

CASE STUDY

Odisha, India

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Community-led restoration of forest resources improves community cohesion and livelihoods

Since 1987, the Foundation for Ecological Security (FES) has worked in central Odisha to strengthen traditional systems of forest protection and restoration. FES' intervention has contributed to the development of community-based forest management institutions in the Angul District. These comprise women and men from marginalised groups and tribes. They have not only guaranteed a sustainable use of natural resources but also secured livelihoods and made forest-dependent communities' economies more resilient.

PRINCIPAL ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

Foundation for Ecological Security (FES)

LOCATION

Angul District, Odisha, India

TIMELINE

1987 - present

TARGET AUDIENCE

Civil society organisations, policy makers, forestry professionals, cooperatives, researchers, community empowerment organisations

KEYWORDS

Community empowerment, forest governance

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GOOD PRACTICES

Towards making land governance more people-centred

This case study is part of the ILC's Database of Good Practices, an initiative that documents and systematises ILC members and partners' experience in promoting **people-centred land governance**, as defined in the Antigua Declaration of the ILC Assembly of Members. Further information at www.landcoalition.org/what-we-do

This case study supports people-centred land governance as it contributes to:

Commitment 6 Enable the role of local land users in territorial and ecosystem management

Commitment 7 Ensure that processes of decision-making over land are inclusive

Case description

Background issues

At the global level the livelihoods of forest-dependent peoples are under threat, due to deforestation, logging, population pressure, and the pressure from private investors and public authorities to 'convert the use of forests' (Forest Peoples Programme 2015).

The knowledge of local forest-dependent communities is useful for both conservation and development purposes (Berkes 2004). The promotion of community-driven efforts is part of an international movement that aims to develop new approaches to environmental and social advocacy that link social justice and ecological health (Brosius et al. 1998).

The state of Odisha has rich biodiversity with 48,855 km² of forest cover. Odisha has a strong community forestry tradition, which entails that a self-initiated institutional arrangement for conservation and management of forest resources is in place. This arrangement involves village committees, *Van Samrakshan* (forest protection) Committees, Jungle committees and youth clubs. Communities have adopted a variety of conservation processes and practices such as *thengapalli* - a form of voluntary patrolling. Villagers contribute financially to the protection of the forest. In the cases of Dasmauja, Gadiyajur and Jamjor, village level institutions have been federated at the regional, block and district levels to protect forest reserves (UNDP 2012).

In the Athamalik forest range in the Angul district, communities are dependent on forests for their livelihoods. Depleting forest resources and a lack of institutional support increase food and livelihood insecurity. The village of Papsara in the Athamalik region has a population of 400 households. People belong to 10 different castes and indigenous groups. Agriculture and the collection of non-timber forest produce (NTFP) are the livelihood of 300 households, who also collect *tendu* leaf and roll *bidi* (Indian cigarettes). Conflicts within communities as well as with forestry department representatives over dwindling forest resources have been growing in this village.

Solution

FES has restored and strengthened traditional community-based forest management institutions, achieving the dual goal of ecosystem conservation and livelihoods improvement.

Since 1987, FES' work in the district has facilitated the activity of 163 village institutions whose goal is to improve the protection and governance of common land; promote revegetation; and encourage the construction of water harvesting structures. In Athamalik, FES currently works with communities to strengthen - by documenting oral rules - the functioning of institutions, customs and regulations and endorsing these people's role as guardians of their forests. It also works to create a space for women and the poor to access and benefit from the rules regulating cropping patterns and access to water for the protection and conservation of forest resources.

In the village of Papsara, FES developed a Tree Growers Cooperative Society (TGCS). Unlike state-sponsored forestry groups, TGCS is an inclusive and dynamic body that is a) in harmony with the local environment; b) customised to the local social context and c) a guarantee for an equitable distribution of revenues to participants, according to their contribution.

TGCS includes all women and men of Papsara. According to FES annual reports, TGCS created an executive body, delineated functions, ensured transparency, and solicited participation from marginalised castes, tribes, women and men in the community. FES also built conflict resolution mechanisms within TGCS. Conflicting factions were able to argue their cases in open discussions and reach an agreement. Members of TGCS designed a system of access to and appropriation of finite forest resources. They established a cap that allowed for rejuvenation of ecosystems. This implied, for instance, that people had permission to collect firewood exclusively at an established time. Specific days were set aside for cutting wood. A monetary fine was imposed if these rules were not followed.

Activities

A learning process for FES

To gain an accurate insight and appropriately recognise the role of communities in biodiversity conservation, FES embarked on a learning process. Existing published and unpublished records on flora and fauna became the basis for their efforts to design conservation activities.

With rigour and after analysing thoroughly local processes and practices, FES was able to customise their approach to the Athamalik region and to work there effectively. Subsequently they replicated their efforts in other regions.

Internally, FES built their own capacities and skills through focused training to improve the understanding of different locations. They designed programmes that provided opportunities for trainers to improve their skills. Upon request, they engaged in knowledge sharing with NGOs and government bodies.

In systematically collecting information at the field level, FES monitored change in vegetative cover, water availability and agricultural productivity, on one hand, and in the functioning of village institutions, on the other hand. This allowed them to steer decision making as they expanded their efforts - previously focusing on the habitation level - to broader areas involving a number of communities inhabiting, for example, the whole contiguous stretch along a watercourse or a range of forest-hills.

These changes were quantified using an unconventional accounting framework to estimate the monetary value of resource management's benefits. These processes are documented in FES annual reports (2004-2005).

Building collectives for action

As of 2008 FES established 191 community institutions that protected and governed 21,189 hectares of common lands. That is a remarkable increase from when they began working on 43 hectares in 1987. Thanks to the inter-linkages that are there in an ecosystem, improving the conditions of one element - for example of forests, or grazing lands - has positive consequences on others. It also benefits agriculture and animal husbandry because the commons in the farming system become more viable.

In Papsara, FES created TGCS. Continuous engagement with all members of the community resulted in bringing the management of natural resources to the front and centre. There were discussions on equal rights and responsibilities. Women, marginalised farmers from lower castes and members of indigenous and tribal groups were included in TGCS. Poorer households in the village were identified and encouraged to become equal members of the cooperative. Emphasising that every adult woman and man was integral to TGCS ensured equal rights and their contribution to the decision making process.

TGCS was assigned managerial and executive responsibilities at the habitation level. They would function as the primary unit focused on arresting degradation of forest resources. TGCS became an institution that worked more effectively than the *Panchayats* or the local governing body at the local level.

As the TGCS grew to become a cohesive entity, FES trained members on the roles and responsibilities of the *Panchayats*. They also taught them to responsibly leverage funds through the government-sponsored Rural Employment Guarantee Schemes.

Strengthening local stewardship

FES strengthened local stewardship in the area by setting up forums at village level for interaction between the government departments, academicians, technocrats and other citizen forums. This developed a capacity to innovate at the local level. FES created opportunities for dialogue between those who conserve and those who use forest resources as marketable products. They oversaw the development of regional plans at village and district levels to facilitate accommodating competing needs and priorities.

"The forest that once gave like a mother had reached such degradation a decade back, we'd search all day but brought back hardly five edible things... Today my wife brings home the *baghara auala* (giant tuber) I last saw as a child ... (and) 58 different edible items from these same forests" - Pradhan, farmer from Angul, Odisha

FES' activities in Odisha have ranged from consolidating the commons to strengthening community institutions with concurrent efforts at the landscape level. FES works for the conservation of natural resources that are critical to the survival of communities and the viability of farming systems. While improving the wellbeing of ecosystems and of existing commons, they target the issues of poverty and inequality. They have taken steps to improve people's livelihoods, health and education, complementing this with ecological restoration and governance decentralisation strategies.

Advocacy engagement

FES interacted with the Government at the state and national levels to highlight the role of common property resources in watershed development programmes. They shared experiences and emerging issues with decision makers in the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. In Odisha, the State Level Coordination Committee took into consideration the delays in leasing land to village institutions and resolved the pending matters pertaining to the lease of such land. The Committee resolved to issue a comprehensive order outlining the roles of concerned departments and their responsibility to act within an established time frame.

Importance of the case for people-centred land governance

TGCS is the result of a bottom-up and people-centred process, which builds on the existing knowledge, capacities and customary management systems of local communities in Odisha. The organisation at the local level directly represents land-users, including farmers, indigenous peoples, women and rural youth. The institution brings together people who - thanks to this platform - are now able to manage common lands effectively despite competing interests. This has positive spill-over effects on agriculture, education and health.

Changes

Baseline

Angul district is situated in the central part of Orissa, with the Satkosia Gorge Wildlife Sanctuary figuring prominently in the landscape. The area is rich in minerals and faces increasing pressures and threats to its ecological diversity from mining and industry. Industrial developments have added to the disparities between the rich and the poor. The rural poor who depend on natural resources for their sustenance suffer from the consequences of insecure tenure, degraded ecosystems, decreasing water tables, shrinking forest cover and increasing land degradation.

Local institutions such as forest conservation groups faced the threats of youth out-migration and lack of livelihood opportunities. With fewer members remaining, such institutions experienced a breakdown in the local efforts to conserve resources. Aside from that, the fact that large areas were taken over for mining and industrialisation had adverse effects on the community's efforts. This rendered community conservation work largely ineffective. Because community based groups were absent or withering away, the basic governance hub weakened in rural areas, rendering the poor more vulnerable to the recurring droughts and crop failures.

FES initiated its project in 1987. The project presently works with 200 community institutions that protect and govern nearly 23,529 hectares of common land. The commons remain central to the livelihoods of rural communities. The forests in the uplands retain moisture and improve the nutrient flow, providing critical support for the subsistence agriculture practiced by rural communities in the lower reaches of the hills.

Achievements

FES brought together marginalised populations and encouraged them to work with the local administration and to identify the systemic causes that impede or accelerate progress at the village level. Documenting activities and processes made it possible for FES to design collective action within the policy framework of natural resources governance. This resulted in the following achievements:

- People in Papsara village changed their eco-environment and livelihood patterns, as TGCS grew stronger and became a “durable cooperative” (Ostrom 1990), an institution organised and governed by resource users themselves.
- Conflict was reduced, as TGCS membership included all residents - irrespective of gender, caste and ethnic group - who participated equally in decision making processes.
- In Angul and Dhenkanal districts, the *Panchayats*, learning from FES, extended the principles of inclusion and equity applied by TGCS to implement Rural Employment Guarantee schemes for conservation projects.
- A forum of 28 villages emerged to discuss conservation issues of the Satkosia Gorge Sanctuary, to enforce grazing regulation and collectively plan for development activities.
- Seven regional forums comprising 45 village institutions were created and continue today to protect stretches of common land and address issues like forest fires, trade in forest produce and policy developments.

- As per FES annual report (2006-2007), in 2007 a sample study of 11 villages was conducted. The study reveals that conservation of forests and commons has increased the net cultivated area by 263 hectares, benefitting 463 families and resulting in an additional income of about INR 6 million per annum. According to the study, Athamalik is the richest region in terms of primary species. In fact, 28 were regenerated. Simultaneously, thanks to these biodiversity conservation efforts, people's needs are met locally. Community members act as a cohesive unit, access government funds, and celebrate together festivals like the "*Dol Jatra*" (a local festival celebrating spring season).
- In 2012 in the Community Conserved Areas in Madhya Pradesh and Odisha the vegetation and flora increased to a total of 221 species. Among plants, trees register the maximum diversity; among faunal groups, it is birds. FES' contribution was crucial for the protection of rootstocks and forest regeneration.

Evidence

FES annual reports 2006-2007 (http://fes.org.in/images/FES_AR_2006-07.pdf) and 2004-2005 (http://fes.org.in/images/ar_200405.pdf) and a publication of the UNDP (<http://fes.org.in/ccs-directory.pdf>) testify the achievements of FES. Even though FES initiated the Tree Growers cooperative in 1987, they continue to engage with the community in Papsara. Since they scaled up their efforts, contiguous communities are also benefitting from the project.

The "A Commons Story. In the Rain Shadow of Green Revolution" (https://www.nabard.org/Publication/OP_60_commons_story.pdf) - supported by NABARD (National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development), the Ford Foundation and Action Aid - shows FES' commitment to the sustainable management of the commons and their approach to rejuvenating natural resources and to strengthening community cohesion.

Traditional practices were revived enabling forest resources to be harvested sustainably, as reported by the Thomson Reuters Foundation (<http://news.trust.org/item/20130626112835-5uv1k?source=hptop>).

Lessons learned

Lessons for civil society

The language of conservation should be in the dialect of the local communities to articulate their social, economic and cultural realities. This is crucial to achieve the following:

- Assess the contribution of common lands to farming and livestock systems.

- Assess the contribution of the commons in reducing household and livelihoods vulnerability and strengthening their resilience; and the diverse institutional environments that influence relationships of different groups with the commons and determine households' access to them.
- Arrive at an informed understanding of the structure and systems of common resource management and of formal (Panchayati Raj Institutions, Joint Forest Management Committees, Grazing Land Committees) and traditional institutions (Jati panchayats, tribal councils) at the local level, to strengthen them in terms of participation and representation.
- Give voice and visibility to community-based knowledge systems.
- Approach communities, build cohesive units across habitations, strengthen membership and establish leadership roles.

Lessons for policy makers

It is important that policy makers acknowledge the importance of

- Strengthening the capacity of communities in managing groups like TGCS in a sustainable manner to benefit from the sharing of traditional knowledge.
- Supporting community-led conservation initiatives through adequate policy frameworks at state and national levels and by budgeting resources for field studies, mapping and information gathering.
- Consolidating oral traditions regarding land use to enhance community-based conservation; developing documented evidence to protect it from competitive extraction of resources.
- Supporting community efforts to protect biodiversity.
- Moving from a fragmented approach to a long-term policy action by building on the capacities of communities through appropriate institutional mechanisms.
- Protecting rural households from crop and food crises to strengthen the communities accessing the commons.

Challenges

The challenges have been to

- Understand the social divisions that were particularly accentuated at the village level. Encroachment on common land by powerful families, which deprives others from using it, is a possible cause of the conflicts that need to be solved.
- Engage with the community, involving all the diverse social and economic groups.
- Deal with encroachments by nonconforming community members and private interests on both the *khesra* (revenue forest) and the reserved forests in Athamalik. Encroachment is due to the little availability of agricultural land, the small size of land holdings and the drought-prone nature of territory.

- Develop long-term measures to face chronic drought. Due to water scarcity, especially during the summer months, there is a risk of permanent loss of biodiversity.
- Facilitate communities' access to government funds such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.
- Build capacity on soil and water conservation techniques in communities.

Follow-up

FES' relationship with Papsara is nearly two-and-a-half decades old and it still continues. The FES team regularly engages with TGCS members on the functioning of the institution and the new roles it is assuming.

FES replicated their efforts in other villages of Athamalik. Just as FES is building its own knowledge base, documenting experiences at the community level becomes crucial to acknowledge the importance of indigenous knowledge systems, which is still largely invisible.

Supporting material

References and further reading

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