

Cambridge-Harda project policy paper 01

Joint Forest Management in Harda

Since 1990, a nation-wide programme of Joint Forest Management (JFM) has been initiated in India, in which resource users have been given a role in the protection and regeneration of forest lands in return for rights over the use of certain forest products. The programme has the potential to have an impact on two distinct, though related, objectives: improving the quality and extent of forest cover in the country through better protection and regeneration; and, improving the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities, especially marginal and tribal groups.

The mechanism through which this new regime has been implemented is the creation of forest management committees at the village level. The Madhya Pradesh JFM resolution was first issued in 1991, and has been amended three times since (the most recent version dates from 2001). Over the years, the State has attempted to make JFM committees more inclusive, and now the entire *gram sabha* (village body) constitutes the general body for JFM. There are also special provisions with respect to the participation of women and disadvantaged groups of society.

This paper summarises our findings relating to the views expressed by respondents on: the way in which JFM committees were functioning on the ground in Harda Forest Division; the roles and responsibilities of committees; and the impacts on forest protection and regeneration.

Formation and functioning of JFM committees

- Most of the JFM committees in Harda were formed in the first phase of the programme, by 1992-93. Our sample covered twenty JFM committees (6 Village Forest Committees, VFCs, and 14 Forest Protection Committees, FPCs). These were purposively sampled from the six ranges in Harda Forest Division.
- Respondents at the village level reported that there was very little active participation in the formation of committees. They also reported that meetings of committees were irregular. They suggested that the members of the Executive Committees, which have a key role in decision-making, were chosen by the Forest Department. A number of women reported that they were unaware even about the existence of a JFM committee in the village, and felt they had no role in decision-making. Only one woman in all of our sample villages knew that she was a member of the Executive Committee.
- The Forest Department, on the other hand, argued that there was no interference by their staff in the selection of the Executive Committee, and the villagers themselves directly selected the members.

- Forest Department respondents admitted that there had been limited success in securing the participation of women, since social customs prevented male departmental staff from acting as effective extension agents among women. The recent recruitment of women as forest guards in the state should partially redress this issue. Respondents from the Forest Department also felt that marginalised sections of the village community did not participate fully in committees, due to 'elite capture', especially in revenue villages.
- Members of Mass Tribal Organisations (MTOs) argued that the committees were completely under the control of Forest Department staff, and were not constituted democratically. They suggested that forest staff usually selected their favourites as members of the Executive Committees. They also claimed that committee meetings were infrequent, and that committees existed more on paper than as functioning village-level institutions.
- Members of Panchayati Raj institutions at all levels felt that there was limited participation in the committees. This was partly due to entrenched elite domination at the village level, but also the perceived superior technical capability of the Forest Department to undertake forest management.
- The legislators' perceptions of forest committees were mixed. Some felt that these were being constituted through a democratic process by observing the guidelines. Others, however, believed that elections for committees were being influenced either by the Forest Department, or the political elites of the village, or both. Most respondents agreed that committees had been captured by elites, but believed that this was inevitable given the social and economic conditions that prevailed in the villages.

Roles and responsibilities of JFM committees

- At the village level, respondents felt that JFM committees needed to develop their capacity for roles such as record keeping and maintenance of accounts. They also argued that there was very little financial transparency in the committees as they presently operated, since the financial records were kept with the Forest Department, not with the villagers. Our own research team found it difficult to get access to financial records of the JFM committees in the field.
- The field level Forest Department respondents felt that it was risky to keep financial records in the village, since the ultimate responsibility for these records still lay with the departmental staff. Committees themselves were not held accountable, in spite of getting funds for forest protection. However, they argued that committee members knew about financial transactions, details of which were read out during meetings. They said that although the department had administrative control, transactions could only take place with the approval of the villagers, as their signatures were required. In some 'powerful' committees, it was impossible to use funds without proposals being properly considered by the members. Respondents also felt that villagers were capable of undertaking a number of

tasks related to the operation of JFM committees, but were unfamiliar with the required technical language.

- Members of the MTOs were critical of the way in which JFM committees were functioning. They believed that the Forest Department controlled all the funds, and the villagers had little knowledge of transactions. They felt that there was little transparency, and that the department had become more dictatorial because of its control over committee funds. On the whole, they argued, the introduction of JFM was superficial and had done little to change the situation on the ground.
- Village level respondents felt that JFM committees did not have adequate powers to prosecute offenders, especially from neighbouring villages. MTO respondents argued that the introduction of JFM had increased conflicts at the village level, and between villages, especially in the context of meeting everyday livelihood needs (*nistar*) from the forest.
- The respondents from the Forest Department felt that there were few such conflicts, as areas for JFM were allotted after wide consultation at the village level. They believed that additional powers for JFM committees

were unnecessary, as committees existed to supplement and assist the Department and not to replace it. They felt that there was no need to legally empower the JFM committees, and thought that there may be a risk that such legal empowerment would lead to corruption in the committees and dilute the sense of ownership at the village level.

- Amongst the legislators, most respondents felt that the Forest Department needed to work as a facilitator in empowering committees to manage forests, but their views on the level of intervention required for this varied. Some felt that the department needed frequent monitoring and greater direct support to the committees, while others felt that the department should not interfere with the working of committees. The perception of most legislators was that committees were currently not working very effectively. The main reasons identified by them were improper constitution of committees, elite capture, interference by the Forest Department and office bearers of the committees pursuing their own self-interest. Some respondents felt that the chairpersons of committees had started acting as liaison workers of the Forest Department, and not as representatives of the people.

Forest quality: protection and regeneration

- The project did not seek to measure the impact of JFM on forest quality, but discussed the condition of forests and forest protection with a range of respondents, to ascertain their perceptions on this issue.
- At the division level, Forest Department staff suggested that the density of forests had increased, and

that this had also led to an increase in wildlife. Most departmental respondents perceived a definite improvement in forest quality and density on account of the local communities' assistance in protection.

- Legislators supported this view, and felt that the protection of the forests had increased considerably

through the involvement of local people. Officials from Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) and reporters from the local media adopted a slightly different position, believing that while the status of forests improved in the early years of JFM, it had been static since then. The initial years had been characterised by substantial funding, charismatic leadership and a perceived incentive to conserve forest resources, while all these had declined subsequently.

- On the other hand, most respondents from the Mass Tribal Organisations (MTOs) felt that JFM had no significant positive impact on forest condition, with many respondents feeling that the condition had deteriorated. While some of our village respondents shared this perception, the overall picture that emerged from our village studies was that forest cover was believed to have improved in several villages while it was felt that it had deteriorated in others.

- According to the Forest Department, one major impact of JFM has been the involvement of villagers in control of forest fires. Over time, the official data suggests that the incidence of forest fires has reduced, and respondents from the department suggested that there were no more cases of deliberate forest fires. Our Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) respondents agreed with this official

view, and suggested that this was a tangible positive impact of JFM. Similarly, officials from PRIs also felt that villagers helped control forest fires, and that the incidence of forest fires had reduced.

- At the village level, however, our respondents suggested that the destruction caused by forest fires had increased over time. The reasons given for this included collection of *mabua* (*Madhuca indica*), forest burning to improve fodder yields or to remove weeds, and clearing of forest land for cultivation or surreptitious passage. The MTOs corroborated this view, and alleged that forest fires were being caused deliberately by local staff of the Forest Department to hide illicit felling of trees in forest areas.

- From our village studies, it emerged that the overall quality of participation under JFM had declined over time. While all households had earlier undertaken protection activities by rotation, this had now been replaced by a system in which protection was seen primarily as the job of paid watchers who were appointed by the Forest Department. Village women confirmed that their involvement in protection had declined, because they did not receive any payment from the department for fire protection and other activities.

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