Women and youth protests revert land dispossession by the State

In September 2012, the Government of Gujarat announced the creation of the Mandal Becharaji Special Investment Region (MB SIR). By covering 44 agricultural villages, the project would have caused the loss of livelihood to 60,000 people dependent on land. Two civil society organisations joined forces to alert the affected communities. Pressed by 100 days of unrelenting mobilization, the Government of Gujarat eventually withdrew 36 villages from the MB SIR. The case highlights the crucial role of women and youth in land rights struggles.

PRINCIPAL ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED
Maldhari Rural Action Group (MARAG)
Azad Vikas Sangathan (AZAD)
Jamin Adhikar Andolan Gujarat (JAAG)

LOCATION
Ahmedabad, Surendranagar and Mehsana districts, Mandal-Becharaji region, Gujarat, India

TIMELINE
2012-2013

TARGET AUDIENCE
Women's associations, youth organisations, academicians, politicians

KEYWORDS
People's movements, land rights struggles, land grabbing, FPIC
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 3 Recognize and protect the diverse tenure and production systems upon which people’s livelihoods depend
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
Commitment 8 Ensure transparency and accountability
Commitment 9 Prevent and remedy land grabbing

Case description

Background issues

Gujarat was the first state in India to enact the Special Investment Region Act, to enable the development of investment areas. A Special Investment Region (SIR) was supposed to complement the proposed Dedicated Freight Corridor (DFC) between Delhi and Mumbai. An area of 150 km on both sides of the DFC was designated to be developed as the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC), a joint venture by the governments of India and Japan covering 1,483 sq. km. Over 38% of the length of the DFC falls in Gujarat. In 2009, the Government of Gujarat announced the creation of 14 SIRs. Unlike the Special Economic Zones (SEZ), a SIR is built on a larger land area and offers a range of investment-friendly services. Through a notification dated 24 September 2012, the Government of Gujarat declared an area falling in Ahmedabad, Surendranagar and Mehsana districts, where 44 villages were located, as the Mandal Becharaji SIR (henceforth MB SIR).

Mandal Becharaji is a rich agricultural zone inhabited by farmers and pastoralists. In this region, there are farmers who can grow multiple crops in a year. The geographical area of MB SIR measured 50,885 hectares in total and was proposed to be developed as a hub for the automobile industry. Until April 2013, no one in these 44 villages was aware of this notification and the initial news were dismissed as rumours by the local people.
The notification was neither advertised in the local newspapers nor any notice was put up at *gram panchayats*\(^1\).

**Solution**

The local group Azad Vikas Sangathan (AZAD), a collective of youth in Surendranagar district formed by the Maldhari Rural Action Group (MARAG) in 2008, took charge of organising and mobilising the people about the case of MB SIR. At their behest, AZAD was joined by Jamin Adhikar Andolan Gujarat (JAAG), a state level coalition of individuals and civil society organisations focused on land rights and its related issues. Under the leadership of JAAG-AZAD, a concerted campaign was launched in a meeting of Gujarat civil society on 6-7th May 2013.

Although usually they do not represent any power in the Indian society, women and youth played an important role in keeping the campaign together and sustaining it in difficult times. They were able to provide decentralised leadership to the movement, which helped at critical times when other people were under social and political pressure or when threats and enticements made them withdraw from the movement.

While women’s strong connection to land conservation and stewardship provided extra strength and fervour, the youth played a key role through social media such as WhatsApp and Facebook. The network created by them through social media facilitated the timely and quick dissemination of key decisions.

**Activities**

The dissent against MB SIR was executed in multiple ways including resolutions by village institutions, affidavits by people, public demonstrations, protests, marches, bike and tractor rallies, petitions and letter writing campaigns. In total, 36 events took place in a span of 100 days at village, district and state level, with the attendance of up to 15,000 people.

**The genesis**

The members of AZAD and JAAG held village meetings soon after the campaign was launched on May 2013. By the end of the month, all the 44 affected villages decided to take the following actions to express their opposition:

- Resolution of all 44 Gram Panchayats against MB SIR
- Resolution from all Gram Sabhas\(^2\) stating their opposition to MB SIR
- Resolution by different cooperatives in the region stating they did not want the area to be declared as SIR
- Affidavit by all the people in the 44 villages affected against MB SIR
- A notice in the local language at the access of every village stating that any government or corporate official shall enter for any work related to MB SIR

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\(^1\) Local self-government organisations in India; there are about 250,000 *gram panchayats* in the country.

\(^2\) While the *Gram Panchayat* is a small body whose members are elected, *Gram Sabha* consists of all the adult (above 18) members of a village (or a cluster of villages).
These resolutions were later handed over to the CEO of MB SIR. On 28th May, the youth organised a bike rally in 44 villages, which mobilised 250 motorbikes and around 500 youth. The rally ended in a meeting of 1500 people at Kunnpur village, in Mandal block. This was the first demonstration of the strength of the youth (women were not actively involved yet).

**The uprising**

After substantial mobilisation throughout the month of May, the first public meeting was held at Vasana village on 30th May. This meeting was attended by 15,000 people, including civil society organisations, land right activists in Gujarat, and people from the affected and neighbouring villages. Several decisions were publicly taken and the meeting ended with the pledge that the movement would continue until the MB SIR notification was withdrawn. Meanwhile, the lack of response by the State led to a massive tractor rally to Gandhinagar, the capital of Gujarat, on 18th June. In one of the largest demonstrations against MB SIR, over 10,000 men and women with 500 tractors, 50 motorbikes, 10 mini-trucks and 50 four-wheeled vehicles, congregated in Gandhinagar to express their opposition.

In the meantime, the Government and politicians took notice of the increasing dissent and tried to stall the efforts by seeking alliances with some leaders of the affected villages. By this time, women started taking an active role. On 21st June, they met in large number and decided to provide leadership to the movement. There were many women who took the stage and spoke by microphone for the first time in their lives. Some of these women were offered to join political parties, which demonstrates their success. Women were not power centric and hence leadership dynamics never affected the movement. Instead, their leadership provided an unparalleled zeal in giving strength to the movement and they were recognised as the force which sustained the movement in difficult times. When the opposition lobby of the land mafia, corporates and politicians tried to break the movement, women acted as shields and forced the men in their family not to give away to pressure or enticements. When the husbands refused to join the movement in Jhaalesana village, women left their bangles (symbolic for married women) at home to attend the meetings. On 29th June, about 2000 women from 20 villages of Patdi and Mandal blocks organized a rally against MB SIR. They became a force to reckon and went ahead to arrange meetings in 24 villages to discuss SIR provisions and their implications over life and livelihoods. On 7th July, 10,000 women came together at Dalod village to organise a *Maha Mahila Sammelan*\(^3\). They came from all the affected villages shouting anti-MB SIR slogans.

**The finale**

Land agents and politicians made a final attempt to subvert the movement and demonstrated in favour of MB SIR, spoke to media and tried to manipulate the public opinion by offering sweetened deals. Nonetheless, those attempts were futile against the inviolable spirit of the people: a massive meeting was organised in Hansalpur village on 25th July, attended by 12000 people, to protest the land agents and MB SIR supporters. Pressed by 100 days of unrelenting social mobilization, the Government of Gujarat withdrew 36 villages from the MB SIR.

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\(^3\) Grand Women Assembly.
Importance of the case for people-centred land governance

Land rights are inextricably linked to the right to work and right to food. If implemented, the MB SIR project would have transformed the social, cultural, political, economic, and environmental landscape of the region. Large tracts of fertile agricultural land would have been converted into townships with industries. The SIR was out of the jurisdiction of the local authority, meaning the Gram Panchayat would not have had any control over local resources. The land owners would have got compensated for only 60 per cent of their land, while receiving no compensation for their dependence on village commons.

Women mobilised the community and youth sustained the successful movement. This case proves that women and youth can play significant roles in land right struggles, provided that the movement is built on the principles of decentralised leadership, participatory decision making, apolitical affiliation and independence from outside funds.

Changes

Baseline

Mandal Becharaji is a rich agricultural zone inhabited by farmers and pastoralists. Over 11,840 households of farmers, pastoralists and landless farmer and their livestock of 75,000 heads depend on agriculture land and the commons in this region. The land acquisition process under SIR violated the free prior informed consent (FPIC) principles and the India's law on land acquisition, the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Resettlement and Rehabilitation Act (LARR), which required consent from 70 per cent of affected people. The constitutional bodies at the village level such as Gram Sabha and Gram Panchayat were neither consulted and nor had any role in decision making. Up to 44 villages and 60,000 people were under threat of dispossession and loss of land-based livelihood.

Achievements

The signs of a victory for the people's movement emerged in a meeting with the chief minister Mr Narendra Modi on 11th July 2013. He assured that the Government would take positive action by 15th August. The people did not have full confidence in his promise and continued their village and committee meetings. Modi appointed a committee comprising the Finance Minister Nitin Patel, Revenue Minister Anandi Patel, Law Minister Bhupendra Chudasama and Energy Minister Saurabh Patel, to negotiate with selected farmer-leaders. This committee met with farmer-leaders from the 44 villages and recommended the withdrawal of 36 villages from the proposed SIR. The recommendation was accepted by the Chief Minister. The hundred days of struggle ended on the eve of Independence Day, on 14 August, when the Government of Gujarat withdrew 36 villages (out of 44) from MB SIR.
Since then, the MB SIR Movement has become a reference for land right struggles in Gujarat. The success of the movement gave confidence to people to continue their fight for land rights, by showing that it is possible to save land from going into the hands of private corporations.

Evidence


Lessons learned

Lessons for civil society

The decentralised, transparent and participatory leadership were the key success factors of this experience. The movement was rooted on the principles of non-violence and all the decisions were collectively taken in open meetings which ensured ownership, accountability, openness and transparency.

The internal communication amongst women and youth ensured the timely dissemination of crucial information, which further ensured transparency and quashed rumours. The youth, women, elderly and even children were extraordinarily united in their thoughts and actions. Even children could describe the SIR act and its impact on people's lives. The continuous campaigning at the village level helped immensely.

Both women and youth were not power centric and hence leadership dynamics never affected the movement. Instead, their leadership provided an unparalleled zeal in giving strength to the movement and they were recognised as the force which sustained the movement in difficult times.

No outside funding and no political party representation were allowed by the movement. This also built accountability and sense of unity. It was rightly a people's movement, as there was not a single rupee contribution from outside the 44 villages.
Lessons for policy makers

The policy makers need to recognise and respect the special relationship between land and farmers, pastoralists and landless people. Policies should establish safeguards against the arbitrary removal of communities from their traditional land. Provisions that ensure land rights and respect for customary land tenure.

Land rights are inextricably linked to the right to work and right to food. Policy instruments should consider the communities as partners in development to achieve justice, equality and liberty as ensured in the National Constitution.

Challenges

This social movement was up against a strong alliance of land agents and private corporations. They tried to break the movement in different ways - threats, social pressure, political lobbying, monetary bribes, and so on. It is not easy to ignore such pressures, when large sums of money for keeping silence were offered.

In 2013, the then chief minister of Gujarat was campaigning for becoming the Prime Minister of India. Thus, one of the reasons for the Government to withdraw was to strategically avoid him being labelled as ‘anti-farmer’ in media campaigns. In a way, this reinforced the victory of the movement. However, land remains under tremendous pressure and so is the livelihood of the people directly dependent on it.

Follow-up

The success of the people’s movement against MB SIR still resonates in Gujarat. As per media reports, towards the end of 2015, the State Government decided to go ahead with only three out of the 14 SiRs originally announced in 2009.

In December 2013, motivated by the success of the movement, the farmers potentially affected by the Dholera Special Investment Region (DSIR) contacted JAAG to support them. As a result of people’s movement against DSIR, in December 2015 the High Court of Gujarat ordered the suspension of the procedure. In their petition, the people of Dholera asked to declare the SIR Act as unconstitutional on the grounds that the power given to Gram Panchayats cannot be taken away by a Government notification with regards to acquisition and use of land.

In 2014, farmers rallied against the proposed Hazira Special Investment Region, envisaged to be built over more than 24,000 hectares of land. As a result, the Government decided to withdraw the notification for Hazira SIR.
Supporting material

References and further reading

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Photos, videos

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