

COMMON POOL RESOURCE POLICY PAPER 2



DFID Natural Resources Systems Programme

Common Pool Resources in India: Evidence, Significance and New Management Initiatives

Kanchan Chopra & Purnamita Dasgupta

March, 2002

INTRODUCTION

Common pool resources are characterised by varying degrees of access by local communities. In India, such resources are estimated at about 75 million hectares out of a total land area of 328 million hectares. Of this, approximately 25 million hectares lie within land owned by the forest department, while the rest lie on other land, under the jurisdiction of the revenue department, the village and other local governing bodies.

The broader Indian context is defined by GNP growth at 4.8 to 5%, a literacy rate of 65.39%, life expectancy at 61.1 years, and a decadal rate of population growth of 21.34% in 1991-2001. Poverty is still pervasive with an estimated 36% of the population below the poverty line in 1993-94 (1999-2000 data suggests a decline to 26.1%, but the two are not directly comparable).

ACCESS TO THE COMMONS

In India, common pool resources are defined as non-exclusive resources to which the rights of use are distributed among a number of co-owners, generally identified by their membership of some group such as a village or community. Common pool resources thus include community pastures and forests, wastelands, common dumping and threshing grounds, watershed drainages, village ponds, rivers and other common pool water bodies.

In almost all parts of India, villagers have extensive *legal* rights of access only on some specific categories of land like 'pasture and grazing lands' and 'village forests', which are directly under the jurisdiction of the village or village panchayat. All other categories of land not under private ownership belong to the state revenue department or the state forest department. This includes barren or uncultivable land, waste land, land put to non-agricultural uses, and forests. In practice, however, the rural population, especially the poor, does depend on the goods and services available from these categories of land. Customary rights and traditional practices also provide common access to private property in certain situations, such as when land is lying fallow.

Forest-based common pool resources provide legal access by way of property regimes outlined by the government. These are either *limited rights on reserved forests*; *rights as specified in protected and unclassed forests*; a new genre of *rights under evolving joint forest management schemes*; and *rights on village and panchayat forests*. The nature of rights and concessions granted varies extensively across states. For instance, different rules of access for grazing and fuel-wood collection exist in different states. Similarly, collection of non-timber forest products, both for sale and self-use, is allowed in some states but not in others.

DATA COLLECTION AND EVIDENCE

The role of common pool resources in the context of poverty alleviation and development in India has been studied by several regional studies, using village level data and information sources. Further, a country-wide survey conducted by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) in 1998, documented the role of common pool resources in the rural economy through a study of 10,978 villages selected from across the country through a systematic sampling technique.

The NSSO adopted a pragmatic approach, distinguishing between the *de jure* and the *de facto* approach to resource ownership and use. The *de jure* approach was used for collection of data on the *size* of common pool resources. In this approach, only those resources which were within the boundary of the village and were legally held by the village panchayat or a community of the village were treated as common pool resources. The *de facto* approach was adopted for collecting information on *use* of common pool resources. By this approach, common pool resources were extended to include all resources which were in use by the community by convention, irrespective of ownership, including if they were located outside the boundary of the village. Given these different approaches, it is unsurprising that, in matters of detail, the micro-studies provide richer material. Variations also emerge across regions, such as in the significance of common pool resources. However, the NSSO report validates some of the results of village based approaches.

The NSSO report confirms some results from village based approaches:

- the area of common pool resources varies in approximately the same range, i.e. between 1% and 32% of the geographical area in different parts of the country;
- the average value of collections from common pool resources is highest for the rural poor;
- the level of development of a village (as approximated by size) is inversely related to the extent of use and collection of fuel-wood;
- dependence for rearing livestock is not as high as expected.

SAFETY NETS OR DEVELOPMENT DRIVERS?

Common pool resources play a role both as safety nets and as drivers of development. Evidence from micro studies shows that richer cultivator households sometimes get higher benefits from common pool resources due to complementarity between private agricultural assets and the capability to use common pool resources. Examples include links between livestock ownership and use of fodder resources, and ownership of pumpsets and extraction of groundwater for agriculture. There is a mixed picture on these functions, and both aspects are important in particular situations and contexts.

The authors used factor analysis methods with the NSS data-set to assess linkages between common pool resources and development. The analysis suggests that common pool resources continue to be most relevant to the survival strategies of the rural population. Negative relationships between common pool resources and literacy, and the proportions employed in industry, suggest that as urbanisation and industrial development occurs, such resources become less significant. On the other hand, complementarities in the production process between private and common pool resources are likely to continue, particularly in the agriculturally developed zones.

ISSUES FOR POLICY

During the 1990s, the Indian government introduced some new initiatives aimed at a more participatory approach to management of land and water resources. Guidelines for Joint Forest Management (JFM) and for Integrated Watershed Development are two important recent steps that affect the management of common pool resources.

JFM envisages the creation of partnerships between the forest department and the people for forest protection. Resource sharing between people and the forest department is aimed at simultaneously alleviating poverty for local communities as well as contributing to forest conservation. Guidelines for Watershed Development, on the other hand, aim at holistic development of land in a watershed as a vehicle for rural development. The objective is to bring

together the concerns of different agencies owning land in a watershed, i.e. the forest department, the revenue department, private owners, village bodies and communities with rights of access.

Success has been mixed in both cases. Large variations exist across states with respect to watershed development, and, by and large, benefits have been negligible. The ground rules for the formation and operation of forest committees and watershed development teams are often weighed heavily in favour of the respective line departments. In the absence of a legal enactment, promised resource sharing under JFM has not occurred. JFM does not seem to have improved access of local people to common pool forest resources, and, in some cases, it has even resulted in a deterioration of their status vis-a-vis the government departments (whereas pre-existing structures, such as Van Panchayats in Uttaranchal, gave the status of 'right-holders' to local communities, they have been reduced to the position of 'beneficiaries' under JFM).

In the case of JFM, the department/state continues to be the sole owner of forest resources, with people being involved as partners, but without any ownership rights over assets. The resource is not at the disposal of the community and the state continues to exercise the right to choose beneficiaries to whom use rights are granted. It also reserves the right to withdraw these benefits. Some researchers have concluded that JFM has become a mechanism for co-opting villagers into the agendas of powerful stakeholders, within and outside the state, and can be seen as a form of 'centralised decentralisation'.

Initiatives such as JFM need to be complemented with a land use policy that prevents encroachments by industry and urbanisation. JFM has made no effort to take into account pre-existing institutions of forest management, or new legislative initiatives for decentralisation (for instance, PESA – Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas – Act, 1996 which is seen as more inclusive of pre-existing traditions and customs of the tribal societies). Overall, the structures of government continue to be perceived as non-transparent and non-participatory, even as they seek to create pockets of devolution.

Lessons for common pool resource management policy:

- Interventions need to take regional variations in existing institutional bases into consideration and not aim at 'centralised' drafting of 'decentralised participatory governance'.
- Interventions to improve access and influence change need to build on pre-existing resource management institutions, and be transparent with respect to processes of sharing.
- Interventions need to be complemented with a land-use policy that prevents encroachments by industrialisation and urbanisation.
- Interventions need to provide 'level playing fields' for stakeholders with differing endowments of information and power.