

Cambridge-Harda project policy paper 03

Forests and livelihoods

India's forest policy states that the needs of poor and tribal communities living in and around forests constitute the 'first charge' on forest produce. In recognition of this, the Joint Forest Management programme promises benefits to village communities in return for their contribution to regeneration of forests and protection activities. These benefits are generally seen to be an important incentive for local communities to collaborate with the Forest Department in forest management and protection. The Forest Department has also invested in a range of rural sector interventions to create more stable livelihood options, especially for the poor. Local populations also access a range of non-timber forest products from the forest, both for self-consumption and for sale. This note summarises the views of respondents on the relationship between forests and local livelihoods in Harda.

Benefit-sharing under Joint Forest Management

- Under Madhya Pradesh's Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme, forest committees are entitled to the forest produce obtained from the thinning of timber coupes and clearing of clumps in degraded bamboo forests, as well as a share of the forest produce obtained from final felling of timber coupes, and final felling of bamboo coupes, after deduction of harvesting costs (the shares vary depending on the type of forest committee).
- The field research revealed that there was very little knowledge of the benefit-sharing mechanisms at the village level, and a lack of clarity about the 'formula' for benefit sharing. Although some money had been distributed to forest committees, members were unaware of any direct links to improved protection and regeneration under JFM.
- The Forest Department respondents argued that there was no additional revenue from protection under JFM, so there were no benefits to share at this stage.
- Some village level MTO respondents felt that village people had initially accepted JFM because it had brought in employment and some usufruct benefits. However, they felt that the Forest Department had benefited more from the JFM programme, while the condition of the local people had become worse. They often compared JFM to a cow, whose anterior part was with the people (to feed) while the Forest Department controlled the posterior part and captured all the benefits (milk and dung).
- Amongst the Panchayati Raj institutions, opinion was divided on this issue. At the village and block level, respondents perceived the current benefit-sharing mechanism to be skewed towards the Forest Department, which was seen to be reaping the benefits of forest protection provided by the villagers. Benefits of JFM were seen to

be restricted to the provision of opportunities for wage labour. On the other hand, at the district level, officials of the Panchayati Raj institutions believed that the benefit-sharing mechanism was equitable. However, they also suggested that the actual transfer of these benefits was often undermined due to the lack of awareness among the community and unaccountability on the part of the Forest Department.

- Knowledge of the benefit-sharing arrangements was very low amongst legislators. Some respondents also stated that the Forest Department did not explain the benefit-sharing formula to local people. They felt that people did not know their existing rights, and that it was the duty of forest officials to make them aware of their rights.

Other forest-related livelihoods

- All our respondents agreed that the most significant impact on livelihoods in Harda district in the last decade had been because of the advent of canal irrigation. However, the canal had not reached most forest and forest-fringe villages.

- Even though villages in and around forests had not benefited from the canal, here too irrigation had been critical in improving livelihood opportunities. Forest Department officials, especially at the division level, claimed that many of these irrigation benefits had been delivered to such villages because of the intervention of the department, through wells, pump sets, lift irrigation and check dams. Although the mandate of the department was not rural development, a number of its entry-point activities when JFM was introduced had a significant impact on livelihoods. NGO respondents agreed that significant improvements in irrigation infrastructure had taken place on account of JFM.

- At the village level, our respondents agreed that the irrigation infrastructure had improved, but suggested that JFM was only partly responsible for this. In some of our

sample villages, the *Jeevan Dhara* scheme had provided wells that had enabled double cropping and improved livelihoods. In other villages, because of poor land availability, irrigation had a limited impact.

- Respondents from the MTOs agreed that irrigation facilities had improved, but argued that benefits had been cornered by the village elite, and there was limited impact on the livelihoods of the poor and marginalised groups.

- Forest Department respondents suggested that the other significant impact of JFM on livelihoods had been through the provision of wage employment from forestry works. They argued that these activities had demonstrated a direct link between participation in the JFM programme and the realisation of financial gains by the villagers.

- Employment on Forest Department work was attractive, especially to women in the villages as they received equal wages to men in such work (unlike in agriculture and other private activities). However, women felt that there had been a decline in such work over time, and this had led

to increased migration of women in search of other wage labour opportunities.

- Respondents suggested that there had been a significant decline in grazing over time. At the village level, it was suggested that this had initially been due to more effective protection and closure, but was now largely because of a decline in fodder availability caused by factors such as weed infestation. This had contributed to a decline in the cattle population, as well as in the productivity of cattle. As a result, trading in milk and milk-products had declined, and this was having a negative impact on livelihoods of cattle-rearing communities. Women from these communities, in particular, felt that they had become more vulnerable, and had been forced to turn to wage labour.

- Forest Department respondents suggested that grazing had reduced

because of effective protection by the committees. MTO members argued that such closures were unnecessary, since villagers did not allow cattle to graze in forest plantations. NGO respondents agreed that a scarcity of fodder had led to a decline in the number and productivity of cattle.

- In Harda, a scheme had been introduced for the regeneration of areas affected due to the flowering of bamboo. This Bamboo Beneficiary Scheme had helped the household economy of beneficiary families, but had a mixed impact on the development of bamboo forests (positive in some areas, but not others). MTOs were critical of the scheme, arguing that only those who supported the Forest Department had been made beneficiaries.

Non-timber forest products

- The important non-timber forest products in Harda are *tendu* (*Diospyros melanoxylon*), *mabua* (*Madhuca indica*, flower), *gulli* (*Madhuca indica*, fruit) and *achaar* (*Buchnanania lanzan*). Of these, *tendu* is nationalized and marketed through state channels, while the rest are sold in the private market.

- There was considerable variation in the dependence of sample villages on NTFPs, mainly due to access. At the household level, on average, poorer households were more dependent than wealthier households on NTFP.

- Village level respondents felt that there was a declining availability of NTFP at the local level. Women respondents, who were largely responsible for collection, suggested that

mabua availability had declined and the number of collection days for *tendu* had also reduced. They suggested that JFM committees had not been able to improve the availability or sustainable harvesting of NTFPs, and that the Forest Department had not made an effort to promote NTFP plantations. This view was endorsed by JFM executive committee members.

- Respondents from the Forest Department agreed that NTFP availability had not increased, but suggested that this was because of unsustainable harvesting practices, as well as natural factors such as the lack of rainfall. Some also suggested that the destruction of forests due to external instigation by some MTOs had resulted in the destruction of NTFPs.

- On the issue of marketing, villagers believed that the state monopoly on trade in *tendu* was generating good returns. However, some felt that restrictions on quantities that were bought at the local (*phad*) level were unfair, as they did not always reflect local availability. In some areas, quantities collected were not being correctly recorded, and the local clerk (*phad munshi*) was appropriating the 'extra' collection. In some areas in Harda, women had been introduced as *phad munshis* and respondents felt that they were less likely to indulge in such corruption.

- For non-nationalised NTFPs, local villagers felt that middlemen were an essential part of the marketing chain, since they reduced transaction costs and were able to meet immediate needs for cash. Market traders paid better prices, but villagers found it difficult to bargain with them. They also tended to demand larger quantities, which local villagers could not supply.

- Although middlemen did have a tendency to cheat, local communities felt that they were getting more aware of market prices, and better able to negotiate with middlemen (partly due to empowerment through JFM). In response, some middlemen were

beginning to cheat on quantities (weights) rather than prices.

- The middlemen agreed that communities had gained some bargaining power, but felt that villagers did not fully understand the operational costs of the middlemen, which prevented them from offering better prices. They also said that they often found it difficult to obtain the bulk amounts that traders wanted.

- Traders also felt that community awareness about NTFPs had increased, but that there was a poor understanding about market dynamics and the impact of product quality on prices amongst villagers. They felt that middlemen were generally helpful as they reduced transaction costs and supplied bulk amounts, although there were some exceptions. They suggested that profits in the NTFP trade were relatively small, and most traders bundled the NTFP trade with trade in other commodities.

- MTOs believed that the entire marketing chain (Forest Department, middlemen and traders) was set up in a manner that was exploiting local tribal people, who needed to be given full control over NTFPs.

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