

Social Protection and Wellbeing: Food Security in Adivasi communities, Chhattisgarh, India

Despite economic growth, persistent levels of absolute poverty remain across the world. Social protection is an important response to this, guaranteeing a basic level of income support. The state of Chhattisgarh, India, provides an interesting model, as government commitment and people's action combine to buttress food security in communities with historically high levels of disadvantage.

New research on **wellbeing and poverty in Chhattisgarh** provides an innovative perspective on these issues. Qualitative and quantitative evidence show more secure livelihoods have a broader effect on people's confidence and experience of quality in life. Strong traditions of collective identity and community mobilisation constitute important resources for the achievement of rights in practice. Persistent gender inequalities remain, however, in both objective achievements and people's subjective assessments of what they can do or be.



Key Findings

Outcomes: Improved Food Security

- Since the early 2000s Chhattisgarh has experienced major public investment, combining national programmes with initiatives of the state government. This has included significant expansion of roads and schooling, but it is the turnaround in social protection that is most marked.
- Where hunger was commonplace ten years ago, fewer than 10% of people say they had to go hungry over the previous twelve months.
- 80% of respondents have ration cards and almost all of these are getting their full entitlement of Public Distribution System (PDS) rice. 49% have worked under the rural employment guarantee scheme (MGNREGS) in the past year and most received the right pay for the right number of days.
- Wage rates in the private sector have also increased, shifting the terms of exchange between employers and workers.
- Some challenges continue: a residual 20% have no ration card and these are predominantly poorer people; MGNREGS payments are frequently delayed and the fact that payment is not available on a daily basis leads some poor to self-exclude.
- While there are some signs of progress, marked inequalities by gender remain.

Process: Government Commitment and Popular Mobilisation

- The successful delivery of social protection is achieved through a combination of government commitment from above and popular mobilisation from below.
- Securing formal rights in practice still requires active pursuit by claimants. Entitlements may be withheld on the whim of individual officers or political representatives, or granted because of a personal relationship.
- A strong tradition of collective identity and community mobilisation constitute important resources for the achievement of rights in practice.

New Perspectives: Psycho-social Wellbeing

- A multi-dimensional model of psycho-social 'inner wellbeing' was developed through the research to assess what people think or feel they are able to be and do.
- Better economic status is matched by higher inner wellbeing scores. Qualitative evidence confirms this, suggesting that more secure livelihoods have a broader impact on people's confidence and experience of quality in life.
- While wellbeing may be assessed individually, its roots lie in the collective. Participation in social exchange and joint community action are both highly valued. At the same time, confidence is quite low in the ability to achieve these, and varies greatly by gender, economic and marital status.
- In these communities, social solidarity is linked with a shared responsibility to care for the earth. Personal wellbeing is therefore grounded in a broader wellbeing ecology, in which culture, community and place connect to the political economy of environment, rights and resources.

Introduction

This paper reflects on a policy success: the effective delivery of social protection in Surguja district, Chhattisgarh state, which has largely removed hunger in Adivasi¹ communities where 10 years before it was endemic (Dreze, 2001; Dreze and Khera, 2010). At its core is the Public Distribution Service (PDS), which supplies food-grains free or at nominal prices, and a nationwide programme which guarantees at least one hundred days of labour to rural households.

Where the PDS has been a by-word for corruption and inefficiency, the achievements in Chhattisgarh constitute an inspiring alternative (World Bank, 2011; Dreze and Sen, 2013). This assumes even greater importance as the National Food Security ('Right to Food') Act (2013) extends entitlement to subsidized food-grain to two thirds of the Indian population. Taking a distinctive focus of the wellbeing of recipient communities, this briefing uses qualitative and quantitative evidence to explore local perspectives on the process and outcomes of achieving food security. It aims to provide information that will help extend the benefits of social protection amongst India's less advantaged people.

"Now we are getting rice from the government and so we are able to live our lives" (Married Woman)

"Earlier there were no rations so we had to work much harder; now we don't even have to husk the paddy; so what if my husband has a disability - at least we get enough rice to eat!" (Married Woman)

"This current government has done away with our troubles" (Married Man)

¹ The term 'Adivasi' means indigenous person. It refers mainly to those termed 'Scheduled Tribe' in colonial times. It is preferred as giving a common identity and overcoming the pejorative associations of 'tribal'. 'Scheduled Tribe', like 'Other Backward Caste' and 'Scheduled Caste' remain Indian census categories.



Communities at the Margin

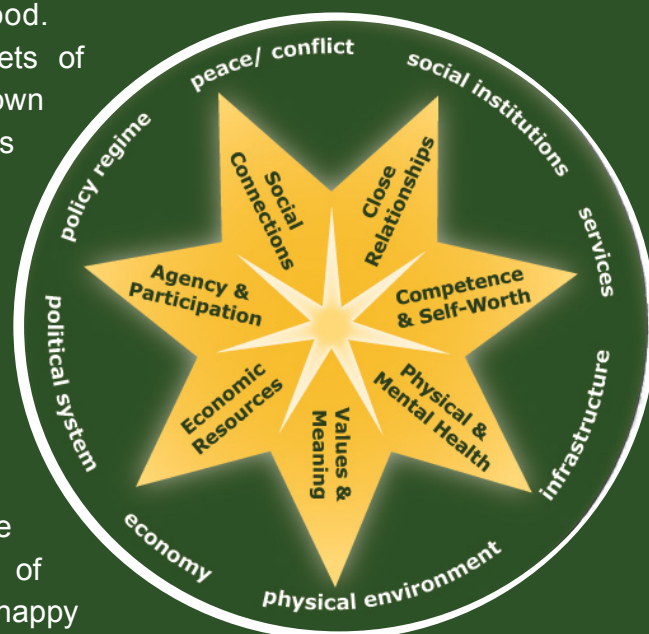
The research took place in the historically remote hill and forest regions of northern Chhattisgarh. These are extremely poor communities where people depend on (largely rainfed) farming, daily labour and gathering non-timber forest products to survive. Reflecting the area's population as a whole, the majority of respondents (84%) are Adivasi, including Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PTG), with smaller numbers of Other Backward Caste (OBC) (15%) and Scheduled Caste (1%) people.

The four research villages present a range of contrasts. Central is the most prosperous and easily accessible, close to the block (sub-district) headquarters. Hill winds its way up a road that was only recently constructed. Forest is the least accessible village, fully reachable by road only since 2012. Dry Land is the poorest and farming is a struggle here, with no mechanised irrigation and limited access to streams or rivers.

The historic marginality and exploitation experienced by Adivasi communities is well documented (Sundar, 2007; Rycroft and Dasgupta, 2011) and southern districts of Chhattisgarh have been heavily affected by Naxal activity, a Maoist-inspired resistance movement which is in violent conflict with the state (Gaur and Patnaik, 2008; Sundar, 2012). Chhattisgarh is rich in mineral and coal deposits. Industrial interests thus combine with security concerns to form part of the backdrop to recent state investment, particularly the construction and improvement of roads.

Box 1: Researching Inner Wellbeing

Researching wellbeing means going beyond the economic to a broader understanding of what makes life good. Rather than seeing people simply as the targets of policy, this new approach explores people's own perspectives, looking beyond individual viewpoints to consider issues of culture, values and ways of life. It is outcome-based, concerned not simply with the achievement of programme objectives, but with the practical impact on people's lives. It draws attention to connections and implications across traditional boundaries of thought or sector. Critically, it focuses on quality of life, considering people's subjective experience and perceptions in addition to objective achievements. While subjective wellbeing is typically measured by a combination of how satisfied people are with their lives and how happy they feel (Diener, 2000), this research introduces a new concept of 'Inner Wellbeing'. This seeks to understand in a more substantive way what people think and feel they are able to be and do in different areas of their lives (White et al., 2013).



Inner wellbeing comprises seven domains: economic confidence; agency and participation; social connections; close relationships; physical and mental health; competence and self-worth; values and meaning. Parallel research developing this approach took place in Zambia (White and Jha, 2013). The survey has five questions (or items) for each domain. For each question respondents are asked to select one of five graduated answers. These are then scored on a scale that ranges from strong negative (-2) through weak negative (-1) to neutral (0) to weak positive (+1) to strong positive wellbeing (+2). The questions were extensively grounded and piloted to ensure they captured issues that were important to people's lives locally.

Fieldwork took place in two rounds of four months each, February to May, 2011 and 2013. A survey combined objective (self-report) questions about livelihoods, education, health and social support with subjective questions about satisfaction and inner wellbeing (IWB). We talked to husbands and wives (separately) and women heading households. In 2011 we surveyed 340 people and in 2013 368. 187 respondents were interviewed in both rounds. 7% of respondents were single women. Qualitative data include 151 survey notes and full transcriptions of 30 interviews.

We were supported in the field by Chaupal, a local organisation undertaking community mobilisation. There is no doubt that the goodwill that Chaupal enjoyed in our research villages was critical to people's readiness to talk to us. Academic affiliation was with the G. B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad.

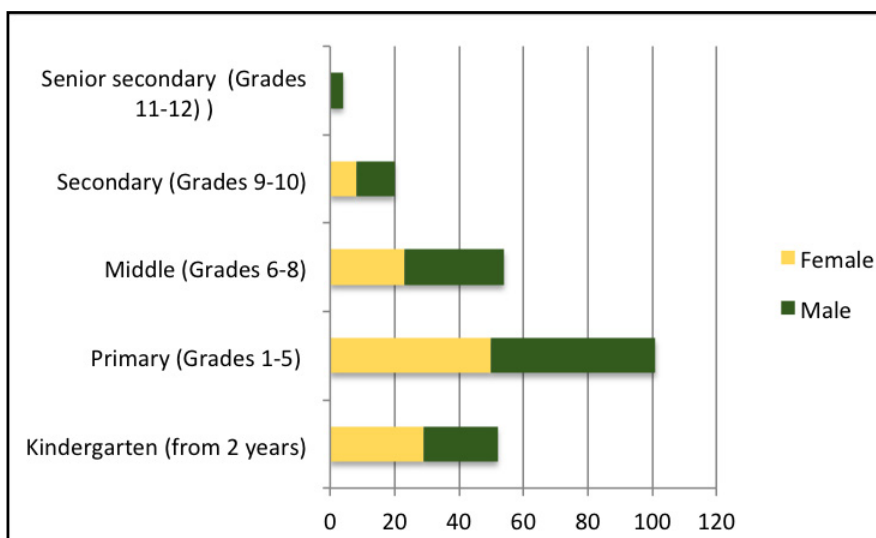
Significant Achievements through Public Investment

Education

Since the early 2000s Chhattisgarh has experienced major public investment, combining nation-wide programmes with initiatives of the state government. As in India as a whole, schooling has expanded rapidly. Free mid-day meals are available for children at government schools, and in our sample virtually everyone eligible for these was receiving them. Levels of education have greatly increased. Only 6% of our respondents' school age children had no schooling or were able only to write their own names, compared with 75% of our respondents

(88% of women and 62% of men). Figure 1 demonstrates two challenges that remain. First, numbers of children in school drop off markedly post-primary. Second, there remains a strong gender bias: the proportion of boys to girls currently in school increases at each level, until at senior secondary level all four students are boys. Many people also commented on the poor quality of government schools, choosing to send children to private or mission schools if they could afford it.

Figure 1: Gender in Current School Attendance - 2013 (n = 231)



Health Care

Basic health care and nutrition support is given to mothers and young children through village level anganwadi centres, which also function as playschools. Virtually everyone eligible for this support was receiving it, although there were some issues about timeliness and quality. Further innovations in health care are an ambulance service; mobile health clinics; and a health insurance scheme. These were new programmes and we cannot comment on rates of access or quality. There is still heavy reliance on the informal sector, however. The health service most commonly used in the past six months was 'quack' doctors (24%), followed by spiritual healers (19%). Then came community health centres (17%), private clinics (13%) and mitanins (volunteer community health workers) (13%).

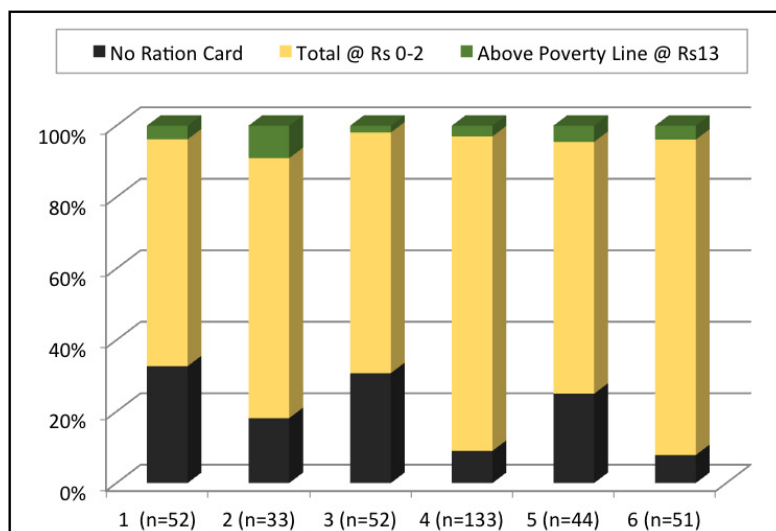


Effective Delivery of Social Protection

Public Distribution System: PDS

From 2004 onwards the Government of Chhattisgarh committed itself to revitalise the PDS system, which had been mired in corruption and inefficiency (Dreze and Sen, 2013:206). This involved changing mechanisms for the delivery of ration goods, enabling much greater public involvement in monitoring and surveillance, and issuing new cards to extend entitlement to the great majority of households. Confirming the reports of others (e.g. Khera, 2011) our survey found in both 2011 and 2013 that over 80% of people had ration cards. Of those with ration cards, more than 98% were able to get PDS rice. In terms of ethnicity, it is the groups classified as PTG that had the best access – 92% held ration cards entitling them to rice at Rs 2 per kilo or less. Rates of holding ration cards were similar across the four villages. While there were some stories of discrimination, the commonest reason for having no ration card was having moved village or a household division. As Figure 2 shows it tends to be poorer people who are without ration cards. Also, the proportion of people classified as 'Above Poverty Line' (APL) was surprisingly similar across economic groups. These facts suggest that even in such a successful programme well-known problems with targeting have not been entirely overcome.

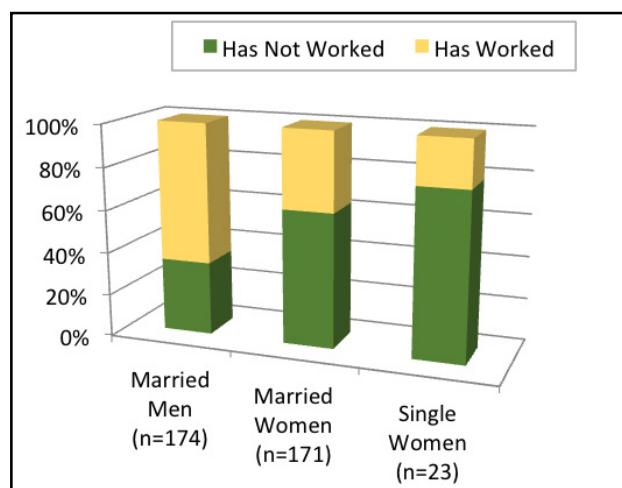
Figure 2:
Distribution of ration cards by economic status - 2013



Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme: MGNREGS

The other major social protection scheme is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). Following the 'Right to Work' Act in 2005, this guarantees a minimum of 100 days of manual labour per rural household per year. In 2013 49% of respondents had done some work under this scheme over the previous year. In both 2011 and 2013 men were more likely to have participated than women (Figure 3). Single women were least likely to have participated, perhaps because they tend to be older, and the MGNREGS involves heavy manual work. In both years the major issue was that payment came late, but there was a slight improvement: 88% of those doing MGNREGS work in 2013 stated that payment was late, compared with 96% in 2011. Even if wages are paid on time, however, the fact that they are not given on a daily basis means that some of the poorest people can't afford to do MGNREGS work.

Figure 3: Work under MGNREGS by gender and marital status - 2013



Box 2: Delays to MGNREGS payment mean poorest may self-exclude

Anand had work under the MGNREGS scheme, but had to leave it after 10-12 days as he did not have enough food to eat. Now he is making combs which he can sell for an immediate profit. The family lives a hand to mouth existence and he asserts "Either I can arrange for food or work under MGNREGS". Once the comb is made, he can trade it for ½ - 1kg rice. When there is enough food in the house, he goes and works at the MGNREGS site but when food is scarce, he has no option but to look for food.

Shifting Terms of Labour Relations

The availability of PDS and work on MGNREGS jobsites at officially set wage rates have shifted the local terms of labour relations. Poorer people recall how they used to be paid in paddy, two kilos for a day's labour, and such poor quality, broken and mixed with stones, that after husking it made only half a kilo of rice, just enough to make up a gruel to keep hunger at bay. Employers, on the other hand, complain that now it is hard to find people to work. Labourers are demanding Rs.150 for a day's work, whereas before PDS and MGNREGS they would have accepted Rs.50. In time-honoured form, this shift is presented as a moral failure of the poor.

"People have now developed a mentality of 'why work?' when they can be dependent on others. Earlier they had to depend on their own resources because if they didn't they would have starved." (Married Man, Employer)

Collective Action

The successful delivery of social protection in Chhattisgarh reflects a combination of government commitment from above and popular mobilisation from below (Dreze and Sen, 2013). Examples of mobilisation include a protest which stopped contractors cutting trees in the forest; getting a ration shop owner replaced when rice was late and quantities short; getting the forest department to re-locate a proposed nursery from village land to the forest interior. Securing formal rights in practice still requires active pursuit by claimants. Entitlements may be withheld on the whim of individual officers or popular representatives, or granted because of a personal relationship. Despite the clear policy that MGNREGS should be available equally to men and women, for example, people related how one sarpanch (elected village head), who was herself a woman, had ruled that only men should work. Not until the men downed tools was this decision reversed.

Box 3: Building the Road: Collective Action Brings Government Response

Hill village comprises a long, straggly series of clusters of houses, etched into the hillside as the road twists and turns on its steep climb upward.

The story of this road begins when the sarpanch, S.G., asked M., the local MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly), to visit their village. He was met at the bottom of the hill with a great fanfare of drums and music. The villagers explained that they wanted a road up through their village. M. laughed and said that it would be impossible to build a road over such a long stretch of rocky terrain. Deeply offended, the villagers realised that they would have to build the road themselves. The entire village, men and women, worked without wages for six weeks. When part of the road was ready they again called the MLA, asking him to pray at the temple at the top of the hill to inaugurate the new road they had constructed. There he found a microphone and dais set up for him to give a speech.

After congratulating them on proving him wrong, he offered Rs.2,00,000 (£3,000) to the sarpanch as a reward. S.G. responded that while he was an illiterate man, part of a 'savage' people who lived up in the hills and may not know much, he did remember M.'s earlier dismissive response. He said that the villagers were not dogs that they would now come running for crumbs. M. left, but returned later, this time to S.G.'s house. Because M. was now a guest in his house, S.G. had to receive him graciously. The villagers consulted together and eventually accepted the money, using it to pay wages to everyone who had laboured on the road. It later became an MGNREGS jobsite. Eventually the road was asphalted under the Prime Minister's Rural Road Scheme.



Food Security and Psycho-social Wellbeing

The relationship between economic status and subjective wellbeing is much debated (see e.g. Graham, 2011). The general consensus is that amongst poorer people a rise in income produces a rise in subjective wellbeing. This is consistent with our findings. We measured economic status in three different ways: livelihood (main source of survival combined with amount of paddy harvested), land-holding, and asset-holding. All of these correlated positively with all of the inner wellbeing domains, suggesting that the better people are doing objectively the more positive they are in what they think or feel they are able to be and do. The economic measures also correlated positively with how happy people said they felt in general.

It is also clear that people feel in general that things are getting better, often linking this explicitly to the PDS and MGNREGS. Asked to compare how they were doing economically now with five years earlier, on a scale of -2 (doing much worse now) to +2 (doing much better now) the average score was 0.81, with 'doing better now' by far the most common response (60% of all responses). This is considerably more positive than the average score of 0.26 across the inner wellbeing items, and 0.25 for how people feel they are managing economically at present. There was, however, a large difference between the average scores of single women and married people on the questions about general happiness, managing economically, and standard of living compared with five years earlier. By contrast, the major difference in overall mean scores of inner wellbeing was by gender (with men scoring higher) rather than marital status.

Box 4: Food insecurity undermines people's material, social, and psychological wellbeing

Life before PDS: The web of poverty, disadvantage and grief across the generations

'Because of our poverty, so much poverty... so we thought "let one son study at least and let the other work with us and help us earn some money so we can put something in our stomachs." If they had both gone to school then what would we have eaten? ...My heart pains for that... that my younger child didn't study... But what if I am sad... we were poor. What would we have eaten in those days when there was no ration (PDS rice)? You get that now, not then! There was nothing then. ...He abuses me so I say "as long as I am alive I will make sure that I educate your son. We didn't educate you and so took on that sin but we will educate your son." That is what I say.' (Married Woman)

Life without a ration card

Anxiety

'I am always worried about where food is going to come from, where are we going to get work, how we will buy food.' (Married Woman)

Shame

'I feel so ashamed, one wish is that when guests come I could give them something better, but as I serve them I feel so bad that this is all I can do, I want to look after them well, but when there isn't anything what can I do?' (Married Woman)

Exclusion from community reciprocity

'There is a wedding in the village for which I need to contribute. H. helped me when I got married so I must help him. If I don't give anything H. will remark upon the fact that all households have contributed a tami (two kgs) of rice each but I didn't. And we are all a community... in this village... H. will bear this in his heart... that he contributed for my wedding but I didn't for his and recall it the next time that I am in need.' (Married Man)



Subjective perspectives on social and collective action

Despite the impressive examples of collective action noted above, both qualitative and quantitative data showed that the majority of people were quite ambivalent about this. On the one hand, they were confident that if the community got together it would be able to achieve what ever it wanted. On the other hand, they had little faith that the community could get together. Table 1 presents the scores for three key IWB questions that relate to this issue, considering both the mean score and how the item ranks against other scores (35 items in total). This shows that these measures of political connections and confidence accounted for three of the six lowest scores of all inner wellbeing questions.

Table 1

	Ranking (highest = 1)	Number of responses	Mean score (+2/-2)	Standard deviation
If official decisions are made that affect you badly, do you feel that you have power to change them?	30	363	-0.48	1.45
How confident do you feel that the community can get together to take action?	34	364	-0.62	1.40
Do you know the kind of people who can help you get things done?	35	368	-1.09	1.37

Gender differences and Social Wellbeing

Living without hunger and being able to meet the family's needs are central to local understandings of wellbeing. But these are rooted in a broader understanding of life in community. The quotes in Box 4 show the importance of being able to host guests appropriately and participate in community reciprocity. The Adivasi culture is one of accommodation (a culture of 'hou' - 'yes') meaning that all should be able to share whatever they have. For instance, they say that when the groom's party arrives they will never be asked how many they are since whatever the number the bride's family/community/village will look after them for those days.

The fact that community is very important, however, does not mean that it always works well, nor that it works equally well for all kinds of people. This can be seen in the different ways that married men, married women and single women score inner wellbeing items that bear on community relationships. We make two kinds of comparison, the average scores across the groups and how that item ranks against other scores given by each type of respondent. The first question we consider is people's general helpfulness. Across all respondents the average is generally positive (0.47 on a -2 to +2 scale; 13th in the ranking of 35 items). As Table 2 shows, however, the means were considerably lower for women than men and both measures were much lower for single women than married people.

Table 2

What proportion of people in the community are helpful (to you)?			
Measure	Married Men	Married Women	Single Women
Ranking (highest = 1)	11	14	24
Mean score (-2/+2)	0.72	0.32	-0.35
No. of responses	174	171	23
Standard deviation	1.27	1.36	1.43



Interestingly, the same difference by gender/marital status was not seen in responses to a question probing the depth of social support: 'How much can you trust people beyond your immediate family to be with you through bad times?' The mean score overall was much lower (0.13) but there was virtually no difference in ranking (20 for married men, 22 for married and single women).



As expected, voice in the community differs markedly by gender/marital status, with negative scores for all women. This was one of very few items that single women scored higher than married women and was the second lowest of all item scores for married women (Table 3).

Table 3

If there is a village meeting do you have an opportunity to voice your opinion?			
Measure	Married Men	Married Women	Single Women
Ranking (highest = 1)	13	34	28
Mean score (-2/+2)	0.56	-0.87	-0.48
No. of responses	174	171	23
Standard deviation	1.40	1.43	1.56

Scores also differ markedly regarding the ability to help others with negative scores for all women but extremely low ranking (30 out of 35) for single women (Table 4).

Table 4

How far do you feel you are able to help other people?			
Measure	Married Men	Married Women	Single Women
Ranking (highest = 1)	12	20	30
Mean score (-2/+2)	0.67	-0.05	-0.52
No. of responses	174	170	23
Standard deviation	1.08	1.36	1.47

The subjective perceptions reflect social practice: 32% of married men said that they had given help to others over the past year, as did 21% of married women but only 9% of single women.

Taken together, these responses show that on these critical dimensions of social wellbeing women are significantly less positive than men in what they feel themselves able to be and do.

Domestic Violence Undermines Men's Wellbeing

Like many communities, domestic violence is common in these villages. We tried various ways of asking about this and commonly met with denials. Finally we decided simply to assume that there was violence, and ask people how uneasy it made them feel. The more uneasy they felt, the lower score was recorded. This brought a remarkably different reaction. Some people said there was no violence, and this seemed genuine. But most people admitted there was violence, and talked about how it made them feel. Understandably, single women came out most positive on this. But remarkably, it was men - who admitted they were responsible for most of the violence - who were by far the most negative, giving the second lowest of any score to this item (Table 5). This suggests an important opportunity for mobilisation work.

Table 5

How uneasy are you made by the amount of violence in your home?			
Measure	Married Men	Married Women	Single Women
Ranking (highest = 1)	34	19	8
Mean score (-2/+2)	-0.59	-0.03	0.55
Standard deviation	1.76	1.78	1.97

A Wellbeing Ecology: Forest Rights

In 2006 the Forest Rights Act granted Adivasi people rights to claim titles for land they occupy. Some of the villagers have gained titles, and many more are attempting to do so. Potentially even more significant, communities may apply for titles to land from which they have historically gathered forest produce, and use these to defend against expropriation by would-be developers.

The forest offers an example of the ambivalent role of the state. Non-timber forest products constitute a significant livelihood resource for 9% of our respondents, mainly poorer people. Intending to protect Adivasis from exploitation by private traders, the state has become effectively the monopoly purchaser of some of these products, and many claim its prices are too low. More critically still, official and illegal logging on state held forest land have resulted in damaging levels of deforestation, as well as many forms of violence against forest communities. The villagers recognise the degradation of the forest as an environmental hazard – if the trees disappear so will the rain. But it is also symbolic. As local people describe it, their collective caring for nature is a form of devotion, a necessary part of sustaining the cosmic balance: ‘if we don’t care for the garden (the earth) then God won’t send rain.’ For these communities, therefore, personal wellbeing belongs in a broader context, in which culture, community and place are intertwined with the political economy of environment, rights and resources.

Implications and Recommendations

Improved Food Security

The achievement of a successful social protection programme in Chhattisgarh shows how entrenched difficulties can be overcome through a combination of government commitment and people's mobilisation. As entitlements are extended nation-wide under the ‘Right to Food’ Act (2013), this provides an important example for other states.

Arguments for universal access to subsidised food-grain are supported by our findings that it is mainly poorer people who lack ration-cards; distribution of Above Poverty Level cards does not follow economic status; and local social and political relationships continue to play an undue role in deciding who gets government benefits.

Popular Mobilisation

Food security appears an individual entitlement but it is collectively established and maintained. Framing food security as a right makes clear the active part people have played and continue to play in securing their entitlements in practice. Our research communities have a long ambivalent relationship with the state. Their low levels of political confidence, despite experience of successful collective action, indicate the importance of local community organisations in educating people about their rights and working with them to ensure these are achieved in practice.

Psycho-social Wellbeing

Qualitative and quantitative evidence reinforce the importance of food security and social protection, showing that more secure livelihoods have a broader impact on people's confidence and experience of quality in life.

While wellbeing may be assessed at an individual level, there is no doubt that collective entitlements, such as those in the Forest Rights Act, are critical to ensure longer term wellbeing.

Gender

There continue significant gender inequalities both in formal sector achievement (e.g. education and rates of work under MGNREGS) and in what people feel themselves able to be and do, especially in the social and political spheres. This suggests that gender issues should take higher priority in community mobilisation. The negative impact of violence in the home on men's inner wellbeing suggests a possible focus for combatting gender based violence.



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Wellbeing and Poverty

Pathways is a research project exploring the links between poverty and wellbeing through research in rural communities in India and Zambia.

All quotes are from villagers of Chhattisgarh interviewed in the research.

The views expressed and information contained herein are the sole responsibility of the authors. Comments or questions should be sent to:

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