Creating a grassroots institution for common forest resources management

In 1997 Seva Mandir created an informal network of Forest Protection Committees, the Van Utthan Sansthan (VUS). In 2003 VUS acquired a formal status as a non-governmental organisation that protects and manages 67,000 hectares of forestland in more than 240 villages in Udaipur, Rajasthan, under Joint Forest Management (JFM). Today VUS successfully engages with tribal communities to work together for forest protection by improving common land and forest resources governance. It has addressed overgrazing, mining and illegal privatisation of forestlands. It has also been instrumental for achieving an increase in livelihood opportunities for communities.

PRINCIPAL ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED
Seva Mandir
Van Utthan Sansthan (VUS)

LOCATION
Jhado, Kherwara, Girwa, Badgaon, Gogunda and Kotra blocks of Udaipur district and Kumbhalgarh block of Rajsamand district in south Rajasthan, India

TIMELINE
1992 - present

TARGET AUDIENCE
State agencies, forest department officials, district administration, community based organisations (CBOs) engaged in forest rights, indigenous peoples’ organisations

KEYWORDS
Shared governance, biodiversity, forest protection, tribal, forest protection committees
Case description

Background issues

In Udaipur common forest land is 73% of the total land. Forest land is a primary source of livelihood and a crucial element shaping the identity of tribal communities. Tribal customary laws discipline the use of land. According to them, village elders control land on behalf of the community and solve land disputes.

Land and forest reforms have overlooked tribal people’s customary practices and communal land ownership rules. Conflicts over forests and agricultural land are common, and arise mainly from boundary disputes in shared forest areas and from the collection of nistar (usufruct) over common land.

The land usage pattern in Udaipur has been complicated by the loopholes in the laws governing the use of forest land and the registration of land ownership. The requirement for a dual land record keeping system at the national and state level has led to encroachments and land grabbing because land records do not constitute land title, only evidence of the title. The disputes are both between and within villages with regards to traditional rights vis-à-vis legal rights.

The National Forest Policy of 1988 introduced Joint Forest Management to increase the involvement of scheduled tribes and forest communities in the protection and management of forests. It provided a policy platform for an equal partnership between the villagers, the Forest Department, and organisations like Seva Mandir for the protection, regeneration and management of common forest land through the creation of Forest Protection Committees (FPCs). According to it, villagers can retain usufructs rights over Non Timber Forest Products (NTFPs), fodder, fuel wood and a share in the timber proceeds.
The structural issues related to the setting up and functioning of FPCs at the micro level are complex. There are delays in transferring common land to the communities by the Forest Department and a lack of awareness within the FPCs of the rationale behind JFM. In many cases, JFM is practiced with scant regard for the rights of traditional dwellers. This leads to simmering hostilities among neighbouring villagers over issues of curtailed access and disputed boundaries.

The Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 (officially known as The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Act) grants communities their customary rights under the Community Forest Rights (CFR) provision. However, the reluctance of the Forest Department to shift administrative and resource control to the village committees and the inability of inexperienced committees to manage this transition are a major challenge in forest management.

Solution

Realising that the solution for effective JFM lies in strengthening the villages' democratic institutions through the transmission of negotiation and advocacy skills, Seva Mandir - in 1997 - created a network called Van Uttan Santhan (VUS), comprising CBOs, Forest Department representatives and some self-initiated groups of Forest Protection Committees (FPCs). Its aim was to provide direction to the village-level democratic institutions such as the FPCs and the Eco Development Committees (EDCs) to enable the conservation of land rights and to secure tenure on forest lands.

The initial network was informal. However, VUS gradually grew into a formal network of FPCs under the banner of Seva Mandir and acquired the status of non-governmental organisation on 28th March 2003.

Since the FRA 2006, VUS has become more of a federation and an umbrella organisation for FPCs, playing a vital role in safeguarding land-based community forest rights and fighting encroachment through collective action. Seva Mandir continues to provide guidance to VUS members interacting and negotiating on behalf of the forest committees with different administrative institutions.

Activities

VUS is completely managed by volunteers. Its key activities are the following.

Awareness building

VUS volunteers provide information and clarity on various issues related to Joint Forest Management. In forest protection meetings, misunderstandings about rights and responsibilities and hearsay are clarified to prevent illegal encroachment and mismanagement of commons in the area. VUS also improves understanding about governance issues related to the formation, registration and management of Forest Protection Committees. Since the enactment of the FRA 2006, VUS has been involved in monitoring the implementation of procedures related to community forest rights, informing villagers about the expectations and opportunities offered by the legislation.
Issue-based meetings with the Forest Department
Regular meetings with Forest Department officials are scheduled with VUS and Seva Mandir representatives to discuss burning issues raised in the Forest Protection Committee cluster meetings; undertake risk assessments of Joint Forest Management sites; finalise operations and follow-up actions, required by the Department. The matters around the formation and registration of new committees are also negotiated along with any complaints. Feedback is received from the Joint Forest Management partners about the functioning of VUS, its members and the committees themselves. Procedural issues for reporting and monitoring of forest management and committee functioning are addressed. Risk assessment is discussed and implemented.

Training and capacity building
The training of villagers and government partners involved in the implementation, management and re-election of Forest Protection Committees is integral to the functioning of VUS. Since 2008 VUS has organised awareness raising workshops and role clarification meetings for Forest Protection Committees and Forest Resource Committees at the block level to understand the Forest Right Act and the processes around raising individual and collective claims. It confirmed the role of the Gram Sabha (village committee) Panchayat and the Revenue and Forest officials, and the responsibility of the Forest Right Committees to resolve conflict by seeking assistance from formal and informal institutions. The Forest Department regularly sub-contracts training to VUS for forestry programmes and schemes such as the Van Sahayogis (forest helpers).

Conflict resolution
VUS resolves conflicts faced by village-level Forest Committees. These are related to village boundaries, grazing and other traditional and usufruct rights. They emerge while Joint Forest Management schemes are developed in jurisdictions. VUS undertakes extensive dialogue with communities and the Forest Department to resolve inter- and intra-village conflicts. It negotiates removal of encroachers - individuals and village communities, mining and timber companies - to prevent illegal privatisation of the forestland. As all local leaders are members, VUS relies on a deep understanding of the local context and on a strong reputation in conflict resolution through peaceful means.

Releasing land under encroachments
Regular inspections are undertaken with the Forest Department to check for illegal privatisation of forest land and to strengthen biodiversity and ecological restoration in Joint Forest Management sites. Extensive (sometimes years-long) negotiations and legal action are undertaken by VUS. VUS has decolonised several hectares of forestland in Jhadol and in other blocks by releasing common resources and land from private and commercial interests.

Advocacy at the district and state levels
On-going and strong advocacy at the village, district sub-division, district, state and national levels to improve access, participation and management of forest commons by tribal people is the hallmark of VUS. The collective bargaining of VUS members has managed to reduce the opposition faced by Forest Protection Committees in obtaining permission for Joint Forest Management leases on revenue land. Seva Mandir and VUS
has played an active role in advocating for amendments to the 1988 forest policy in favour of the inclusion of Community Forest Rights in the FRA 2006.

**Functioning and management of VUS**

The General Body of VUS comprises of Forest Protection Committees and individual members. It democratically elects a seventeen member executive committee bi-annually. A Management Committee comprising of 6 members includes representatives of the Executive Committee, an office coordinator, and a representative from Seva Mandir, who supports the President, Vice President, Secretary, Assistant Secretary and Treasurer in an advisory capacity. Thirty per cent of the Executive Committee membership is allocated for women. In 2016 VUS has 3 women representatives and a female President.

Since 2006, the key functions of the VUS EC have been to oversee the governance, re-organization and re-election of Forest Protection Committees and to strengthen other village level institutions. Under the guidance of Seva Mandir, VUS develops and implements participatory monitoring, evaluation and research on ecological schemes in the area under Joint Forest Management, in order to monitor the progress of Community Forest Rights in Udaipur. The experienced, highly respected and skilled leaders of the Jhadol sub-division provide mentorship and identify opportunities for the professional development of new members of the executive committee, the Forest Protection Committees, and they identify promising individuals for VUS.

**Importance of the case for people-centred land governance**

Seva Mandir’s interventions are people-centred and contribute towards:

- Recognising and protecting the diverse tenure and production systems upon which forest communities’ livelihoods depend, including the communal and customary tenure systems of smallholders, indigenous peoples, pastoralists in the Udaipur district of Rajasthan.

- Enabling - through VUS - the role of local land users in territorial and ecosystem management, recognising that sustainable development and the stewardship of ecosystems are best achieved through participatory decision-making and management.

- Ensuring that processes of decision-making over land are inclusive by strengthening village level institutions - so that policies, laws, procedures and decisions concerning land adequately reflect the rights, needs and aspirations of individuals and of the forest communities affected by them.

- Empowering forest communities that would otherwise face limitations in seeing their interests represented through institutions like VUS.
Changes

Baseline
Prior to the involvement of Seva Mandir in the Jhadol block, Udaipur, there was a large scale illegal felling of trees and a rampant encroachment on forestland - constituting 40% of the total block area. Seva Mandir, through a persistent engagement with the villagers, enabled them to form VUS and to reduce the bitter divisions within the community and the neglect of the commons.

The evolution of VUS from an informal network in one village to a well-governed and functioning village-level institution across districts proves its usefulness as a sustainable intervention for managing common resources, developing forest-based livelihood options and regenerating unproductive land.

Achievements
Starting from the initial 22 Forest Protection Committees that joined in 1997, VUS has become an umbrella organisation of 207 Forest Protection Committees. The achievements of the network are as follows.

Awareness raised
VUS is opening channels of communication on forest and biodiversity conservation at all levels. It has successfully engaged with local communities and the Forest Department to accept and comply with the idea of common management of forests prevailing over individual gain. Previously communities looked at short-term benefits deriving from the funding allocated to the scheme. Now they are opting for the long-term benefits of Joint Forest Management, which allows them to secure their access to forests and forest livelihoods and to enforce their traditional rights. They feel responsible for the maintenance of the commons, managed through voluntary labour or funds raised through the monetary contributions of the villagers.

Secure access to forest resources
With the support from VUS, 76 Forest Protection Committees have submitted claims for Community Forest Rights under the FRA, while another 12 Forest Protection Committees are in the process of submitting such claims. The credibility of VUS is strong thanks to its sustainable approach - in some cases rights have already been maintained for nearly twenty years.

Improvement of livelihoods
The interventions and negotiations undertaken by VUS were instrumental in generating paid work and employment for more than 100,000 people in 2007. Various NTFPs, such as fodder, fuel wood, tendu leaves, mahua flowers and fruits, gum, honey, etc. are being procured by the community from the forest. Better access to and availability of fodder and fuel wood are viewed as a major benefit. Families harvest from forests bundles of fodder of 40 to 45 lakh, valued between USD 270,000 and USD 300,000.
Increased environmental sustainability

A number of studies conducted by Seva Mandir shows that over 80% of the FPCs supported by VUS were successful in collectively protecting and managing forests and in regenerating forestland in 31 villages.

According to them, VUS protects and manages 67,000 hectares of forestland in more than 240 villages. VUS has been instrumental in addressing overgrazing, mining and illegal privatization of forestland. Conservation efforts have increased the vegetative cover, protected important floral species and safeguarded the animal population.

Forest regeneration has been carried out through the plantation of new saplings and the protection of the natural regeneration of root-stocks. A better recharge of groundwater has augmented the availability of drinking and irrigation water. The ecological management of shared resources has improved biodiversity, provided better livelihood options and limited the migration of community members to peri-urban and urban areas in search of work. The availability of fodder and fuel wood from forests has reduced the drudgery of women and girl children considerably.

Evidence

A state level study of forest management sites (Ashish Agarwal et al. 2006) indicates an effective growth of vegetation in both planted sites and natural growth areas (Table 1).

An internal assessment of Seva Mandir shows that in 2010 the biomass growth in the Madla site, Jhadol block reached 15.74 tonnes per hectare after 5 years of protection. According to another study nearly 51.25% of the fuel wood demand from the villagers of the Udaipur district is fulfilled through supply from JFM areas. Increased vegetation has also contributed to enhancing the fauna.

Data collected by VUS indicate that annually the mahua flower and dolma are traded from villages for about Rs.1,500,000 and Rs.1,000,000 respectively. Similarly, the annual business of tendu leaves, gum and honey collected from this area amounts to Rs.1,500,00, Rs.500,000 and Rs.150,000 respectively.

VUS has received awards for their contributions to biodiversity and environmental conservation and for enabling tribal communities. These include:

- 2002 - U.M.L. Environment Award by Seva Mandir for their commendable work in environmental protection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameters</th>
<th>Planted site</th>
<th>Natural growth</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plant Density (per hectare)</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>108</td>
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<tr>
<td>Species richness (no.)</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shannon Weiner's diversity index</td>
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<td>1.960</td>
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<tr>
<td>Basal area (m² per hectare)</td>
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<td>6.65</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ashish Biomass (ton per hectare)</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>39.49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Results of the EERN study on JFM sites, 2006

Ashish Agarwal et. al. 2006.
• 2010 - Raja Punja award, Maharana Mewar Foundation, for their outstanding service to tribal people.
• 2012 - India Biodiversity Award by the Government of India and UNDP.

Lessons learned

Lessons for civil society

A key lesson for civil society is that historically oppressed and isolated communities need time, support and an enabling environment to overcome their disadvantage and start benefiting from pro-poor schemes.

Over time village-level institutions like VUS can be developed. These can focus on securing livelihoods for individual families and education, on supporting village-level functionaries in managing committees, developing awareness, providing training on legal land rights, and helping communities to tackle complexities and confusion caused by legal and policy directives or dramatic changes due to political reasons. Capacity building activities with government departments, forest officials and village elders and representatives are critical for improving the access of tribal communities to common land and resources.

Lessons for policy makers

Policy makers can learn that governance and management of common land call for a multi-pronged approach and a convergence of schemes by many state and non-state agencies. Adequate resources need to be timely allocated towards leadership development and capacity building in any new reform related to forests, land and livelihoods. The regeneration of land and forests is central to sustainable local development. The experience of VUS demonstrates that work on forest resources management is not merely concerned with ‘regenerating land’, but also with ‘regenerating community’.

VUS's existence and expansion in twenty years is a testament to the strength of ordinary people and how they can move beyond a condition of narrow self-interest with the support of civil society institutions like Seva Mandir.

Challenges

Seva Mandir has experienced many challenges in the formation and establishment of VUS. These include - but are not limited to:

• Land grabbing within many communities, which ignore the customary rights of tribal and forest-dependant villagers;
• The unhealthy alliances and vertical ties between grassroots state functionaries and individuals;
• The propensity of communities to normalise hostilities and conflicts related to land within villages;

“We are not against the authorities, but we are aiming to build up pressure on the government both at grassroots and advocacy level to expedite the plight of CFRs in the region”. VUS Activist
The complex national and state land registration procedures that create legal loopholes in securing land tenure for the landless, and prevent tribal and forest dwelling communities from accruing the benefits of common forest land under the FRA 2006.

Follow-up

Well-organised and functioning village-level institutions like VUS are needed for pro-poor policies to be effective and for comprehending the complex interactions between officials, people’s representatives and politicians. Seva Mandir continues to play an important catalytic role within forest communities in Rajasthan that seek to replicate the experience of VUS. VUS is immensely helpful in facilitating dialogue around common forestland and in organising strategies and policies. It has become a strong rallying point for people to overcome their collective disadvantage and work towards empowerment. Institutions like VUS should be created and supported by district administrators and Forest Departments not only in India, in order to build and nurture village-level leadership and enhance the ability of institutions to provide a better governance of the commons.

Supporting material

References and further reading


Photos, videos


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