



## The 1997 Agricultural Khas Land Management and Settlement policy: an analysis through a displacement lens

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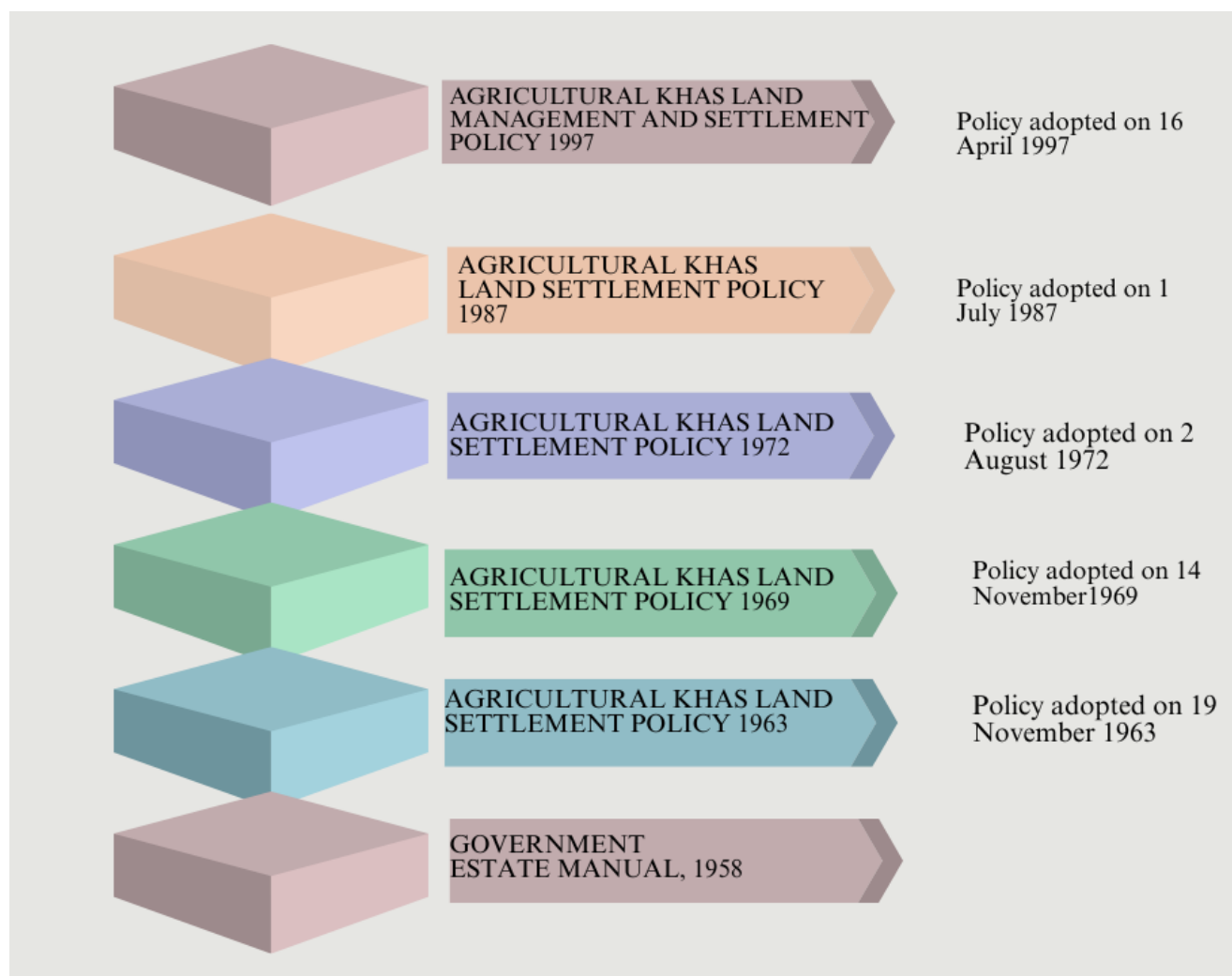
# 1. Background

Agricultural Khas land settlement for landless families has long been prioritized in various national policy documents in Bangladesh. The importance of distributing agricultural Khas land to the landless lies in its potential to ensure livelihood security for vulnerable communities, and support climate-displaced persons through sustainable resettlement opportunities. This initiative formally began under the Land Reclamation Project (1978-1992) and continued through Char Development and Settlement Project (CDSP)-I (1994-1999) and the ongoing Char Development and Settlement Project (CDSP)-II. In CDSP-II, the settlement process starts with the identification of Khas land via a detailed plot-to-plot survey (PTPS), which is essential for ensuring fair and transparent land distribution.

Khas land refers to land that is under the full ownership of the Government of Bangladesh, administered by the Ministry of Land, and officially recorded in the name of the Deputy Commissioner (DC) in Khatian No. 1 (land record). Information regarding relevant parcels is maintained in a dedicated record known as “Register VIII”. It is important to note that land owned by ministries or government agencies other than the Ministry of Land does not fall under the category of Khas land and, therefore, is not subject to settlement under the Agricultural Khas Land Management and Settlement policy 1997 (AKLMSP).

Over the years, the government of Bangladesh has formulated different policies regarding the settlement of Khas land. In April 1997, it introduced a revised Agricultural Khas Land Management and Settlement Policy, which is still in force today. This updated policy aimed to simplify the settlement process on Khas land by streamlining relevant procedures. The figure shows the evolution of this legal and institutional frameworks.

**Figure:** Illustrated by the author, 2025. Adopted from CHAR DEVELOPMENT AND SETTLEMENT PROJECT II.



## 2. Rationale for Selecting AKLMSP policy of 1997

In Bangladesh, all rehabilitation initiatives and land distribution for displaced populations are overseen by the Ministry of Land. Khas land, under government ownership, remains the sole designated resource for resettling displaced communities. Therefore, it is essential to understand how Khas land distributions operate, who are the eligible beneficiaries as defined by current policies, the extent and availability of Khas land, and review cases in which land distribution underpinned successful resettlement of displaced persons. Such an analysis is crucial for understanding the resources available in Bangladesh to address displacement, as well as relevant progress and gaps.

## 3. Operational Framework of the AKLMSP

The AKLMSP policy defines the institutional framework for settlement on Khas land. It identifies three main committees that are involved in the land settlement process, namely:

- ❶ The National Executive committee on Khas land management (NECKLM);
- ❷ The District Agricultural Khas land management and settlement committee (DAKLMSC);
- ❸ The Upazila Agricultural Khas land management and settlement committee (UAKLMSC).

The agricultural Khas land settlement process in Bangladesh is overseen by the National Committee, which formulates related policies and serves as an appellate authority. Actual land settlement is managed by District and Upazila-level committees. The UAKLMSC identifies available land, selects eligible landless families, and prepares allotment proposals. These are reviewed and finalized by the DAKLMSC, chaired by the Deputy Commissioner. A key operational role is played by the Assistant Commissioner (Land) at the Upazila level, whose timely action is vital for efficient land transfer and issuance of land records (Khatian).

## 4. Intended Recipients of the AKLMSP Policy

The policy clearly delineated the priority list of selected landless families as follows-

- ❶ Diluviated tenant's family (Riverbank erosion)
- ❷ Martyred or crippled freedom fighter's family
- ❸ Widowed or divorced lady with working son
- ❹ Family without a homestead and agricultural land
- ❺ Landless family with homestead land only
- ❻ Family with homestead land and less than 0.5 acres agricultural land.

Under the first provision (on Diluviated Tenant's Family), the policy identifies mentions only landless individuals displaced by riverbank erosion as eligible to benefit from land allocation. In practice, however, landless persons displaced by any form of climate-induced hazards are informally considered eligible to claim land allotment under this category.



## 4.1 Definition of landless according to the policy

The policy also updated the official definition of a landless family for the purpose of settlement eligibility. According to this definition:

- a landless family is one that depends primarily on agriculture for their livelihood but possesses neither homestead land nor agricultural land.
- a family that owns up to 0.10 acres of homestead land but holds no agricultural land, and relies on agriculture as their main means of subsistence, is also considered landless under this policy.

## 5. Extent of Khas Land

Bangladesh has an estimated 3.3 million acres of Khas land, including 0.8 million acres of agricultural land, 1.7 million acres of non-agricultural land, and 0.8 million acres of Khas water bodies. However, actual figures are believed to be higher due to significant gaps in official records. Distribution varies regionally, with Dhaka holding the largest share of agricultural Khas land (26%) and Khulna the smallest (6.4%). The 1997 AKLMSP revised land allocation limits to 1.5 acres per family in char areas and 1 acre elsewhere. While official data claims 44% of identified agricultural Khas land has been distributed, estimates suggest only 11.5% has genuinely reached landless families, while the rest has been illegally occupied – especially by powerful local political leaders and influential persons.<sup>1</sup>

## 6. Displacement Projects Implemented by the Ministry of Land, Bangladesh Regarding Khas Land

**Char Development and Settlement Project I (1994–1999):** The CDSP I phase encompassed three key regions: Polder CBD-II, Char Masjid Polder, and Char Vatirtek Polder. These areas spanned a total of 5,133 hectares, with 3,584 hectares classified as net cultivable land. This phase benefited 7,389 households, serving a population of 47,069.

**Char Development and Settlement Project II (1999–2005):** CDSP II significantly broadened the development efforts, covering a total area of 23,719 hectares, with 16,366 hectares designated as net cultivable land. The phase included multiple polders, including South Hatiya, Moradona, Gangchil Torabali, Char Lakshmi, Polder 59/3B, Polder 59/3C, Nijumdwp Char Osman, and Nijumdwp Bandar Tila. A total of 28,256 households, comprising 179,992 people, benefited from the interventions.

**Char Development and Settlement Project-III (July 2005 – December 2011):** With a total expenditure of BDT 1,012.00 million (comprising BDT 516.00 million from the Government of Bangladesh and BDT 496.00 million in project aid), this initiative successfully allocated 9,854 acres of agricultural Khas land to 7,580 landless families in Boyar Char, located within Hatiya Upazila of Noakhali district. The intervention supported 9,500 households for a total of 65,000 beneficiaries.

**Rehabilitation of Homeless Slum Dwellers and Low-Income Groups in Multi-Storey Buildings on Government Land in Dhaka (July 2005 – June 2013):** With a total investment of BDT 34.3 billion (comprising BDT 200 million from the Government of Bangladesh and BDT 34.1 billion from public-private partnerships), the project built 2,016 flats on government-owned land for slum dwellers and low-income families.. Currently, 1,794 of these flats are occupied, including 596 by people who previously lived in slums.

**Cluster Village (Climate Victims Rehabilitation Project) (January 2009 – September 2015):** Funded entirely by the Japan Debt Cancellation Fund (JDCF) with an investment of BDT 18.3 billion, the project assisted 10,703 landless and homeless families. Each family was provided with a 5-decimal homestead plot, a 300 sq. ft. house, and a separate latrine. In addition, 536 acres of Khas land were allocated, 247 multi-purpose halls were constructed, 1,233 tube wells were installed, and various support initiatives such as economic development training, micro-credit, tree planting, and eco-friendly cookstoves were offered to over 10,000 rehabilitated families.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Barakat,Zaman & Raihan,Political economy of Khas land in Bangladesh.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

**Char Development and Settlement Project IV (Land Component) (January 2011 – December 2018):** This project, costing BDT 769 million (GoB: 455.06 million, Project Aid: 313.94 million), allocated 17,560 acres of land to 13,508 landless families. CDSP IV covered several sites, including Char Nangulia, Noler Char, Caring Char, Char Ziauddin, and Urir Char. These sites collectively spanned an area of 25,533 hectares, with 17,618 hectares classified as net cultivable land. In total, 29,028 households, for a total of 171,148 people, benefited from this phase.

**Char Development and Settlement Project V:** The latest phase of the project mentioned in the previous paragraph (CDSP V) focused on Char Kolatoli, Char Mozammel, Dhal Char, and Char Maksumul Hakim. Together, these sites covered an area of 11,534 hectares, with 7,958 hectares designated as net cultivable land. This phase benefited 8,414 households, for a total of 42,740 people.

## 7. Gap analysis

The issue of unrecorded Khas land, including agricultural, non-agricultural land, and water bodies, stems from problems within the official land record system and disputes between the government and self-claimed landowners. This has led to a significant portion of Khas land not being officially identified, to the point that their exact extent remains unclear to date. The process for applying for Khas land is also complicated, requiring numerous documents that are often difficult to gather for potential beneficiaries. Several barriers are also identified for not getting Khas land, including the beneficiaries' lack of contact with government offices, strained relationships with local influential figures, and illegal occupation of Khas land by non-poor individuals. The illegal occupation reduces the availability of Khas land for the landless, leaving fewer resources for those who would most urgently need assistance. Additionally, incomplete or inappropriate applications further hinder the settlement process, making it more difficult for those in need to secure land.