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ANALYZING INDIGENOUS WELL-BEING THROUGH THE CAPABILITIES APPROACH AND RURAL LIVELIHOODS FRAMEWORK: EVIDENCE FROM THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract

A well-being analysis of ethnic people has emerged as a part of the impact analysis of resource-led development on local communities. Indigenous communities globally experience socio-economic and cultural challenges within this resource-led world due to state building and colonial and post-colonial legacies. This article examines the well-being of ethnic communities in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh—an ethnic mountainous region with long colonial and post-colonial history—through the Capabilities Approach and Rural Livelihood Framework. Drawing on literature review, this manuscript critically analyzes how dominant development paradigms overlook Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural practices, and spiritual relationships with land and livelihood. By reinterpreting well-being as a relational, culturally grounded, politicized and 'naturalized' construct, the text argues for reimagining well-being concept and its frameworks through Foucauldian power and governmentality. The essay will contribute to the future studies on ethnic well-being worldwide.

Keywords

Well-being, Capabilities Approach, Rural Livelihood Framework, Governmentality, Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT)

Introduction

A well-being analysis of ethnic people has emerged as a part of the impact analysis of resource-led development—such as capitalism, neo-liberal policies of ecology, and natural resource management— on local communities (Kamal et al. 2015). It is argued that Indigenous communities globally experience socio-economic and cultural challenges within this resource-led world due to state building and unsupportive colonial and post-colonial legacies (Gilberthorpe and Hilson, 2014). These experiences also impact Indigenous people's well-being worldwide. Several studies examined Indigenous well-being, for example, through the Human Development Index (HDI) worldwide (Cooke et al, 2004) and Registered Indian HDI (RI-HDI) in Canada (Cooke, 2008), Community Wellbeing Index (CWB) (Senecal et al, 2008; Guthro, 2021), *Whare tapa whā*— the Māori model of health based on four elements of life namely physical, mental emotional and spiritual (McClintock et al., 2021), Social and Emotional Well-being (SEWB) Framework for Aboriginals (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014). Indigenous well-being around the world have been assessed through different approaches or measurement process based on some common indicators such as physical, mental and emotional aspects at individual level, family, kinship and community at collective level, language, cultural knowledge and cultural practice at cultural level and spirituality, ancestors and land at spiritual level (McClintock, et al. 2021). In both Indigenous and non-Indigenous context, Capabilities Approach (Ng and Fisher, 2013; Karki, 2021) and Rural Livelihood Frameworks (Kamal et al. 2015; Karki, 2021) are widely used to measure well-being. However, these two approaches/ frameworks are hardly used in well-being analysis of Indigenous people especially in colonial and post-colonial context. From this connection, this article analyses the well-being of ethnic people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh, a southeastern mountainous region (See: Annex:1) from the colonial and post-colonial period (1757 to date). The region constitutes about 10 per cent of Bangladesh's total land area with around 5039 square miles (Chowdhury, 2023) and is characterised by its hill valleys and agricultural plains (Mohsin, 1997: 11). The region has direct influences from colonial and post-colonial administration (Abedin, 1997) which have created antagonistic relations

of local tribal people with the state along with changes in land dynamics over the years (Golam, 2005; Mohsin, 1997). This research will therefore work as guidepost for future research on Indigenous well-being considering power and governmentality in a developing state and beyond.

This article builds on qualitative literature reviews. Overall, it analyses the state of well-being of CHT people under the lens of Capabilities Approach and Rural Livelihood Framewrok. It starts with with a brief discussion on well-being and its measurement. The next two parts analyze the well-being of CHT people through the Capabilities Approach and Rural Livelihood Framework. The following part provides a theoretical lacuna of both approaches and calls for a suggestion for well-being analysis considering Foucaudian power and governmentality in post-colonial context.

Understanding Wellbeing

Well-being is a key aspect and outcome of sustainable livelihood. A precise definition of well-being is difficult although its core elements are widely agreed upon, with the notion of a 'desirable' condition (Jerome and Schöngut-Grollmus, 2023). Even, the 'concerns' of well-being varied among people's happiness, human virtue, subjecting feelings, and objective condition (Ng and Fisher, 2013). Whatever the focusing issue of well-being, it is a multifaceted phenomenon (Ng and Fisher, 2013), which is defined as a 'positive and desirable life condition' (Gautam and Andersen, 2016: 242) or 'quality of life' (Kofinas and Chaplin, 2009). Maslow's (1943) "hierarchy of motivation" outlines five well-being's elements: basic needs, safety, social connections, self-esteem, and self-actualization (Kofinas and Chaplin, 2009). Later Sen (1993) adds fundamental needs like nourishment, health, dignity, self-respect, and community life to well-being (Gautam and Andersen, 2016).

There are broadly two dimensions of well-being: objective and subjective. Objective well-being means an individual's or community's quality of life which is externally observable and measurable in terms of material resources such as income, housing, food, and social attributes such as health, education, social networks, political voices, life expectancy, poverty, and literacy levels (Western and Tomaszewski, 2016; Diener and Suh, 1999). As this dimension is rooted in a utilitarian and basic needs approach focusing on tangible living conditions, it faces criticism for being narrowly focused on resources and avoiding an individual's freedom to achieve valuable functioning, that is what people are able to be and do (Sen, 1999); overlooking individual experiences and perceptions about well-being (Diener and Suh, 1999), and using Western-centric measure of well-being which marginalize non-material or relative aspect of wellbeing (White, 2010). From these criticisms, subjective dimensions of well-being emerged.

Subjective well-being (SWB) is divided into two streams or traditions: *hedonic* and *eudaimonic* (Jerome and Schöngut-Grollmus, 2023). The hedonic stream is rooted in the Greek philosopher Aristippus's philosophy of life which is maximizing the pleasure and happiness of life (Ng and Fisher, 2013). It is a subjective evaluation of life-based positive and negative experiences. On the other hand, eudaimonic well-being, rooted in the Greek philosopher Aristotle focuses on living a virtuous, perfect, and excellent life (Jerome and Schöngut-Grollmus, 2023), or a complete life where nothing is missing (Nussbaum, 2001), or what is worth doing (Ryan and Deci, 2001). It provides attention to the personal potential to realize a meaningful life and to meet the challenges to pursue a meaningful life (Ng and Fisher, 2013). Keyes (2006) extends well-being from the private sphere to the public domain and argues that to attain well-being people need to address social challenges and tasks, which are often called 'social well-being'.

Apart from the hedonic (pleasure-focused) versus eudaimonic (meaning-focused) debate, it is important to identify who will define well-being: by individuals' own experiences or by experts using external values or normative values (Ryan and Deci, 2001). The new debate sheds light on the universality versus cultural contextual version of well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2001). While subjective well-being is sometimes criticised as self-centered, it respects individuals' own values and avoids imposing external standards (Diener et al., 1998; Diener and Suh, 1997). Although objective well-being is often seen as universal, it may differ across cultures. By combining both perspectives, researchers can gain a more complete understanding of well-being (Keyes et al., 2002; Ryan and Deci, 2001).

Well-being can be understood also through various approaches. One prominent approach is Quality of Life (QOL), often equated with the idea of a 'good life.' QOL remains a contested term, with ongoing debates over its core components (Ng and Fisher, 2013). It was originally developed to move beyond purely economic indicators like Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and QOL sought to incorporate broader measures of national well-being (Bauer, 1966). However, more recent research has emphasized the significance of subjective individual experiences (Rapley, 2003; Haas, 1999). Among the lack of consensus on the number and nature of QOL dimensions, it is now widely accepted as a multidimensional concept that includes both objective indicators (such as income, housing) and subjective perceptions (for instance, life satisfaction, personal fulfillment) and the impact of external conditions to shape personal experiences (Cummins, 1997; Diener and Suh, 1997; Costanza et al., 2007; Schalock, 2000). Costanza et al. (2007) broaden the scope by linking QOL to the fulfillment of basic human needs through three types of capital—social, natural, and economic—positioning QOL as a useful policy tool beyond narrower,

individual-focused measures like subjective well-being. However, the QOL approach is criticized for failing to account for community-level dynamics (Raphael et al., 2001; Rapley, 2003).

Beyond subjective well-being and QOL, Ng and Fisher (2013) argue for a ‘multi-dimensional approach’ to well-being. Individuals are embedded within broader environments, and thus well-being must be examined across multiple levels: personal, interpersonal, organizational, and societal levels. It would be beneficial for (a) a collective nature of well-being that prioritizes social justice, collaboration, and respect for diversity; (b) highlighting the critical role of intermediate structures (for example, families, communities) that connect individuals with broader systems, and emphasizing the development of an individual shaped by broader social-environmental factors rather than isolation (Ng and Fisher, 2013).

The method of measuring well-being is also debatable as various measurement approaches and indicators have been developed over the years. Costanza et al. (2016) groups all indicators into three broad categories. First, Consumption, Production, and Wealth Indicators measure well-being based on conventional national progress through GDP, Green GDP, Genuine Savings, Inclusive Wealth Index, and the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare, also known as Genuine Progress Indicators. Second, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) approach measures well-being through 200-300 SDG indicators. The OECD Better Life Index and Social Progress Index are from the same school. Third, the Subjective Wellbeing approach integrates various indicators to measure wellbeing through such subjective life satisfaction scores, and the World Happiness Index (Costanza et al, 2016). However, all these approaches or indicators are criticized because people may not be aware of some key issues like natural capital and ecosystem services that contribute to their well-being (Kahneman, 2011). Also, these approaches are highly culturally biased and difficult to compare internationally. Such as studies show that Chinese people are less happy and less optimistic compared to the US people, however, US people are more depressed than Chinese people (Costanza et al, 2016). From this criticism, Costanza et al (2016) proposed a ‘Hybrid Approach’ after integrating all positive aspects of previously mentioned indicators to measure well-being. This approach has three dimensions: economy, society, and nature. The economic dimension is measured through Genuine Progress Indicators which encompass the net contribution to both production and consumption of an economy. The social dimension integrates social capital or community contribution through surveys and components of life satisfaction. Finally, the natural dimension considers natural capital and ecosystem services, which do valuation of ecosystem services. However, the ‘Hybrid Approach’ does not consider Indigenous well-being and their specific Indigenous context, while the indigenous context is different from the traditional understanding of well-being.

Ethnicity profoundly impacts Indigenous well-being and is considered “almost any conceivable measure of socio-economic wellbeing” (Dockery, 2010: 2). For Indigenous people, well-being is seen as a balance or equilibrium between all living things. Equilibrium is maintained through people-to-people connections and people-to-nature connections (McLachlan et al. 2024). In the Indigenous context, well-being is measured through a relational and strength-based understanding of it. It encompasses four domains: individual (physical, mental, and emotional), collective (family, kinship, tribal, and community), cultural (language, cultural knowledge, and cultural practice), and spiritual (spirituality, ancestors, and land) (McClintock et al. 2021). Indigenous well-being has been measured in different Indigenous settings across the world, for example, in Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014; Western and Tomaszewski, 2016); in Canada and New Zealand (McClintock, et al. 2021) and in the USA (Gall et al, 2021). In short, Indigenous well-being is multi-dimensional and community-centered rather than purely individual. It can be measured through individual, collective, cultural, and spiritual dimensions, considering colonial history and systemic inequalities with a variety of indicators as outlined below.

Table 1. Indicators for measuring Indigenous well-being in various contexts

Country	Criteria for Measuring Indigenous Wellbeing
General (all regions)	- Individual (physical, mental, emotional health) - Collective (family, kinship, tribal, community ties) - Cultural (language, cultural knowledge, and practices) - Spiritual (spirituality, ancestors, connection to land)
Australia	- Subjective wellbeing: Life satisfaction, health, crime involvement (victim/offender) - Objective wellbeing: Income, education, financial hardship, material deprivation, leisure time, family, and friend networks (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014; Western and Tomaszewski, 2016)

Canada	-Holism, Culture, Identity - Community and Family - Land and Sea connection - Resilience, Spirituality, Cultural Medicine - Physical, Mental, and Emotional wellbeing - Socioeconomic indicators: education, labor status, housing, income - Recognition of colonialism and systemic underfunding (Gall et al., 2021; McClintock et al., 2021; Guthro, 2021)
New Zealand	- Identity, Indigenous customs - Self-determination and autonomy - Love and compassion for others - Impact of colonization and majority-minority relations - Genealogies, sense of place, spirituality, family ties - Physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being (Gall et al., 2021; McClintock et al., 2021)
USA	- Holism, Culture, Cultural pride, and preservation - Language, Spirituality, Cultural Medicine - Connection to Power and Energy - Land and Sea connection - Community connection, Resilience - Basic needs (Gall et al., 2021)

Source: Compiled by author, based on Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014; Western and Tomaszewski, 2016; Gall et al., 2021; McClintock et al., 2021; Guthro, 2021

Analyzing CHT Well-being Through Capabilities Approach and Functionings

The capabilities approach is a theoretical framework to analyze well-being in society focusing on two issues: freedom to achieve well-being, and understanding well-being depends on people's capabilities and functionings (Robeyns, 2016). This approach has a long history from the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who argues that in understanding well-being, capabilities, and functionings are more important than resource and utility (Alkire, 2007). In contemporary well-being studies, Amartya Sen makes it popular. According to Sen, well-being is the combination of three issues: capabilities, functionings, and conversion factors. "The central feature of well-being is the ability to achieve valuable functionings. The need for identification and valuation of the important functionings cannot be avoided by looking at something else, such as happiness, desire fulfillment, opulence, or command over primary goods" (Sen, 1985: 200). Functionings is the valuable activity or state or ways of 'being and doing' of individuals that make well-being, whereas capabilities are the substantive freedom of choice of 'functionings' in a life considered valuable by individuals (Chaparro et al. 2025; van der Boor et al, 2022). Conversion factors work as a bridge between the gap of resources and opportunities and choices required for desired functionings and capabilities (Sen, 1999). According to Sen, there are three conversion factors: personal characteristics, social characteristics, and environmental characteristics. These factors influence the individual to convert goods and resources into valuable functionings (Robeyns, 2017; Chaparro et al. 2025; van der Boor et al, 2022). So, the capability approach examines what an individual can 'do' and 'be' with available resources depending on personal, social, and environmental factors.

However, the required capability for a desired life is an issue of debate. Martha Nussbaum first set a list of ten universal capabilities based on minimum capabilities considering different philosophical approaches required for a dignified life (Nussbaum, 2007). However, Nussbaum faces myriads of criticisms mostly from the ground of application and empirical measurement of her list (van der Boor et al. 2022). Also, Nussbaum's predetermined list of capabilities rejects Sen's pluralism, where Sen highlights context and social, cultural, and environmental factors for understanding capabilities (Stiglitz et al, 2009). Despite the debate between Sen and Nussbaum, they 'excessively' highlighted the individual's capabilities of well-being. However, critics argue that the excessive focus on individuals neglects the relational determinants of human well-being and freedom (Evans, 2002; Uyan-Semerci, 2007). Instead, collective capabilities are proposed which emphasize collective actions for expanding human freedom (Ibrahim, 2006). Collective capabilities are those 'to be sought in common' (Taylor (1994) in van der Boor et al, 2022: 3). Two specific characteristics of it: depending on collective actions and newly generated capabilities can benefit the wider community (van der Boor et al, 2022). These capabilities represent choices or freedoms the person would not have had or been able to achieve without the support of the group, such as recognition of Indigenous rights.

Nowadays, the capabilities approach has become a valuable social justice framework (Chaparro et al. 2025). In the Indigenous context, it is used as a valuable framework that emphasizes what means to live a good life in terms of real opportunities or capabilities instead of focusing on utilitarian resource-based approaches (van der Boor et al, 2022). From both individual and collective approaches to capabilities, Indigenous people strive for well-

being, such as self-determination. The capability approach is widely used in analyzing the well-being of Indigenous people, mostly in the theme of harmony in territorial management and community-based sustainable development (Chaparro et al. 2025), those can be grouped under 'Indigenous knowledge systems' and 'indigenous worldviews'. As Gordon and Datta (2022: 40) argue Indigenous well-being can be considered through Indigenous knowledge systems, ways of governing, treaty negotiations, and indigenous worldviews. In the analysis of the Indigenous well-being of CHT through the capabilities approach, I will use Gordon and Datta's (2022) theme.

Indigenous Knowledge System

Indigenous well-being is inseparable from the ability of communities to control their futures according to their own values and knowledge systems (McGregor, 2008). Sen's (1999) capability approach to well-being emphasizes the ability of Indigenous peoples to live lives they value, within the socio-environmental contexts that define their identities. In CHT, Indigenous knowledge encompasses a wide range of practices, from agriculture and natural resource management to medicine, spirituality, conflict resolution, and community governance. They have traditionally practiced *jum* (swidden cultivation), a sustainable form of shifting agriculture adapted to the region's hilly terrain, and a traditional key agricultural practice (Hutchinson, 1909; Rasul and Thapa, 2006; Roy, 2000). However, since the plow cultivation started, jum has declined. The colonial British government subsidized plow cultivation over the jum for more economic return from the argiculture (Hutchinson, 1909). Government policies favoring sedentary agriculture have led to a 40 per cent decline in jum cultivation over the past two decades, threatening food security and traditional livelihoods (Adnan, 2004; FAO, 2013). Now, about 14 per cent of the Indigenous population practices *Jum* cultivation (Barakat et al, 2009). Of the 364,000 acres of cultivable land in the CHT, 73,000 acres are used for plow cultivation, 99,000 acres remain available for *jum* cultivation, and 66,000 acres are used for homesteads (Barakat et al., 2009).

Well-being in the CHT can be understood as relational rather than individualistic. According to Adnan and Dastidar (2011), land, for example, in Indigenous worldviews is not only an economic resource but a source of spiritual, emotional, and communal strength. The forced alienation from ancestral land through militarization, state development projects, and settler influx profoundly damages these relations, undermining material conditions and eroding the social fabric that underpins Indigenous well-being (Mohsin, 2003). Moreover, customary practices often clash with state-imposed legal frameworks that promote private ownership and capitalist development. Currently, land ownership in the CHT falls into three main categories: individual registered ownership, traditional ownership—recorded or unrecorded with the headman (local land officer)—and usufruct rights to common property, which differs from land tenure systems in the plains (Barakat et al., 2009). Although, various legal frameworks recognize customary land governance in the region. The CHT Regulation 1/1900, the Hill District Council Act (1989), the CHT Regional Council Act (1998), and the CHT Land Dispute Settlement Commission Act (2000) all formally uphold collective land management, prohibiting permanent individual ownership (Baker, 2006), in practice, state-driven policies that encourage private land ownership and large-scale development projects have led to widespread land dispossession and displacement (Alamgir, 2017). The imposition of state laws favoring individual land ownership has marginalized Indigenous land claims and increased threats to their territorial rights (Adnan, 2004; Alamgir, 2017). The competition over land is not only between Indigenous communities and Bengali settlers but also within Indigenous groups themselves, as internal disputes over land use and governance have intensified.

In addition to land, cultural practices—rituals, languages, oral traditions, and festivals like *Boisabi*—sustain emotional and communal health (Tripura, 2016). These practices provide a mechanism for transmitting knowledge intergenerationally, preserving not only cultural heritage but also preserving their way of life and environment. For example, Animism remains central in many communities, with nature spirits playing a role in spiritual beliefs. Rituals, such as offerings to ancestral spirits, reinforce ecological stewardship. The Chakma believes in a forest guardian who protects resources and livelihoods (Chakma, 2024). In addition, CHT people have different festivals, mostly based on *Bengali* New Year, with different names 'Baisabi' (comes from '*Boisuk'*, '*Sangrai*' and '*Biju*') (Alochonaa, 2014; Pangkhua, 2014). Their festivals strengthen community ties. Also, the inhabited ethnic groups each have their language or dialect of Chakma, Marma (Mogh), Tripura (Kokborok), Mro (Murang), Bawm, Khumi, and Lushai (Ethnologue, 2021; van Driem, 2001; Uddin, 2006; Paul, 2018). Smaller linguistic communities, such as the Mro, Bawm, and Khumi, also contribute to the region's linguistic diversity. These languages, however, are classified as endangered due to their declining number of speakers (Anderson, 2007; UNESCO, 2011). Written scripts of these languages are facing challenges due to the dominance of Bengali in education and administration (Schendel, 1992).

Ways of governing

The governance mechanism of Indigenous people is a core area for determining Indigenous well-being (Gordon & Datta, 2022). Going back to Sen's definition of capabilities: people's real freedoms to pursue the lives they have reason to value (Sen, 1999), the well-being of CHT people means enhancing their capabilities related to their participation and decision-making including self-determination. Indigenous ways of governing are practiced through self-determination utilizing individual and collective capabilities (Gordin and Datta, 2022). Specifically,

self-determination is linked with the well-being of Indigenous people through self-government, subsistence, fate control, freedom, and cultural regeneration (Gordon and Datta, 2022).

In CHT, colonial and post-colonial governance structures have developed and practiced through indirect rule and direct control, often without Indigenous consent. Such as the British colonial administration, while recognizing some traditional authority through chiefs, also introduced administrative changes that disrupted Indigenous governance (Mohsin, 2003). Following independence, the Bangladesh state pursued assimilationist policies, promoting Bengali nationalism and encouraging Bengali settlement in the CHT, which exacerbated tensions and dispossessed Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands (Roy, 2000). Land governance in CHT is colonially and state-dominated, as discussed earlier. This mechanism hinders Indigenous self-determination of their land. Current governance mechanism is seen as exploitative, fearful, frustrating, and dangerous which augments unfreedom and thus undermines individual and collective capabilities and well-being (Gordon and Datta, 2022).

Treaty Negotiations

Treaty negotiations are highly connected to Indigenous well-being as well-being is inseparable from identity and political agency (McGregor, 2008). Treaty negotiations, therefore, are not merely political agreements; they are critical processes that can either expand or restrict key capabilities such as bodily health, emotional security, affiliation, control over one's environment, and participation in political life (Nussbaum, 2000). An honor to treaty promises can expand well-being and vice versa. For Indigenous people, the treaty must satisfy three conditions: (a) Indigenous people are distinct and recognition of their historic and contemporary injustices; (b) fair process of negotiation between the parties considering power imbalances; (c) considering mutual obligation and shared responsibility (UTS, 2023). After a two-decade-long military insurgency in CHT, the 1997 Peace Accord between the Bangladesh state and Parbatya Chattogram Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS) was signed aiming to grant autonomy, land restitution, and demilitarization (Roy, 2004). The implementation of the 1997 Peace Agreement in CHT has been slow and politically contested, leaving Indigenous communities vulnerable to land dispossession and marginalization (Roy, 2000; Shahriar, 2024). Lack of political will, particularly in transferring authority over law, administration, and land to Hill District Councils, has hindered progress (Panday and Jamil, 2009). State-driven development projects, prioritizing economic growth over Indigenous land rights, have intensified unrest (Mohsin, 2003). The Accord has also unintentionally reinforced Chakma dominance, leading smaller groups to demand separate homelands (Shahriar, 2024). Moreover, international peacebuilding efforts often impose external agendas, described by Chakma (2016) as "peacebuilding imperialism," further complicating local aspirations for self-determination. Also, the United Peoples Democratic Front (UPDF), another CHT-based political party emerged in response to dissatisfaction with the 1997 CHT Accord, argued that the Accord failed to address the fundamental demands of the *Jumma* people—the collective name of CHT people as they are dependent on jum cultivation. The party is dedicated to achieving self-determination and "full autonomy" for the Indigenous Jumma communities (UPDF, 2024). Thus, the CHT agreement does not satisfy the aforesaid three conditions of treaty negotiation and does not increase the capabilities and well-being of the CHT people.

Indigenous worldviews

Worldviews are mental lenses to perceive the world (Olsen, Lodwick and Dunlap, 1992) those are developed throughout life through social interaction and socialization (Hart, 2010). This understanding could be extended to realize Indigenous worldviews with few common features. For instance, to McKenzie and Morrissette (2003), Indigenous worldviews are the outcome of people's 'relationship' with nature. The statement from the Indigenous participants of the 23rd IUHPE World Conference on Health Promotion (Rotorua, Aotearoa New Zealand) also indicate 'relationship' as Indigenous worldviews. They state that Indigenous worldviews are 'the interactive relationship between spiritual and material realms that Mother Earth is a living being – a "person" with whom we have special relationships that are a foundation for identity, and the interconnectedness and interdependence between all that exists' (IUHPE, 2019). McKenzie and Morrissette (2003: 259) argue that this relationship depends upon metaphysical beliefs that survival is connected with natural energy and earth cycle; grand design, harmony and balance and well-being of life, and 'spirit' that links each other among the creation. Focusing on people's connections with nature, Simpson (2000) realized Indigenous worldviews that knowledge is holistic and depended upon the relationship among the living and non-living things; multiple versions of truths; things are live and equal; sacredness of land; vitality of human relation with spiritual world; and human being are important. Because of this interconnectedness, Indigenous worldview is often called 'relational worldview' (Graham, 2002) as it recognizes connection exist between people and entities and support each other in this relationship. Therefore, the well-being of Indigenous people is understood by relationships among each other, spiritually oriented, plural version of truth depending on perspectives.

Indigenous worldviews of CHT people emphasize interconnectedness between individuals, communities, land, and the spiritual world (Roy, 2000), and their well-being is understood as the balance of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions, and well-being is seen as collective rather than purely individual (Chakma, 2010). To Indigenous people, land is at the center of life, not simply as a resource, but as a living entity with deep ancestral and spiritual significance (McGregor, 2008). One of the core problems, land conflict between CHT people and Bengali, arises due to the worldviews. Loss of land is not just an economic loss, but rather a loss of a total life

system for CHT people. Under the lens of the capabilities approach, well-being depends on cultural survival, environmental stewardship, and education. However, due to conflict over land, and the slow implementation of the CHT Accord, control over land and resources remains limited (Panday and Jamil, 2009). Government-led development initiatives, such as tourism projects, often prioritize economic growth over Indigenous land rights (Shahriar, 2024) undermines Indigenous well-being. Neglecting Indigenous languages and knowledge systems in health care system and education, undermines cultural capabilities as well (Chakma, 2010).

Going back to Table 1, where four broad themes to measure Indigenous well-being are identified: individual, collective, cultural, and spiritual. As contemporary well-being frameworks increasingly underscore the significance of holism and self-determination as foundational to Indigenous wellbeing (McGregor, 2008), all four measurement themes are covered in the aforementioned discussion based on Gordon and Datta (2022).

Analyzing CHT Well-being Through Rural Livelihood Frameworks (RLF)

The Rural Livelihoods Framework (RLF) has been developed as a conceptual tool for understanding how rural people sustain their lives and well-being, particularly in contexts of poverty and vulnerability. The word 'livelihood' is widely used across disciplines as a flexible term (Scoones, 2009) which refers to "the means of gaining a living, including livelihood capabilities, tangible assets, and intangible assets" (Chambers, 1995). Ellias (2000) expands this conceptualization of livelihood to "the assets (natural, physical, human, financial, and social capital), the activities, and the access to these (mediated by institutions and social relations) that together determine the living gained by the individual or household." Another term associated with this framework is rural. In this framework, rural means 'households which have no farm of their own but sell their labour to agricultural producers, or make a living from processing, storing or exchanging local agricultural produce or from facilitating or marketing agricultural produce, are also regarded as rural households' (Niehof and Price, 2001: 12). Thus, rural livelihoods include both livelihoods related to agriculture and non-agriculture.

Livelihood often automatically includes the concept of 'sustainability,' though its features are unclear (Turner, 2017). A livelihood is considered sustainable if it can recover from shocks, maintain or improve assets, and avoid harming natural resources (Scoones, 2009), while also creating opportunities for future generations (Chambers and Conway, 1992). 'Sustainable livelihood' is both an approach and a framework with three main aspects: valuing local knowledge (epistemology), participatory methods (methodology), and a foundation (theory) in Sen's capabilities approach (Natarajan et al., 2022).

RLF is interchangeably used with the Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA), where earlier focuses on rural areas and the latter is common for both rural and urban areas. As livelihood includes sustainability, RLF becomes a Sustainable Rural Livelihoods framework (SRLF). This framework uses the 'means-outcome' spectrum that livelihood resources are processed through institutional and organizational domains using some livelihood strategies for sustainable livelihood outcomes. Scoons (1998) developed a framework to analyze rural livelihoods composed of five components. First, the context, conditions, and trends of society are analyzed based on history, politics, and macroeconomic dynamics. Second, it suggests analysing livelihood resources through the 'asset pentagon'—natural capital, economic capital, social capital and physical capital, and human capital. Then it analyses institutional mechanisms that create and implement policies and regulations on access and use of livelihood resources (Scoones, 1998). Fourth, analysis of livelihood strategies or portfolios such as any productive activities like agriculture, trade, and self-employment (Fierros-González and Mora-Rivera, 2022) leads to livelihood outcomes. Last and fifth is the analysis of livelihood outcomes to reduce vulnerability and risks (Scoones, 1998; 2009).

From an Indigenous perspective, SLF is criticized for ignoring Indigenous worldviews and Indigenous understanding of context, capital, and livelihood outcomes (Kamal et al. 2015). They also argue for applying Indigenous worldviews in each element of SLF for analyzing Indigenous well-being. If we apply Indigenous worldviews in SLF, then the vulnerability context (shock, trends, and seasonality) of a society should be analyzed considering the indigenous context and its long colonial and post-colonial background. Second, the element of asset and capital should be replaced with 'relationship'. Therefore, social capital becomes a relationship with society, human capital becomes a relationship with humans, economic capital becomes a relationship with money, and natural capital becomes a relationship with nature (Kamal et al. 2015). In addition to this, cultural capital (traditional knowledge and unique ability of ethnic community) can also be included as capital with SLF in Indigenous wellbeing (Shang et al. 2021). Institutional dynamics for access and control of capital can be replaced with ways of governing to benefit indigenous views of sustainability. Livelihood strategies would be any productive activities like agriculture, trade, and self-employment considering the Indigenous lifestyle and their views on production and consumption (Fierros-González and Mora-Rivera, 2022). Lastly, livelihood outcomes to reduce vulnerability could be considered as a relationship among resources, people, and the environment emphasizing Indigenous knowledge with fair distribution of resources, which leads to indigenous self-determination (Kamal et al. 2015).

RLF/SLF is widely used for analyzing well-being, as well-being is one of the outcomes of this framework (Kararuddin and Samsudin, 2014). One of the well-known indexes is the Livelihood Security Index (LSI)

developed by Lindenberg (2002) and Sanzidur and Akter (2010). They measured well-being through multidimensional aspects emphasizing livelihood assets, livelihood strategy, livelihood outcome, institutional involvement, and vulnerability context (Kararuddin and Samsudin, 2014). Indigenous elements of livelihood framework are sporadically applied in various locations and contexts such as livelihood strategies in Mexico (Fierros-González and Mora-Rivera, 2022), in Cambodia (Sarou, 2009), the sustainable outcomes in China (Shang et al. 2021). I will employ all elements of the livelihood framework to understand CHT's well-being.

Vulnerability Context of CHT

According to Chambers and Conway (1992), vulnerability refers to the external environment in which people exist—shaped by trends, shocks, and seasonal shifts that affect their livelihoods and well-being. Considering the Indigenous context with this, CHT's vulnerability can be analyzed with its historical colonial background and its Indigenous context. CHT's vulnerability is rooted in colonial and post-colonial state-building practices that have disrupted their Indigenous ways of living. Such as, under British colonial rule and later through the policies of post-colonial Pakistani and Bangladeshi governments, Indigenous peoples in the CHT experienced dispossession, forced displacement, and cultural assimilation (Mohsin, 2003). The construction of the Kaptai Dam in the 1960s, for instance, submerged vast areas of cultivable land, displacing approximately 100,000 Indigenous people without adequate compensation (Roy, 2004). This loss of land forced them into chronic poverty, resulting in vulnerability. Their vulnerabilities also increased due to militarization, genocide, and ethnocide (Mohsin, 1997, Levene, 1999; Chakma, 2010). Besides, deforestation through commercial logging and soil degradation (Chowdhury and Ahmed, 2010) changes the ecological balance and diminishes the natural resource base important for Indigenous subsistence economies, including food security, water availability, and medicinal plants. Also, climate change and natural calamities increase the vulnerabilities of CHT people, such as erratic rainfall patterns, more frequent landslides, and prolonged droughts threaten traditional farming systems and access to safe water sources (Islam et al., 2014), heighten their exposure to food insecurity and health risks (Naher, 2024), and experience cyclical food shortages, indebtedness, and restricted access to health care (UNDP, 2015).

Asset and Captial (relationships)

Asset and capital are considered under the relationship of Indigenous people with them. Relationships with society is considered social capital. In CHT, social relationships remain one of the strongest assets of Indigenous people. Traditional governing mechanisms and leadership structures such as Circle Chief (raja), Headman (union chief), Karbari (village leader), customary laws, and clan system enable social resilience and conflict mediation (Roy, 2000). Practices such as cooperative labor exchanges during harvests and communal ceremonies strengthen social solidarity (Mohsin, 1997; Chakma, 2010). However, the social relationship is under threat due to political divisions and the weakening of customary governance institutions through state-imposed governance mechanisms such as the Peace Agreement (Levene, 1999).

Human capital (relationship) considers how people use their labor for collective being (Kamal et al. 2015) and the overall advancement of a nation (Sharakhmatova and Mikhailova, 2024) with their skills, knowledge, health, and ability to work (DFID, 1999). CHT people still believe in their collective actions because of their indigenous worldviews. They consume and transfer their knowledge, for example, to the future generation for their sustainability (Chowdhury and Ahmed, 2010). However, erasing the traditional knowledge system through different policy actions by colonial and post-colonial regimes such as introducing plow cultivation instead of jum cultivation deteriorates their well-being (Hutchinson, 1909; Mohsin, 1997). Natural capital includes indigenous relationships with nature, such as land, forests, water, biodiversity, and other ecosystem services.

Natural capital in CHT is under threat and thus cannot yield well-being for ethnic people. Such as the customary relations of Indigenous people often clash with state-imposed legal frameworks that promote private ownership of nature and capitalist development. The imposition of state laws favoring individual land ownership, land dispossession, and Bengali settlement, for example, has marginalized Indigenous land claims and increased threats to their territorial rights (Adnan and Dastidar, 2011; Adnan, 2004; Alamgir, 2017). Today, Bengali settlers control over 40 per cent of traditional Indigenous lands, intensifying socio-political tensions and displacement (Gain, 2000: 45; Tripura, 2016: 23). Apart from land, forests are controlled by the state undermining the traditional relationship of CHT people with land and forest (Alamgir, 2017).

Economic capital with Indigenous perspectives highlights what role money can play in keeping their cultural practices (Kamal et al. 2015) where growth and economic advancement are not the salient parts of their livelihoods. Economic empowerment is meaningful for well-being if it contributes to cultural integrity and self-determination (Corntassel, 2012). However, in CHT, economic activities neglect this relationship. For example, state-led development projects, such as tourism, have often prioritized economic growth over the protection of Indigenous land rights, exacerbating tensions in the region (Mohsin, 2003). This situation reflects postcolonial governance, where state-led economic activities often clash with Indigenous claims to autonomy and self-determination. Also, the state's long-term forest lease for economic gain has further restricted indigenous access to traditional resources, exacerbating economic insecurity and marginalization (Alamgir, 2017).

Institutional dynamics

Institutional dynamics of Indigenous livelihoods deal with politics and governance mechanisms on access and control to assets and capital (relations) considering Indigenous worldviews of sustainability. Previously, I discussed that Indigenous ways of governing are practiced through Indigenous self-determination (Gordin and Datta, 2022). However, institutional dynamics in CHT have developed and exercised through direct and indirect control of colonial and post-colonial governance structures. They produce such type of governance structures that negatively impact Indigenous relations with capital, such as introducing a colonial profit-oriented cultivation system, dispossessing from land, rejecting their identity which is connected with nature, and developing antagonistic relationships with the state (Mohsin, 1997, 2003; Roy 2004; Rasul, 2006, Levene, 1999).

Livelihood strategies

Livelihood strategies in the Indigenous context are monetary and non-monetary activities considering Indigenous lifestyle and their views on production and consumption (Fierros-González and Mora-Rivera, 2022). Indigenous livelihood strategies are determined through five factors: family labor and education, land area, migration network, environmental conditions, and access to markets (De Janvry and Sadoulet, 2001). In CHT, livelihood strategies among the communities are heterogeneous depending on their livelihood mechanism. One of the most common strategies is dependence on or connection to land. As an Indigenous, connection to the land has changed due to the state's intervention, as discussed earlier, and natural factors like climate change, their livelihood strategies also are at risk (Naher, 2024). In CHT, Indigenous consumption and production patterns are portrayed as unsustainable and unprofitable, such as jum (Lewin, 1909). In post-colonial Bangladesh, a unit under the Forest Department is introduced namely 'Jum Control Department' to control traditional jum cultivation in CHT. Although family labor must be unpaid (Fierros-González and Mora-Rivera, 2022), recent changes in agricultural patterns such as rubber plantation, tobacco cultivation, and different fruits cultivation have altered the payment mechanism for agriculture labor in CHT. Due to the acceptance of formal education among the CHT people, their connection with the local livelihood strategy becomes secondary. Such as in my personal visit in 2024 at *Talchari* village in Barkal Upazila of Rangamati Hill District of CHT, I found that two members of a family are doing government jobs in Chittagong town and one of the female members is serving as health assistants in a non-governmental organization at the village. They hardly involve themeslve with agricultural activities now. Due to the migration of two male people of that family, they abandon the mango cultivation on a large scale. Access to the market also changes livelihood strategies. For example, at Talchari, people have a connection with a nearby market. People now cultivate turmeric, which is profitable, once was not cultivated. Thus, livelihood strategies deeply connected with land and traditional cultivation are uprooted, and their well-being is undermined.

Livelihood outcomes

Indigenous consideration of livelihood outcome could be considered as the relationship among resources, people, and environment emphasizing Indigenous knowledge with fair distribution of resources, which leads to Indigenous self-determination (Kamal et al. 2015). However, analysis of the other four elements of the Livelihood Framework testimonies that they do not consider indigenous worldviews, and logically thus the outcome can not produce CHT people's well-being. CHT people's relationships with nature, people, and resources are not in a condition that can lead to Indigenous well-being. The unfavorable conditions arise from land insecurity, colonial and post-colonial state-building dynamics, Bengali settlement, militarization, land dispossession from ancestral land, rejecting Indigenous customary agricultural practices, rejecting their identity, ethnocide, genocide, marginalizing Indigenous knowledge, climate Change (Mohsin, 1997; Roy, 2004; Rasul, 2006; Levene, 1999; D'Costa, 2014; Chakma, 2010; Islam et al., 2014; Naher, 2024; Panday and Jamil, 2009; Shahriar, 2024). These issues result in marginalization, food insecurity, altering CHT people's relationship with land, and out-migration to urban centers leading to a disconnection from their cultural roots. Livelihood conditions in CHT do not satisfy the criteria of Indigenous well-being, and its core element Indigenous self-determination.

Discussion And Way Forward

In the earlier discussion, I connected the Indigenous context with both the Capabilities Approach and the Rural/Sustainable Livelihoods Frameworks to analyze well-being in the CHT. The Capabilities Approach reveals that the well-being of CHT communities is undermined by the systemic undervaluing of Indigenous knowledge, the exclusion of Indigenous languages and epistemologies, and the marginalization of traditional medicine and its practices, all of which exacerbate disparities in well-being outcomes (Chakma, 2010). These inequities are further reinforced by the enduring legacies of colonialism and ongoing state-driven marginalization, which continue to silence Indigenous voices and sustain the well-being gap between ethnic minority and Bengali majority (Adnan & Dastidar, 2011).

In well-being analysis, although the RLF is regarded as successful in examining poverty and vulnerability, it has been criticized for its limited attention to power relations (Syukron, 2021; Kamal et al., 2015) and for being

overly individualized, depoliticized, and insufficient in addressing structural poverty. In addition, the word 'sustainability' in SLA is unnecessary, as it often overlooks environmental issues (Natarajan et al., 2022; Turner, 2017). SLA also ignores historical contexts, focusing only on the present and neglecting the 'livelihood-making' process (de Haan and Zoomers, 2005); and marginalizes alternative knowledge and experiences of Indigenous people (Natarajan et al., 2022). It often justifies 'top-down' definitions of sustainability which accepts persistent poverty as sustainable, and makes it apolitical (Langill and Oberhauser, 2024; Turner, 2017; Li, 2007).

The currency of well-being has been widely used in policy making, and politics and as a tool of outcome-evaluation of policy interventions. It is seminal to ask *how* well-being is defined, *who* defines it for *what* interest, and what type of *power* is used to produce *outcomes* in terms of inclusion and exclusion in the process (Jerome and Schöngut-Grollmus, 2023, italics are done by author). For example, scholars (e.g., Binkley, 2011, 2018; De La Fabián and Stecher, 2017; Martínez-Guzmán and Lara, 2019) have critically examined the influences of happiness on individuals and argue that the discourse around happiness is not neutral—it serves political purposes under late capitalism and neoliberalism. Discourse, the collection of statements that create meaning and influence society through constructed, sustained, and legitimized knowledge influenced by power dynamics (Foucault, 1980), justifies which statement will be circulated or excluded (Mills, 2003) and influences how we perceive and interact with the statement (Danaher et al. 2013).

Using Foucauldian governmentality, it can be shown how the "positive psychology" of happiness (Martínez-Guzmán and Lara, 2019) shapes people's thoughts, behaviors, and identities in ways that align with broader systems of control and self-regulation. Happiness is used as a tool to govern individuals by promoting certain norms and relationships that fit the goals of a neoliberal society. In analyzing well-being in the CHT, governmentality can serve as a central lens, particularly in relation to ethnicity, institutional dynamics, and livelihood strategies. Governmentality highlights how people's thoughts, behaviors, and identities are shaped, controlled, and even self-regulated within both colonial and postcolonial contexts. Alongside this, it is important to examine the power dynamics of the CHT that how power influences the very concept of well-being, how it shapes the design and implementation of institutional rules and regulations, and how it constrains or enables the livelihood strategies that ethnic people adopt in pursuit of well-being outcomes.

Well-being is shaped by sociohistorical and cultural contexts, which is not fixed, but rather varies depending on the time, place, and social conditions in which it is understood. Jerome and Schöngut-Grollmus (2023) argue that multiple ways of conceptualizing, discourses and approaches to well-being influence an individual's perception, experience, and responsibility. They also used the concept of Foucault's 'problematization' to argue that the polysemy of well-being is not merely a semantic issue, it has socio-political and material consequences. Problematization is the opposite of naturalization—the concept of things and phenomena that remains unquestionable or problem-less and does not create any doubt (Jerome and Schöngut-Grollmus, 2023). According to Foucault (1988): "Problematization is neither the representation of a preexisting object nor the creation of an object that does not exit through discourse. It is the set of discursive and nondiscursive practices that make something enter the interplay of the true and the false, constituting it as an object for thought." Due to the polysemy of well-being definition or lack of an 'agreed' definition, using Foucault's' problematization, it is possible to reveal that how well-being concept is developed as a series of objects and technologies to govern (Restrepo, 2008). In other words, what counts as well-being is socially constructed in ways that regulate populations and normalize states behaviors to ethnic people. In the CHT, for example, the state policies often measure well-being through indicators such as income levels or integration into the market economy. These framings overlook and devalue Indigenous understandings of well-being, which are rooted in relationships with land, community, and cultural traditions. The state's framing of well-being thus operates as a technology of governance, serving as a tool to discipline Indigenous peoples and legitimize state authority over them. For instance, shifting cultivation (jum), which is central to Indigenous livelihoods and cultural well-being, is frequently problematized by the state as "backward" or "unsustainable." In this way, well-being is constructed not only as an outcome but also as a mechanism of governing behavior and identity, encouraging communities to internalize state-defined norms of what it means to well-being.

The 'naturalization' of well-being should be examined through an intersectional lens, highlighting how the concept of well-being is often normalized in ways that obscure the experiences of people with multiple, overlapping identities. Livelihoods are gendered, with women facing distinct demands and challenges (Mandel, 2006; Langill & Oberhauser, 2024) shaped by intersections of ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and disability (Crenshaw, 1989; Mohanty, 2003; Varghese, 2023). Petersen and Rutherford describe this as a form of "double colonization," where women are oppressed simultaneously by both colonialism and patriarchy (Tyagi, 2014). Building on this, feminist scholars such as Elmhirst (2015) and Mollett & Faria (2013) argue for context-specific strategies to improve well-being that draw on marginalized and gendered knowledge. Any project that ignores intersectionality and naturalizes well-being risks overlooking the specific conditions women face, thereby marginalizing their livelihoods and well-being. In the CHT, for example, ignoring women's experiences of militarization or gender-based violence (D'Costa, 2014) obscures the ways women experience well-being differently. Women in the CHT often face heightened insecurity under military surveillance, while the

dispossession of land disproportionately undermines their livelihoods compared to men. Thus, an analysis of Indigenous women's well-being in the CHT need to account for the intersecting effects of patriarchy, colonialism, and broader structures of power.

Advancing Indigenous well-being necessitates the promotion of Indigenous-led development initiatives, the legal protection of ancestral land rights, the establishment of culturally responsive education systems, and the formal recognition of traditional knowledge. Sustainable well-being for ethnic communities in the CHT requires an understanding of how Indigenous peoples define and realize their aspirations for a 'good life,' which is embedded with power dynamics. This self-realization is a symbol of self-determination. Therefore, for future research on ethnic well-being in CHT and beyond, the 'naturalization' of well-being could be explored through governmentality, and experiences of ethnic people including women and men.

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Figure 1. Map of Bangladesh with Chittagong Hill Tracts in green