Forest Policy and Economics 111 (2020) 102066

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Forest Policy and Economics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/forpol

Promoting a responsive state: The role of NGOs in decentralized forest governance in India.

Divya Gupta[a,*], Sharachchandra Lele[b], Geetanjoy Sahu[c]

[a] Forest and Governance Program, Ashoka Trust For Research in Ecology and the Environment, Mailing Address: ATREE, Royal Enclave, Srirampura, Jakkur Post. Bangalore 560 064, India

[b] Center for Environment and Development, Ashoka Trust For Research in Ecology and the Environment, Mailing Address: ATREE, Royal Enclave, Srirampura, Jakkur Post. Bangalore 560 064, India

[c] Centre for Science, Technology & Society, School of Habitat Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Deonar, Mumbai 400088, India

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Rights-based approaches
Forest rights
Forest-dwelling communities
NGOs
Responsibilities
Responsive governance

ABSTRACT

Community Forest Resource (CFR) Rights recognized under India's Forest Rights Act transfers collective rights and responsibilities to forest dwelling communities for sustainable use of their customary forests. However, just like any other decentralization reform that adopts a rights-based approach, the implementation of the Forest Rights Act has been poor, as the rights and responsibilities are transferred without ensuring communities' capability to exercise those rights and carry out the responsibilities vested in them. This raises the question of what role the state needs to play to actualize this rights-cum-responsibilities based decentralization. We found that in such a scenario, non-state actors, primarily Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) working on tribal or rural development issues, act as a bridge between the community and the state to enable the transition to responsive forest governance. We compared processes occurring in villages that lack NGOs' support with those that are supported by the NGOs. We found that the awareness about community rights and responsibilities in the two types of villages was completely different. The reason for this was the efforts of the NGOs on three fronts: mobilizing and building the capacities of villagers to exercise their rights, enabling market engagement, and ensuring the state's responsiveness. We argue that this experience of NGO engagement in Forest Rights Act implementation can be used to understand what necessary steps might be required to ensure that the promise of decentralized forest governance is translated into practice.

1. Introduction

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Act (Forest Rights Act or FRA) was enacted by the Indian Parliament in 2006, following collective pressure from a massive social movement to correct the historical injustices imposed since the colonial takeover of India's forests (Kumar and Kerr, 2012). The Act makes a provision for Community Forest Resource Rights[1] (hereafter CFR rights). This is the most significant provision in the Act, as it recognizes the rights of the communities to access most forest products, and gives them the authority to protect, manage, and conserve the forests to meet their needs, while also fulfilling the responsibilities of sustainable use and conservation.

More than a decade has passed since the Forest Rights Act was enacted. One of the critical lessons learned in this intervening time is that the mere existence of the Act does not prevent the forest dwelling communities from deprivation and marginalization (Sahu et al., 2017). To begin with, the actual claiming and recognition of community rights itself has been an onerous process (Maharashtra CFR-LA, 2017). However, recognition is just the first step; even in the post-rights recognition phase, the communities have been struggling to assert and exercise their rights (Kumar and Kerr, 2012).

The rights-based approaches like the Forest Rights Act are being increasingly adopted in recent forest sector governance reforms worldwide. This is particularly the case in developing countries that have large populations directly dependent on forests (Sunderlin et al.,

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: divya.gupta@atree.org (D. Gupta), slele@atree.org (S. Lele), geetanjoy@tiss.edu (G. Sahu).

[1] The Act makes provision for four different kinds of rights: Individual Forest Rights (occupation and cultivation); Community Forest Rights (grazing, fuelwood, collection, fishing, ownership and disposal of non-timber forest produce or NTFP among others); and Community Forest Resource Rights (rights to protect, regenerate, conserve and manage community forest areas); and Development Rights. In this article, we analyze the process of implementation of Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2019.102066
Received 27 April 2019; Received in revised form 14 November 2019; Accepted 18 November 2019
Available online 13 January 2020

2009; Larson et al., 2008). These rights-based approaches are not only meant to advance the objectives of poverty reduction and livelihood enhancement, but are also seen as necessary for the very 'survival and dignified living' of the forest dwelling communities (hereafter referred to as communities) (ODI (Overseas Development Institute), 1999:1; Johnson and Forsyth, 2002). Studies have shown, however, that simply getting rights-based legislation passed neither guarantees its implementation nor the achievement of its objectives. In fact, even after the rights are granted on paper, the goals of the legislation remain unrealized unless there is a mechanism to ensure that the communities are capable of exercising their rights and carrying out responsibilities they are entrusted with (Larson et al., 2008). Therefore, when the state implements a rights-based approach as a formal strategy and transfers rights and responsibilities to communities, new practices or multilevel support from the state is often required (Ojha et al., 2009).

The concept of 'responsibilization', which is the theme of this special issue, offers an interesting lens through which the activities in the post-rights recognition phase can be examined. Responsibilization, as understood by some decentralization scholars, (Mustalahti et al., 2019) is viewed (critically) as imposing technocratic goals on local communities through administrative deconcentration (or its many variants) without the transfer of power. In the context of decentralized forestry reforms, such a process leads to the shaping of environmental subjects[2], rendering them responsible for certain aspects of their well-being and well-doing, which were previously considered the duty of the state (Erbaugh, 2019; Faye, 2019). These may include not only meeting sustainability and conservation norms, but also marketing forest produce where previously the state may have played a major role. Earlier decentralization programs in India such as Joint Forest Management (JFM) clearly suffered from the problem of 'responsibilization' —transfer of responsibilities, but not adequate rights, to village-level institutions (Lele, 2014). Rights-based approaches are supposed to be different, as they transfer both rights and the authority to manage the forest to statutorily defined downwardly accountable institutions (Kumar et al., 2015). However, in reality, the rights-based approach may also result in responsibilization if it does not include building the capability of communities to exercise their rights and carry out their responsibilities. Thus, what is needed is a way of transitioning to responsive governance Mustalahti et al., 2019 in which the state is responsive to the needs and capabilities of the communities (Ojha et al., 2009).

Unfortunately, adequate state support is often missing in the post-rights recognition phase. Although Section 16 of the Forest Rights Act, Amendment Rules 2012 specifies that the State Government needs to ensure through its departments that communities whose rights have been recognized and vested under that Act receive the post-claim support, state agencies have not intervened to provide support to the rights holders. In the absence of such support, non-state actors may step in (Johnson and Forsyth, 2002; Wright and Andersson, 2013; Barnes et al., 2016). These non-state actors can range from social activists and community leaders to community-based organizations and/or NGOs. These are mostly actors that have been actively involved in the social movements protesting against the marginalization of forest-dwelling communities and demanding the recognition of their rights. However, once the rights are granted, these activists switch their roles from protest or agitation to constructive work (Barnes et al., 2016). The process employed by these non-state actors to facilitate such constructive work by the communities, however, remains understudied (Larson et al., 2008; Wright and Andersson, 2013, Mustalahti et al., 2019). In this study, we therefore use the example of the Forest Rights Act in India to examine the activities of such non-state actors to understand their role in enabling the communities to exercise their forest use and management-related rights and responsibilities.

We conducted a study in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra state in India, well-known for being actively engaged in Forest Rights Act implementation (Maharashtra CFR-LA, 2017). To reiterate, the objective of this research is to demonstrate the challenges faced by communities in exercising their CFR rights and discharging their responsibilities in the post-rights recognition phase. In addition, we also investigate the role played by non-state actors in serving as a bridge between the state and the communities and enabling responsive governance. The non-state actors sampled for this study are NGOs. The questions we ask are: *What activities do NGOs perform within the community to help carry out its responsibilities? What activities are focused on agents or aspects external to the community, such as engagement with the state and markets? Finally, what difference do NGOs make in the villages in comparison with villages where NGO intervention is absent?*

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 is a review and analysis of the literature on decentralization, responsibilization, responsive governance, and the role of NGOs, including, specifically, the literature on India. This section also provides the rationale for our investigation. Section 3 is a description of the study region and the methods employed for data collection. Section 4 is the results section of the study. Section 5 includes discussion of the results and the conclusions drawn from the study. In this section, we also discuss the broad implications and limitations of the study and provide directions for future research.

2. Understanding decentralization, responsibilization, responsive governance, and the role of NGOs

Starting in the 1990s, reforms aimed at decentralizing forest management were initiated in many developing countries. These reforms followed two alternative approaches. One approach was that of administrative deconcentration, involving the creation of local user groups and transferring forest management responsibilities to them, while keeping key powers with the state agency and keeping the groups upwardly accountable (Ribot et al., 2006; Bee, 2019). An example of deconcentration is the wave of 'participatory', 'joint', or even so-called 'community' forest management programs that swept across sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America.

The second approach, which emerged later, was a rights-based one that statutorily secures rights, defines responsibilities, and transfers the powers and authorities necessary for discharging these responsibilities either to the communities or their elected and statutorily recognized local bodies. The responsibilities to be discharged by the local level body typically include not only democratically managing the resources to meet the needs of the community, but also meeting the sustainable use and conservation norms. Some examples of this include the Community Forest Bill of 1990 in Thailand, the Forest Act of 1993 in Nepal, and the Forest Rights Act 2006 in India.[3]

The term 'responsibilization'[4] has only recently been applied to forest governance, but it is applied largely in the context of the first approach (deconcentration).[5] It refers to the act of shedding of the state's responsibilities and making users responsible for their own well-being (be it economic welfare or in education or other sectors) *without* the corresponding transfer of the autonomy to make their own decisions, the authority to enforce them, or downward accountability to keep them democratic (Mustalahti and Agarwal, 2019; Uggla and Soneryd, 2017). Such a shift in responsibilities typically results in the forcing of technocratic goals of state agencies on local communities.

[2] Environmental subjects are the forest dwelling communities for whom the environment constitutes a critical domain of thought and action.

[3] More specifically, the Community Forest Resource Rights provisions under section 3 (Agrawal, 2005)(i) and the corresponding powers given under section 5 of this Act are an example of this.

[4] This is a term originally suggested by Rose (1996) in a critique of the effects of globalization on governance in Europe.

[5] See, e.g., the critique of the user group approach in JFM and other community-based natural resource management programmes by Manor (2004).

The Joint Forest Management program in India is a classic example of this process (Sundar, 2000; Lele, 2014).

Whether such responsibilization would be obviated in the rights-based approach, remains an open question. On the face of it, secure rights coupled with clearly defined responsibilities and powers would seem to prevent responsibilization. There are, however, several potential challenges. First, even in the most benign context,[6] Fleischman and Solorzano (2018) point out that the success of progressive decentralization forest policies is contingent on communities having the specific capabilities and skill sets required to engage with other community members, media, government agencies, markets, and other related actors. Second, the process of exercising these new rights and powers may not be received benignly by other (especially state) actors. Larson et al. (2008) argue in their report on the implementation of statutory forest rights in Latin America that "achieving new legislation that recognizes or grants rights and responsibilities to land and forest to the community is a significant victory, but the exercise of those rights is not fully possible until the statutory rights have been enforced" (pg. 9). Larson et al. (2008) demonstrated that, in virtually all the cases they studied, communities encountered substantial challenges in exercising their rights due to factors like "conflicts with other resource claimants; failure of the state to define the tenure rights appropriately or defend them effectively; problems with the local authorities and governance institutions; the superposition of new models over existing institutions; obstacles to community engagement with markets; and the lack of systems to support forest resource management" (pg. 9).

Third, conceptually, there is no basis for taking the binary perspective on forest governance that it must be either fully state-controlled or community-based. Even if it can be argued that the statutorily elected local body is now 'the state', it must be acknowledged that (given the history of centralized state control that continued in the post-colonial period in most developing countries) the legitimacy and authority of these bodies critically depend upon the recognition, autonomy, and even capacity-building support provided to them by the higher level organs of the state, which enjoy those powers to date.

To that effect, (Mustalahti et al., 2019) propose the concept of 'responsive forest governance', where the state is responsive to the capabilities and needs of the communities so that resources at the local level match the new decentralized duties that are assumed to be discharged by the communities (Ribot, 2012).Further, (Rutt, 2012) adds that decentralization reforms that aspire for responsive governance provide communities the flexibility they need to manage, adapt to, and remain resilient in their changing environment. This can be seen either as a normative position or an instrumental concept to avoid the well-known 'implementation deficit' (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984) in decentralization efforts.

The question then is how this implementation deficit can be bridged and how might the transition from either centralized or responsibilized forest governance to genuinely decentralized and responsive forest governance be achieved. It appears that civil society actors like NGOs may play a critical role here. Indeed, across many countries, both the original push for participatory natural resource management (which ended up as administrative deconcentration) and the subsequent shift to a rights-based approach happened due to pressure from civil society, including both informal social movements and NGOs (Wright and Andersson, 2013; Barnes et al., 2016).

Banks et al. (2015), in their work on the role of NGOs in the development sector, explain that NGOs use their knowledge and experience of working in a local context to strengthen their roles in empowerment and social transformation. These NGOs can supplement governance (Brass, 2012) by stimulating state agencies and actors to provide services (Gupta and Koontz, 2019). Admittedly, NGO involvement is not an unmixed blessing. Critical literature exists that points to the problems associated with the 'NGO-ization' of various government efforts (improved cooking stove programs, watershed development, rural credit, child welfare, agricultural extension, etc.), which can often lead to these organizations focusing on reproducing themselves (Ghosh, 2009), being unresponsive to local needs and aspirations, and being unaccountable (Cook et al., 2017; Kamath, 2004). Nevertheless, it may be argued that the scope for NGO-ization is more limited in a rights-based context, wherein NGOs are given no statutory role (unlike deconcentration 'programs' where an NGO role may be written into the structure). The real question is whether there is a need for NGOs to play a role at all in rights-based approaches, and what role (s) they end up playing and why. Answering this question may inform the debate on how rights-based approaches can be actualized in terms of real livelihood and forest conservation benefits.

The Indian context provides a microcosm in which the potential transition to responsive forest governance and the role that NGOs could play in it can be studied. Starting in 1990, India implemented a Joint Forest Management program that eventually displayed all the features of responsibilization or administrative deconcentration (Lele, 2014; Sundar, 2001). Then, extreme measures by the state Forest Departments to evict so-called encroachers in 2001–2002 led to widespread agitation and the eventual passing of the historic Forest Rights Act (Sarin, 2014). The Forest Rights Act is the first legislation in India that acknowledges the historic injustices meted out to forest-dwelling communities and, in going beyond securing agricultural/habitation land tenure for traditional forest-dwellers, provides for harvest and management rights over forests traditionally used by these communities (Kumar et al., 2015). In one stroke, the Forest Rights Act addressed (or sought to address) all the weaknesses of the Joint Forest Management program. The Act gives statutory recognition of substantive rights to harvest and market all non-timber forest products (NTFPs) (Section 3 (1)((c)), grants management rights over the entire forest tract that villagers wish to manage (Section 3 (1)((i)), and grants the community powers to manage the forest and the responsibilities involved therein (Section 5)(MoTA, 2014; GOI, 2006).[7]

A large network of activists, community groups, professional NGOs, academics, and groups affiliated with political parties collaborated to have the Forest Rights Act enacted (Kumar and Kerr, 2012; Barnes et al., 2016), and this network has worked hard (and continues to do so) in the post-enactment phase to get rights recognized. Even while much remains to be done on the rights recognition front, especially vis-à-vis community rights (Maharashtra CFRLA, 2017), certain states such as Maharashtra have seen remarkable progress, with CFR rights titles being granted in more than 7000-odd villages. A lion's share of the reasons for this progress can be attributed to the efforts of this network of activists, NGOs, and others (Maharashtra CFR-LA, 2017).[8]

Maharashtra state has also seen the greatest initiative taken in the activation of recognized rights. At least eighteen NGOs can be identified as working in Maharashtra on enabling villagers in carrying out forest management activities after the receipt of the CFR rights title.[9] An

[6] The most benign context is one in which decentralization has been done willingly by the state agencies.

[7] Responsibilities of holders of any forest rights include: a) protect wildlife, forest, and biodiversity; b) ensure that adjoining catchment areas, water sources, and other ecologically sensitive areas are adequately protected; c) ensure that the habitats of forest dwelling communities are preserved from any form of destructive practices affecting their cultural and natural heritage; d) ensure that the decisions taken in the gram sabha to regulate access to CFR forest resources and stop any activity that adversely affects the wild animals, forest, and biodiversity are complied with.

[8] For instance, of the 18 NGOs to which the Government of Maharashtra recently gave grants for the development of CFR management plans, 10 are located in the Vidarbha region.

[9] See government order: No: Sitting-2013/CR-66/ka-14 (Govt. of Maharashtra, 2013) and GR. No: FRA-2015/CR.110/Ka-1 (Govt. of Maharashtra, 2015)

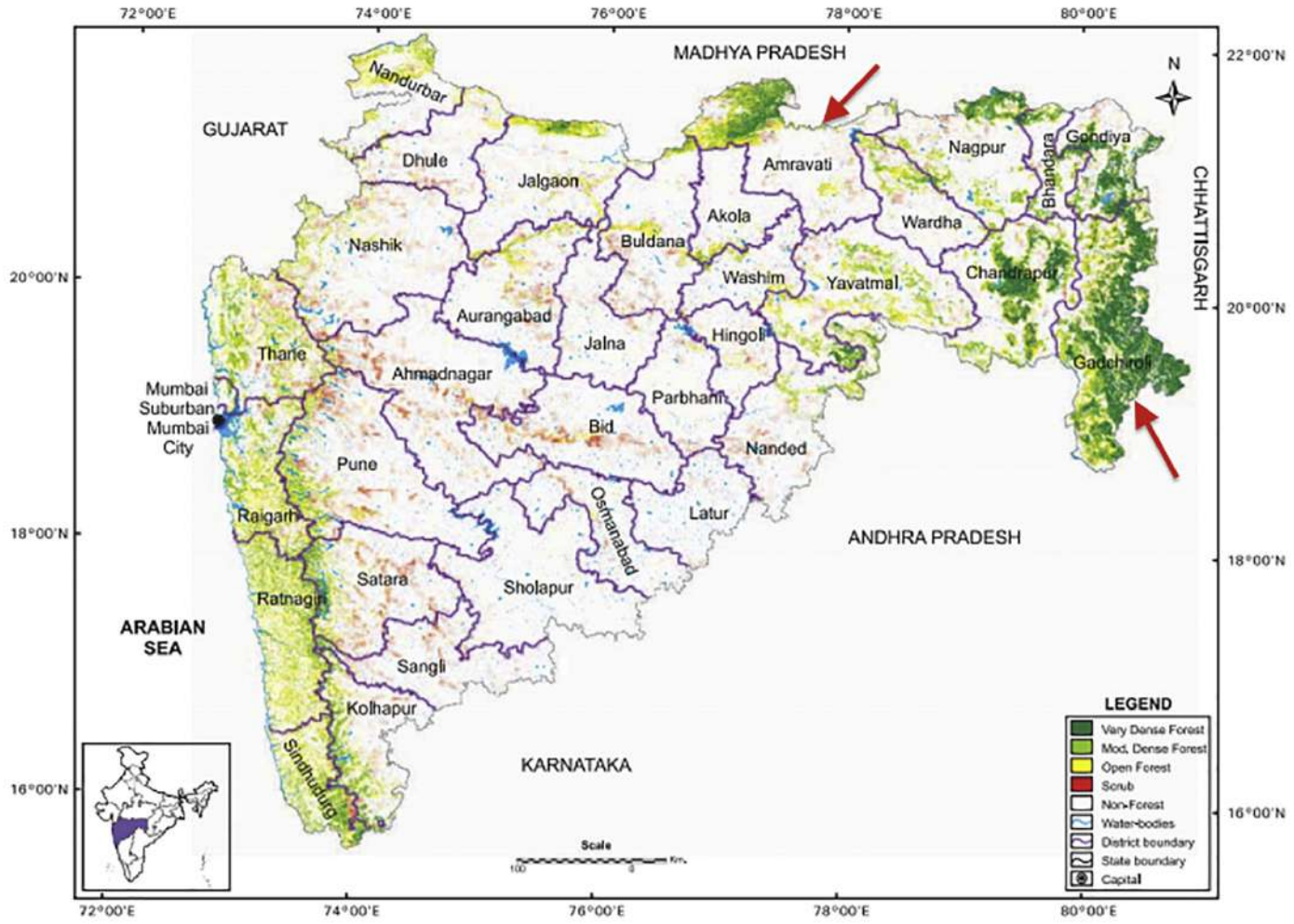

Fig. 1. *Location of Maharashtra state in India (inset) highlighting Amravati and Gadchiroli districts in the* Vidarbha *region of Maharastra. (Derived from the*Forest Survey of India, 2017*report).*

analysis of whether and how they have contributed to the realization of livelihood and conservation benefits in the post-recognition phase can perhaps shed light on what gaps might persist even after so-called 'successful implementation' (i.e. recognition) of the CFR rights provisions of the Forest Rights Act and what residual responsibilities continue to rest with the higher-level state agencies in rights-based decentralization of forest governance.

3. Regional context, sample, and methods

Within the state of Maharashtra, the forests are located largely in three regions (see Fig. 1) – the Western Ghats, the northern boundary with Madhya Pradesh, and the eastern region. The eastern region of Maharashtra is known as Vidarbha, it contains 53% of Maharashtra's forests (Forest Survey of India, 2017) and 28% tribal population (Census, 2011). This region – consisting of the eleven districts of eastern Maharashtra – is also characterized by the presence of a number of tribal and forest rights activists and NGOs engaged in tribal development that are also actively engaged in Forest Rights Act implementation.[10]

We (especially the primary author) traveled extensively in the region to understand the post CFR rights recognition scenario in both NGO and non-NGO supported villages and interacted with key informants and networks. Based on these interactions we purposively sampled a subset of NGOs that have demonstrated a good track record in the Forest Rights Act implementation. The NGOs selected for the study have been working in the region for more than fifteen years. They were actively involved in the social movement demanding rights for the forest-dwelling communities and in helping villages stake claims, and they are now aiding communities in asserting and exercising their rights in the post-rights recognition phase. Basic features of these NGOs are listed in Table 1. It should be noted that only NGO 4 started its work in the region with forest related issues. Most of them began their work in this area by focusing on the malnutrition problem prevailing among tribal communities. The founders of the NGOs said that the reason they invested in forest governance is their belief in empowerment of *gram sabhas* (village assemblies), through which one can also address problems related to equity, resource sustainability, and livelihood enhancement. While the NGOs differ from each other in several ways (as seen in Table 1), they all actively network with activists, scholars, and research institutes and are members of forums like the Community Forest Rights-learning and advocacy (CFR-LA) group and the Vidarbha Livelihood Forum. These forums act as a platform for networking, learning, and developing common strategies for dealing with the state at various administrative levels.

Data collection for this research involved drawing upon information from the following diverse sources: analysis of articles from popular media, government documents, project reports prepared by the NGOs, minutes of meetings and other records maintained by the *gram sabhas*;

[10] For instance, of the eighteen NGOs to which the Government of Maharashtra recently gave grants for the development of CFR management plans, 10 are located in the Vidarbha region.

Table 1
Basic features of the sampled NGOs.

Features	NGO 1	NGO 2	NGO 3	NGO 4
Philosophy	Empowerment through complete democracy and decentralization.	Forest as an important safety net and life-support for rural populations.	Livelihood security through conservation.	Perseverance and development.
Structure	Founding members based in the field; active community organizers and ~45 leaders identified in the community to perform the tasks on the ground.	Founding member based in the field; 1 active community organizer and ~5 leaders identified from the communities to perform the tasks on the ground.	Founding member commutes between field and home town; ~3 active community organizers.	Founding member based in the field; ~8 active community organizers and ~50 leaders identified in the community.
History	Almost three decades old. Founding members started out as a part of a Gandhian movement. There are two founding members, one of which works on health and the other on social issues.	Almost 15 years old. The NGO's founding member always worked in the social sector.	More than three decades old. The NGO's founding member has a conservation background and also owned a business earlier.	Almost 18 years old. The founding members have a background in social work and law.

interviews with different actors, including NGO members, community members, bureaucrats, activists, journalists, and independent researchers; focus group discussions; participant observation, which included home stays and attending community meetings, festivals, and rituals; and extensive field notes. This mixed method approach allowed us to crosscheck information from multiple sources, thereby improving the validity and credibility of the findings.

Specifically, the first author conducted over one hundred interviews with people from a wide range of backgrounds. Approximately 60% of the interviewees were members of the local community (in both NGO-supported and non-supported villages). The community members included members of the *gram sabha* (all adult members of the village) and CFR rights management committee. Villagers were also identified for the interview via snowball sampling to share their experience about the Forest Rights Act, CFR rights, and other forest management related issues. This sample included both men and women belonging to varied classes, castes, and age groups. An additional 15% of the interviewees were bureaucrats, another 15% were NGO personnel, and the remaining 10% were social activists and independent researchers. Interviews were conducted in person and lasted from thirty minutes up to two hours each, with follow-up phone calls to clarify and corroborate information.

The interviews conducted for the study were semi-structured, with questions designed to be open-ended to allow flexibility for incorporating the new ideas, insights, or perspectives provided by the interviewees. This technique was suitable for the research, because although an interview guide was prepared in advance (see Appendix 1) to allow the interviewer to remain focused on the topic, there was also flexibility and freedom to tailor questions based on the type of people interviewed (Kvale, 2008).

Focus group discussions were held in each village to identify common and divergent understanding, attitudes, and values pertaining to Forest Rights Act, CFR rights, the extent to which the rights are being exercised, and activities carried out in the forest in the post-rights recognition phase. In all, six group discussions in six different villages, lasting from one to two hours each, were held with approximately fifteen community members per discussion.

Focus group discussions serve as an effective way of gathering information and understanding the realities of people's perceptions and provide an opportunity for spontaneous expression and facilitation of interaction in the community. Overall, it was an efficient method of gaining insight into people's shared understanding of forest rights and seeing how the meaning of those rights is constructed in a group (Merton, 1987). In addition, this method was also useful in increasing awareness and raising consciousness about the Forest Rights Act and CFR rights in the group. For example, in the non-NGO supported villages, it was noted that the villagers were either not aware that their CFR rights had been recognized or had no clue about what it meant to have their CFR rights recognized.

Participant observation was also used as part of the data gathering. It served as an effective way to observe a social setting without becoming inextricably caught up in the setting's ongoing affairs (Glesne, 2006; Emerson et al., 2001). Substantial time was invested in adjusting to the system and establishing credibility in the community where the fieldwork was to be conducted. The process involved home stays and attending community meetings, festivals, and rituals. This method enabled observation of the behavior of the villagers, listening to conversations (sometimes also engaging in conversations), and understanding what forest rights really mean to people.

Detailed field notes were also kept to fully capture all the field experiences. This process allowed for personal reflection on the data while it was being collected (Charmaz, 2006). In addition to providing an opportunity for reflection, field notes also served as an opportunity for preliminary analysis, which was reassessed at regular intervals, and helped in keeping an account of observations that contributed to explaining or providing possible reasons for some of the study's findings

(Emerson et al., 2001).

Once the data collection was complete, the data was organized to provide information and understanding on the post-rights recognition scenario, the different actors involved, and their activities. More specifically, the information about the roles and diverse range of activities in which the NGOs were involved were gleaned from the data for future analysis to look at emerging patterns, themes, and concepts. Overall, this analysis allowed us to interpret the data, identify themes, and eventually conduct systematic comparisons within and across cases.

4. Results

4.1. What happens in the absence of NGO support?

We studied villages that had been granted CFR rights but where NGOs were not working ($n = 5$). Across these villages, we observed the following: First, not all the villagers knew that their CFR rights had been recognized. Only a selected few in the village – the members of the *gram panchayat* in such villages – were aware that their claim for CFR rights had been recognized. Second, even among the latter, there was a limited understanding of what CFR rights entail, the rights prescribed under the CFR rights, how those rights can be exercised, and what responsibilities are vested in exercising those rights. For instance, when asked, the respondents did not know that they could market NTFPs on their own or that they could exclude others from their CFR forest areas. Third, not surprisingly, given the lack of awareness, these villages had not formed CFR rights committees (as per the Forest Rights Act Rule, 4(e)) or biodiversity management committees to plan forest management in their CFR forests. Fourth, the villagers had been working under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act[11] (NREGA), through which they had been involved in forest management activities like afforestation, constructing soil erosion control structures, and monitoring their forests. However, these activities were not identified or planned by them, as specified under the Forest Right Act; they were still being planned and implemented by the Forest Department. Finally, the NTFP marketing was also still under the Forest Department's control, so the villagers continued to work as wage laborers engaged in the NTFP harvest at a wage set by the Forest Department, while the auctioning was entirely controlled by the Forest Department. Thus, in spite of getting CFR rights, nothing had really changed in these villages.

4.2. Exercise of CFR rights and responsibilities in NGO-supported villages

In the NGO-supported villages (n = 19), we observed that the NGOs work in three domains: interaction with the communities, interaction with state actors, and interaction with market actors. The interaction with the communities focuses more on capacity building. With state and market actors, the NGOs interact on behalf of communities to ensure the support and facilitation, i.e. responsiveness, of state agencies for implementation of the Forest Rights Act in its true spirit. In the market domain, the NGOs seek to help villagers engage more effectively with actors such as NTFP traders. In this section, we share the details of our results to demonstrate the scenario in the NGO-supported villages in the post-rights recognition phase.

4.2.1. Interaction with communities: Awareness and capacity building

The Amravati and Gadchiroli districts of Maharashtra have a long history of community mobilization and demand for enforcement of constitutional rights. This goes back to the early 1970s and a series of demands related to topics such as rights to employment guarantee, land reforms, and protection of customary and traditional forest resources. In the post-claim phase, the primary focus of NGO work in the villages has been mobilizing and empowering the communities to exercise their CFR rights, while also carrying out their responsibilities regarding sustainable use and conservation. The NGOs have done this by working at multiple levels: a) building awareness, b) empowering certain groups to participate more effectively, c) carrying out capacity building and targeted skill development; and d) pursuing specific activities related to the CFR rights (see Table 2 for details).

Awareness building is carried out through various workshops on CFR rights, creation of material in the local language, and arranging exposure visits to 'model' villages. This last strategy seems to be particularly effective. For example, NGO 2 arranged visits for members of the communities they work with to *Mendha Lekha*, a village that is perceived as a leader in exercising CFR rights (Pathak et al., 2008). As a villager reported,

"When we visited *Mendha Lekha*, we got inspired by the way they keep records and their thoroughness with the Forest Rights Act. We were also greatly influenced by their philosophy of governing their forests to the extent that they do not feel any obligation to remain accountable to the Forest Department or any other administrative department. On the contrary, they perceive their *gram sabha* (village assembly) as a part of the state, and the community members believe they are accountable to their *gram sabha* and no other entity. We got so inspired by our interaction with the people from *Mendha Lekha* that we are trying to emulate some of their actions in our village".

Going beyond generic awareness building, these NGOs have pursued activities targeted at empowering particular sections of the village community. NGO 4 has been actively engaging with the youth in the village: "We got funding from the Village Social Transformation Foundation (VSTF), which we are using to develop youth leadership in the villages. These youth leaders are called *gram pravartaks*, which literally translates to village transformation leaders" (Founder, NGO 4). NGO 1 has focused more on empowering women in the community:

"We observed that women would barely participate in the meetings; they hesitated to speak up in a gathering where there were men. We realized that having a separate training workshop for women where they could be more comfortable in expressing, sharing, and learning was important, so we started organizing workshops exclusively for women" (Founder, NGO 1).

The women participants at the workshop said that previously they used to feel hesitant in expressing their views, as they were too scared of being judged and made fun of, so they always decided to stay quiet. They added that such workshops not only educated them but also empowered them: "We look at other women leaders and get inspiration from them, to understand and articulate the problems we face and have the confidence to speak our minds" (Participant, Women Farmer Training Workshop by NGO 1).

In addition to awareness building, the NGOs have attempted to build particular skill sets among the villagers. Training programs on forest management techniques, vegetation stock mapping, and the use of Global Positioning System (GPS) in mapping have been conducted by most NGOs (Table 2). These skills are then used in subsequent activities, such as mapping of the CFR forest area boundary (which has not been done by the state agencies) and preparation of CFR forest management plans, which the state is encouraging them to prepare.

Finally, the NGOs have actively pursued specific forest related activities. Apart from helping in the marketing of NTFPs (which we discuss separately below), NGO personnel are always keeping in mind issues of 'sustainable use' and 'conservation'. One activity to address this area of concern is afforestation, especially in the degraded parts of the forest, using native plant species. There are different ecological contexts in the areas in which different NGOs work; for example, NGO 4 works in a particularly degraded forest belt. Consequently, NGO 4 has focused heavily on restoring vegetative cover, using numerous strategies (e.g. soil and water conservation, planting of grass and trees, watering of the saplings to ensure their survival, etc.) They have

[11] NREGA, also referred to as MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), extends a legal guarantee of 100 days' minimum wage labor per year to all rural households in India.

Table 2
Activities carried out in the post-rights recognition phase in NGO-supported villages.

PURPOSE	ACTIVITIES			
	NGO 1	NGO 2	NGO 3	NGO 4
Awareness and capacity building	• Rapport and trust building • Training workshops to educate and inform the communities about the FRA and their rights • Engaging local villagers in NGO activities • Mobilizing self-help groups (SHGs) • Collective information sharing via WhatsApp[a] groups • Regular interaction with community members • Exposure visits to other villages • Mobilization to engage the communities in collective action for afforestation, erosion control, and other forest management activities • Vegetation stock mapping • GPS mapping • Training workshop for women farmers • Mobilization of SHGs	• Initiation of projects only based on requests from the community	• Convergence of all the institutions and committees formed in the post-rights recognition phase	• Convergence of all the institutions and committees formed in the post-rights recognition phase • Youth engagement via Maharashtra VSTF
Reconciling with statutes, trouble-shooting administrative bottlenecks, & providing support for resource regeneration	• Rapport building • Creating pressure by demanding proper implementation of the FRA	• Rapport building • Creating pressure by demanding proper implementation of the FRA • Deconstructing the law for state actors	• Rapport building • Demanding proper implementation of the FRA • Confrontation	• Rapport building • Demanding proper implementation of the FRA • Confrontation • Litigation
Forest produce marketing	• Networking with other NGOs for cross-learning about ways to navigate market systems, learn about new opportunities, and overcome obstacles in the marketing process • Negotiation • NTFP collectives • Alternative livelihood opportunity: mahua (*Madhuca logifolia*) flower sweets	• Alternative livelihood opportunity: honey	• NTFP collectives • Alternate livelihood opportunity: fisheries and herbs	• NTFP collective • Alternative livelihood opportunities: dairy, fruit, and fisheries

[a] WhatsApp is one of the world's largest calling and messaging applications that allow its users unlimited texting, file sharing, and video and audio calls for free. WhatsApp is especially popular for its group chats that serve as forums for sharing information with the members of that group.

photographic evidence of having substantially regenerated the vegetation cover in several villages. The funds for these activities were mobilized through a multitude of government programs.

In most villages, the afforestation activity, though arduous, also served as a source of income because the NGOs were able to convince the state to pay the people for their labor through NREGA. NGO 3 has also actively focused on changing NTFP harvesting and management strategies by asking villagers to desist from destructive practices, even if these are seen as 'traditional' (authors do not provide details here to maintain anonymity). They believe that villagers have responded to this appeal, and dozens of villages have declared a ban on such practices. This is a clear example of an active focus on the responsibility for sustainable use and conservation.

Finally, one additional strategy that NGO 4 has adopted to aid communities in easily exercising their rights is the convergence of all institutions related to forest management. Previously, implementation of any government policy or program required a new committee to be formed. This led to the existence of multiple committees in a village, which increased the ambiguity and confusion and impeded the implementation of the policy or program. "We have converged all these committees into one, so that there is no confusion— there is a single committee that works on implementing all forest and village-level schemes", explained the founder of NGO 4. This ensures that the village can work towards integrated development and decide how each scheme fits into its overall plan.

4.2.2. Interaction with the state: Reconciling with other statutes & troubleshooting administrative bottlenecks

Although the CFR rights are statutory, exercising them has not been easy given the gaps in the law,[12] the indifference or lack of initiative from some departments, and outright hostility from the Forest Department. Thus, the NGOs have to both confront and seek the cooperation of state agencies to enable communities to exercise their rights to perform tasks prescribed under the Forest Rights Act (see Table 2). Efforts to build rapport with the bureaucrats are made by all the NGOs:

"Having good chemistry with the state actors is very important and facilitates the resolution of any confusion in translating information to the community on ground. A lot of state actors, though given the responsibility of implementing Forest Rights Act, were not trained on the Act. I have conducted several workshops with them and deconstructed and explained the components of the Act and what it entails on many occasions" (Founder, NGO 2).

The NGO founders also shared that while the cooperation of the state actors in proper Forest Rights Act implementation was necessary, this was not always easy to get, because sometimes NGOs needed to confront the state actors in cases when the Act was violated or inadequately implemented. For example, the founder of NGO 4 said, "We had no option but to confront the Forest Department when they suddenly decided to relocate villagers residing in the CFR forests without their consent. We reached out to our network of higher-ranking officials to create pressure on the state actors at lower administrative levels here". The leader of NGO 3 also reported that they have put pressure on state agencies through contacts with higher-ranking government officers when they fail to or inadequately implement government programs and schemes or obstruct activities under the Forest Rights Act.

During their interviews, state actors acknowledged the work and contribution of the NGOs in mobilizing communities to exercise their rights. However, they also made the point that the work of each NGO was limited to the small number of villages they were working with and hinted at NGOs choosing easy targets. For example, senior Forest Officer Amravati claimed, "NGOs just focus all their energies on a limited number of cases, and that is their claim to fame. However, we do not have that choice; we have to work in all the villages and treat them all equally." This geographic limitation in the work of the NGOs was also evident in our data, which showed that the staff and funding available to these NGOs were both very limited and in no way matched the resources of the state. However, oftentimes some of the villages where the NGOs work end up becoming model villages that inspire others to develop ways to navigate administrative bottlenecks on their own, so that they can exercise their rights and responsibilities easily.

4.2.3. Marketing of forest produce

The forests of the Vidarbha region are blessed with a number of valuable NTFPs, but the most economically valuable ones by far are *tendu leaves* (*Diospyros melanoxylon*) and bamboo. However, until the passing of the Forest Rights Act, the entire process of NTFP harvesting, sales, and marketing, including identifying and contracting the best buyers and auctioning NTFPs at the best prices, setting wages for the NTFP harvesters (village workers), determining the dates of harvest and regulating the movement of the product, and the eventual payment of an additional 'bonus' (if any), were all taken care of by the Forest Department. The transfer of ownership and selling rights of NTFPs to forest-dwellers under the Forest Rights Act meant that *gram sabhas* would need to engage directly with contractors and companies for financial transactions. The question then arises of how the communities will handle new, complex, and risky tasks with which they had no previous experience, given that, for instance, a failed auction in a season would mean significant loss of income.

Ideally, the state should have facilitated the transition from state-run auctions and accounting procedures to auctions run by *gram sabhas*. However, in reality, the state has left the *gram sabhas* on their own, without creating parallel avenues for capacity building—e.g. providing technical training, using the GPS to demarcate the boundaries, and organizing workshops to educate community members about rights and government programs they can access. In fact, the *gram sabhas* have faced hurdles from the Forest Department and contractor lobby in the process. One of the stiffest challenges has been obtaining the transport permit that is needed to transport the harvest outside of the forest for sale. NGO-supported villages managed to obtain their transport permits by putting sustained pressure on the Forest Department.

The unfamiliarity with the tendering and auctioning process added to the challenge. There was also little awareness about market rates. Contractors had always had an upper hand while negotiating the supply and prices of NTFPs, especially bamboo. One of the ways that NGOs have enabled the community to exercise their CFR rights regarding NTFP trade without major challenges from the contractors and/or the Forest Department is by facilitating the creation of federations of *gram sabhas* (colloquially called *mahagramsabha*) (Gupta, 2019). These are institutional mechanisms that are popular across the Vidarbha region for the trading of the *tendu leaves* used for rolling cheap cigarettes (colloquially called *bidis*). NGOs 1, 3, and 4 have facilitated the formation of collectives for the trade of *tendu leaves*. Villages where NGO 2 has been working do not have much *tendu* so they are not part of any collective; instead, they have bamboo as their major NTFP. In addition to the sale of *tendu* leaves and bamboo, the NGOs are also promoting alternative livelihood opportunities in the villages where they are working. For example, NGO 1 is venturing into promoting sweets made from the flower of Mahua tree (*Madhuca longifolia*); NGO 2 has been involved in creating an active local market for the local honey; NGO 3 has been promoting marketing of fish and other herbs in the villages where they are working; and NGO 4 has been actively helping communities get easier access to cattle, which has led to the proliferation of dairy products as an important source of income for the people in the region. NGO 4 has also helped communities market sugar-apples (*Annona squamosa*) grown in their CFR forests. These sugar-apples are

[12] The gaps in the law exist as there is no clarification provided about the responsibilities of the state agencies in the post-rights recognition phase. Efforts to define the responsibilities were made in the Joint Committee (2010) report, but were actively obstructed by the forest bureaucracy.

marketed as natural and organic produce. They have generated good economic returns in the recent past (see Table 2).

5. Discussion and conclusion

The broad objective of this study was to examine the support required to achieve responsive forest governance following the recognition of CFR rights under the Forest Rights Act in India. Specifically, we sought to understand what happens when the statutory rights and responsibilities are transferred to the community and how the community goes about exercising their CFR rights and discharging their responsibilities in the post-claim phase. Our study shows that unless the rights holders are aware of what their rights entail, have the required capacities, and are mobilized to defend their rights when necessary, they will neither be able to adequately exercise their rights nor have the capacity to discharge their responsibilities. The rights-based approach applied in the Forest Rights Act gives adequate autonomy to the community to ensure (thus far) that 'responsibilization' of the kind that took place under JFM does not occur (Lele, 2011 and Lele, 2014). However, the shift from either subservient (pre-JFM) or responsibilized (post-JFM) forest governance to responsive governance by the state is excruciatingly slow and difficult.

Our observations show that awareness about the exercise of new rights and responsibilities devolved under the CFR rights provisions of the Forest Rights Act does not exist or happen automatically. There is no systematic effort by the state to make this happen, and, consequently, NGOs are filling this gap (Barnes et al., 2016). To do this, these NGOs are working in multiple domains. They directly engage with the communities, conducting training workshops to educate community members and build their capacities. They also engage with various state agencies in an attempt to reconcile the Forest Rights Act provisions with other statutes and trouble-shoot administrative bottlenecks to ease the path for marketing and government support. Finally, they engage with market actors to help communities obtain better prices for the forest products that have now come under community ownership.

Common to the four NGOs studied for this research is the goal of community empowerment—the aim to ensure that communities are able to effectively exercise their CFR rights granted under the Forest Rights Act. Nevertheless, these NGOs have their own strengths and idiosyncrasies that stem from their respective backgrounds and histories. These individual features influence the types of activities the NGOs perform. For example, the founder of NGO 1 has almost three decades of experience working with women and SHGs, and, thus, the NGO's activities emphasize training women farmers and mobilizing rural women to assert their rights. Similarly, the founder of NGO 2 has been actively involved in the social movements in the region demanding the recognition of rights of the forest dwellers; therefore, the activities of the NGO emphasize on awareness building in the communities so that they can make their own decisions regarding what government projects to initiate and which schemes to access. NGO 3 primarily worked with the state Forest Department in the past and was engaged in policy advocacy to promote conservation. Post Forest Rights Act enactment, NGO 3 is focusing on promotion of conservation-oriented activities. Lastly, the founders of NGO 4 have a background in social work and law; hence, they have actively used litigation as a tool in their engagement in FRA implementation. Nevertheless, the commonalities outweigh the differences in terms of the extent of the support they have provided to communities and the multiple domains in which they have to work in order to make CFR rights effective.

There are of course risks inherent in NGOs being involved in the implementation of decentralization reforms in particular and state programs in general (Ghosh, 2009; Cook et al., 2017; Kamath, 2004). The risks include possibly limited impacts, lack of transparency, perpetuation of villager dependency on outside agents, and (if the state funds the NGOs) loss of the autonomy of the NGOs to act as a watchdog on state actions. Most important, in the context of the NGOs we selected or those working on FRA implementation in general, is the limited reach they have in comparison to the scale of the decentralization task. We are therefore not arguing that management of forests claimed under CFR rights must be promoted through NGOs. However, our analysis indicates that there are many steps involved in the exercise of CFR rights. These steps, though not spelt out in the law, place enormous demands on an inexperienced village community. This requires the state to be highly responsive to the needs of communities during the post-rights recognition phase. The NGOs are filling the gaps left by state inaction or weaknesses in empowering local institutions to discharge the responsibilities vested in them under the Forest Rights Act. The relevance of the work of NGOs is evident from our observations in the non-NGO supported villages, where the implementation of the Forest Rights Act was limited due to the limited awareness and capacity of the community. Although the work of NGOs might not be scalable, their involvement in implementation of the FRA currently provides an extremely valuable (even if limited in scale and stop-gap) support system. It can also be treated as a pilot to enable policy-makers to understand the steps required to be taken by a state agency to ensure the implementation of the Act beyond the rights-recognition phase.

The results of this study are constrained by several limitations. First, the mode of operation of the NGOs used in this study cannot be used as a basis for generalizing the results to all NGOs working on Forest Rights Act implementation in the rest of the country. Rather, our study provides insights about the activities performed by some of the most capable NGOs in enabling communities to exercise their rights. Second, the study might give the impression that all the challenges in the Forest Rights Act implementation are addressed by virtue of NGO involvement. This is not entirely the case, because, while NGOs do play a crucial role in aiding the communities in exercising their rights, they are mostly unsuccessful in cases where villages are struggling with complex internal politics and are unable to come to a consensus about an issue. This is because, under such circumstances, it is challenging for the NGOs to build mutual trust in the community and mobilize them to take collective action. In addition to the above-mentioned limitations, the results of the study are also limited in that the study does not adequately explore the impact of the exercise of CFR rights on investment in other social sectors and the impact of women's participation on the exercise of these rights. These limitations exist primarily because activities performed in the villages in the post-rights recognition stage, as mentioned earlier, are fairly recent. These are important concerns that need to be addressed by future research.

Observations from a single geographic context might be hard to generalize. Nevertheless, this study contributes to the understanding of the steps involved in creating a conducive environment to enable communities to exercise their rights and responsibilities under rights-based decentralized forest governance. In addition, the study provides material that can be used by the NGOs themselves to reflect on their work. Our interactions with the NGOs suggest that most of them are aware of the limitations in their work, both of in terms of scale and sustainability. At least one NGO expressed the need for them to withdraw at some stage, while acknowledging the challenge in leaving behind long-lasting institutions. Studies such as ours can provide an opportunity for NGO actors to reflect on future strategies in this journey towards responsive forest governance.

Author declaration

Divya Gupta: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Analysis, Data Curation, Writing-original draft, review and editing.

Sharachchandra Lele: Conceptualization, Methodology, Analysis, Writing- review and editing, Supervision.

Geetanjoy Sahu: Writing- review and editing, Supervision.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the NGOs that graciously hosted us and shared all their materials and insights, as well as all our respondents, especially the villagers from our study area who answered our questions patiently and treated us with great hospitality. We are also grateful to all the bureaucrats who were extremely cooperative and helped us understand their side of the story of law and policy implementation. We would also like to thank the three anonymous reviewers and our editors for their insightful feedback. This paper is part of the special issue called "Responsibilization" and the open access cost of the publication was covered by the Academy of Finland and the Strategic Research Council of Finland. Finally, the financial support for this work came from internal funds at Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment and Tata Institute of Social Sciences, especially from endowments provided by the Ford Foundation, Rohini Nilekani, and the Tata Trusts.

Appendix A. Appendix 1

Processes to be observed and information to be sought:

- How does the presence of a CSO change the role and activities of the State?
- Ways the CSO can act as a complement and counterbalance to a powerful state agency?
- Are the CSOs the countervailing force against an unresponsive and corrupt state that disregards both environmental issues and human rights?
- Diversities within CSO activities/initiatives and their implications
- CSO approach in CFR: CSO-driven vs CSO-led
- Power Structure between CSO and community
- Cross-learning and spillover effects in non CSO-facilitated village

Questions for the community:

Preliminary questions:

Q. How many households are there?

Q. What is the main profession/source of income of the people in the village?

Q What is the men vs. women ratio?

Q. How big is your forest?

CFR related questions:

Q. When did you get the CFR claim?

Q How did you find out about it?

Q What is your personal opinion about CFR/FRA?

Q. Did you get any help during the claim process?

-If so, who helped and how?

Q. Did you face any challenges during the claim process?

-If so, what kind of challenges?

Q. Have you observed any changes post CFR claim?

Q. What are the activities going on post CFR claim?

-Receiving any help?

Q. How are people adapting to changes?

Q. What motivates you to engage in CFR activities?

Q. Do the villagers have any interaction with the govt. personnel?

Experience with the CSOs:

Q. What has been your experience working with the CSOs?

Q. What are the different activities the CSOs are performing?

Q. What is their strategy while working with the community?

Q. What are the resources provided to the gram sabha by the CSOs?

Q. How do you think it would be if the CSOs were not there?

Market:

Q. What are the different sources of income generated from the forest?

Q. How does the community organize in collecting and marketing the NTFP?

Q. How much revenue was generated?

Q. What is the difference in the NTFP management and marketing being observed?

Q. What is the role played by the CSO in NTFP management and marketing?

Questions on afforestation.

Q. What is being planted? Who initiated it? How is it being conducted? Who is involved? How successful has it been?

Questions on governance mechanism for NTFPs and CFR forests.

Q. What is the process? Who and how are the community members involved?

Q. What is the role of gender?

Q. Is there anything new that is being practiced?

Q. Do you think the NTFP market will change the way forests are perceived or will be in the future?

Questions on monitoring mechanism.

How is monitoring conducted? Who is involved and in what capacity?

What are the resource access rules established by the gram sabha?

How often do you feel people violate those rules?

How do you deal with the rule breakers?

Questions on funds?

How much funding has been received?

What are the sources of funds?

What are the resources provided to the gram sabha: by CSO, government.

Questions for the NGO personnel:

Questions on origin and rootedness.

Questions on the socio-ecological and economic context where the CSO is working.

Questions on the nature of funding.

Questions on challenges the CSO face in their operation.

Questions on the nature of their activities and mode of operation.

Questions on the CSO position on: FRA, CFR, Market, TD/FD, role of community, their own role.

Questions on exit strategy.

Sample questions:

Q. What is the kind of work your NGO does?

Q. What do you think about FRA?

Q. How did you get involved in FRA?

Q. Do you think FRA will help in: alleviating poverty; forest conservation; enhancing collective action; promoting community development; empowering the community; promoting their autonomy; improving connections with the government; promoting social justice; enhancing livelihood?

Q. What has been your role in FRA implementation?

Q. Why is CFR important? How do you think the community and the forests benefit from it in the long run?

Q. What is the kind of approach or strategies you use while working with the communities? (at social-technical-political-economic-legal-biophysical levels. Check for activities related to: education; training; lobbying at different levels; mapping out forest boundaries; networking with other NGOs and actors.)

Q. What is your view on NTFPs as a source of sustainable livelihoods? Do you think it is sustainable? How viable are bamboo and tendu in the long run?

Q. One criticism CFR is facing is that it will deplete natural forest and ecosystem services because access of communities to natural resources will put pressure on the natural resource and result in compromising biodiversity in the region. What is your take on that?

Q. What do you think the role of FD and TD should be in the process of FRA implementation?

Q. What are the some of the major challenges you face in the process of working with the communities? What are the factors that impede and facilitate the process?

How do you manage to overcome those challenges?

Q. What are some of the challenges you come across in the process of operation of your NGO in the context of FRA implementation and in general? (Is it the workforce; lack of motivation; hectic schedule; lack of cooperation from the bureaucrats; administrative problems?)

Q. What are the challenges you come across while working with the community?

Q. What is the role of SHGs?

Q. What is the fate of the NGOs working in the NRM sector? Have you experienced any changes from how you used to operate earlier and how things have changed now? Do you think the things have changed for good or bad? Has that made it difficult for you to work? What are the factors that have triggered those changes?

Q. What are some of the ways you have adapted to those changes?

Q. Have you ever thought about your exit strategy?

Q. What do you think is or should be the role of FD and TD?

Q. How do you think the research institutions and researchers impacted your work or dynamics at the grassroots level in general?

Questions for bureaucrats (FD, TD, District Collector).

Q. What is your perception of the Forest Rights Act? What are the impacts you think it might have on the community and the forests?

Q. What changes have you observed in the forest and in the community after implementation on FRA?

Q. What is your role in FRA implementation?

Q. What are the challenges you are experiencing in the implementation of FRA? How do you overcome them?

Q. What are the necessary roles you feel you are expected to play in FRA implementation (expectation from the state vs. community)?

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