

Institute for Ecology and Livelihood Action

COVID Transformation and Relevance of Decentralised Governance

Background:

On 24th March, as a result of the impact of the world wide pandemic COVID19 Government of India first announced lockdown for an initial period of twenty one days. As we know this lockdown has not been fully revoked as yet. While the lockdown has severely hampered movement and resulted in numerous issues related to health and livelihoods, it also provided a challenge to seriously operationalise the concept of decentralised governance made possible by advancements in communication technology. It also provided the impetus for looking more closely at local health solutions related to stressing the importance of local foods in the light of the scientific evidence of their nutritional value.

As a supporter of a National Initiative called Gram Sabha Jagrukta Abhiyan launched by Indian Community Activists Network, Institute for Ecology and Livelihood action helped prepare the concept note and strategy paper for the movement. With the help of partners in Gujarat, Rajasthan and Jharkhand IELA also helped facilitate the process on the ground in various ways through trainings on the collection of secondary data, documentation and facilitation of RTI applications.

Separately in the first quarter, IELA helped in completion of the Nation-wide study on the status of the Forest Rights Act being done by All India Forest Forum for Forest Rights Struggles (AIFFRS), supported by Indian School of Business (ISB). Based on feedback from ISB, IELA helped in the preparation of five policy briefs summarising the study and highlighting the implications in different contextual situations on the ground. The five briefs brought home the fact that one size does not fit all and solutions have to be tailor made to suit the ground conditions. In the process it indirectly pointed to the relevance of local self governance processes as a way to capture the nuances on the ground. As a result it recommended that a process of Federating at the District/landscape level be used to provide gram sabhas with the wherewithal to raise their voice on governance issues affecting their livelihood concerns at village and landscape level. Suitable modifications to this basic structure was also recommended to articulate the concerns of specific interest groups like pastoralists, fishers, Internally displaced persons, Primitive tribal groups who had migrated to other States and did not tribal status in those states and specific concerns of local forest communities based on the nature of ecology and potential life support systems that could support them.

With the focus shifting to the gram sabha as a whole and to issues related to the entire community at a very crucial time like COVID,, the need to address issues related to provision of employment, nutritious healthy food, promotion of kitchen and health gardens became a priority along with the push to ensure that communities realised the importance of the local

biodiversity in their life support systems and as a result worked towards the preparation of Community Forest Rights claims and Village Biodiversity protection committees.

Having facilitated the participation of partners in the National Inclusive Children's Parliament (NICP) at Delhi in Jan- Feb 2020, around the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), a process of helping create children's parliaments was initiated in Rajasthan and Gujarat. With the help of an intern from Symbiosis Law College Pune, IELA, slides highlighting the importance and relevance of each SDG were prepared. IELA also helped to develop a perspective on SDGs relevant to the rural areas. The key difference between the rural and urban approach is that access and governance rights on the natural resources were more important in rural surroundings while rights to basic needs and amenities are important in the urban context. As a result IELA was able to bring an entirely new perspective to the issue of the way the SDGs were being looked at. Due to COVID 19, progress on this matter has been slow but issues related to the relevance of local foods as a way to tackle nutrition, health and overall well being concerns of local communities in rural areas has been highlighted.

Considering the focus on Nutrition, Health and Overall well being, IELA was also able to highlight the centrality of women in dealing with these issues. Accordingly with the help of partner organisations, a concept note on the same was developed which is helping to guide IELA and partner interventions in the States of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Uttarakhand. The last quarter focussed on consolidating the activities in these States so as to develop a comprehensive programme capable of addressing more global concerns related to Climate Change, sustainable livelihoods and governance. This approach has been crystallised in a note on Theory of Change. Further work on how this can be used in different fields is being further explored.

Annual Report 2020-21

Development of the federation approach conducive to forest dwellers and forest dependent communities for community forest rights:

Rajasthan

Over the year, different interventions took place in the districts of Chittorgarh with Badad Mazdoor Kisan Sangathan (BMKS), in Bhilwara with Upar Maal Mazdoor Kisan Sangathan (UMKS) , in Bundi with BMKS and directly with activists working in Udaipur District. The capacity building of traditional forest dwellers and forest dependent communities for submitting and asserting their CFR rights and individual forest rights continued amidst other struggles and efforts during and after Covid-19 lockdown.

The federation approach being adopted is first bringing all individual forest right claimants from different villages at one platform where they are given handholding support by IELA and the relevant local organisation. Secondly, meetings are being conducted for brainstorming and planning for filing CFR claims. A summary of the actions taken and result achieved are given in the table below.

Summary of Action taken and Achievements

Sr. No	Action Taken	Details	Result
Rajasthan			
Chittaurgarh			
1.	Memorandum to SDM copy to Chief secretary, District collector and local MLA	209 IFR claims arbitrarily rejected in 38 villages of 15 panchayats. Memorandum sent in July 2020 with follow up with MLA in Nov 2020 and with DLC in Jan 2020	No action taken so far
Bhilwara			
2.	Formation of federation and sending of memorandums on violation of FRA	40 villages from 5 Panchayats federated as Upar Mal Mazdoor Kisan Sanghathan (UMKS). Memorandum sent to SDM and District Collector on atrocities committed by local forest officials in violation of the Forest Rights Act	No action yet
Bundi			
3.	Formation of federation and sending of memorandums on violation of FRA	Two memorandums sent in october 2020 to DLC and to SDLC	No action yet federation initiated
Udaipur			
4	Formation of federation	Issues related to destruction of the forest, deprivation of rights to Mahua trees and proper process for Tendu leaves for which forest fires are initiated to hide the activities of the land mafia	Campaign planned in April 2021

Case study of village Bakchanch, in Bundi District: The village was included within the geographical boundaries of Jawahar Sagar Wildlife sanctuary (Wildlife division Kota) in 2002. The villagers were instigated by the forest officials to sign on the legal stamp papers declaring their land holdings. The forest officials persuaded the traditional forest dwellers to mention areas of their land holdings lesser than they were actually holding. The villagers were also persuaded for mentioning settled before few years instead of long period since their forefathers settled there. No process of conducting Gram Sabha and obtaining consent for creation of Jawaharsagar Wildlife sanctuary was followed with the residents of village Bakchanch. After that the forest officials started forcing the traditional residents to leave the place. The process of threatening, filing illegal cases and incrimination of traditional forest dwellers continued till they came to know about enactment of the Forest Right Act 2006. Continuing the oppressive moves the administration did not constitute any Forest Right Committee in Bakchanch village till 2016, when ultimately after being made aware by BMKS, the villagers convened the Gram Sabha and constituted the FRC. In 2018 the FRC submitted 55 files of IFR claims to the Panchayat secretary to forward them to the SDLC. Later 40 files were returned back by the SDLC to the panchayat, informing (verbally) that they were incomplete, but the panchayat officials did not inform FRA claimants regarding return of the files, instead of that they informed the FRA claimants that their claims have been rejected. The claimants even could not trace the whereabouts of their files. The fate of remaining 15 FRA claims became the same and there is no information about their files, any decision made etc. Amidst of this the process of threatening, filing illegal cases and incrimination of traditional forest dwellers continued by the forest department. The FRA claimants then sent a letter to the state government with the request for taking action for recognition of their forest rights under the FRA. In 2019, the state government of Rajasthan had launched the online portal for filing FRA claims. IELA and BMKS team helped FRC Bakchanch in filing fresh claims on the online portal in the month of August 2020. After that the forest officials visited the lands of FRA claimants and displayed some acts of location recording (without informing the land holders or giving any reason for what they were doing). Even after the filing of online claims, the claimants are not getting any update from the SDLC or DLC regarding status of claims they have filed. Therefore with the technical support of BMKS the FRC again sent two memorandums in the month of October 2020 to the DLC and SDLC respectively regarding no action being taken on the online filed FRA claims and request to the authorities to take action and recognise their claims.

Case study of Phulwari Ki Naal in Udaipur District: While contacting FRCs in Phulwari Ki Naal wildlife sanctuary for constitution of gram Sabha federation and preparation and filing of Community Forest Right claims, it came to our notice that there is clash undergoing between local traditional forest dwellers versus outsider migrants who have invaded in the area from adjoining states recently in a few years and encroaching upon forest land as well as creating conflict with the local residents. These invader settlers are being supported by land mafias who are interested in grabbing the land adjoining the wildlife sanctuary to establish their commercial establishments. The land mafia has been using the invader settlers and also

some local criminals as a means to convert forest land into revenue land over a period of years. They are forcing and threatening the traditional forest dwellers of this region to give away their land for unsustainable capital interests. These outsiders use the season of flowering of Mahua tree (*Madhuca longifolia*) as an excuse to burn vast stretches of interior forests to the ground, for collection of fallen Mahua flowers that are traditionally used in various purposes but now a days mainly used in making country liquor. The traditional forest dwellers fear their future is being destroyed by the adverse environmental impacts these illegal intruders are causing. In an unprecedented effort to protect their traditional forest dependent lifestyle the locals have united to oppose the land grabbing by outsiders. The traditional forest dwellers including those who have also filed IFR claims and have got recognition under the FRA have continued to be active in the opposition of the encroachment of land as well as the destruction of their forest resources. The local villagers continue to face violent attacks and threats on their lives, thus recognition of their work in presence of everyone will be a great support.

In this regard IELA is extending technical and handholding support to the local village community in strengthening their Gram Sabha and approach the higher administrative authorities and government to claim their constitutional rights (including rights under the FRA). The federated village community is able to communicate the district, state and national authorities regarding their issues through personal meetings as well as communications. IELA helped the Gram Sabhas to take their resolutions on specific issues of concern (as regarding the invading outsiders, land mafia and forest fires these miscreants generate. IELA helped through preparing a format for Gram Sabha resolution which was used by the village communities in their respective Gram Sabhas. The local villages are being federated to strengthen their collective efforts and assert their community rights over their forest resources. They were helped in drafting memorandum and thereafter reminder to be given to the district administration regarding destruction of their forest resources by land mafia and illegal settlers, citing provisions of the FRA and appeal for administrative action against the mafias and their accomplices.

Pre-emptive Strategy of Community-Based Approach to Grassroots Forest Conservation:

To strengthen the morale of traditional forest dwellers and forest dependent communities and open appreciation for their efforts to protect and conserve the forest a strategy has been planned. The concerned villagers have proposed to host an event this year at the time of Mahua flower collection to resist with outsider settlers and pre-emptively divert the igniting of forest fires and to support the very last surviving biodiversity hotspot of the Aravalis. The idea is to engage the local youth who are concerned to protect and save their sacred grooves, forest and wildlife in collaboration with urban youth who have studied biodiversity and wildlife. The major task of the youth will be to explore, document and photo document the patch in need of protection and conservation in view of the impending forest fire season. The goal is to create an atmosphere in which the young generation of traditional forest dwellers and forest dependent communities take interest and build their understanding of how to live prosperously in harmony with the forest. This will not only help in outcompeting the outsider

settlers and the land mafia, this approach will also help in inculcating the attitude of having ownership of their forest resources.

The local villagers being federated will be able to assert their community forest rights over the forest resources as well as right to manage, conserve and protect their forest resources under the FRA.

Gujarat

Due to the COVID 19 lockdown, there was some difficulty in fully understanding the issues involved which resulted in a halt to the filing process, particularly after the claims for all the five villages of Mandwada, Sodvad, Lalpur, Munglavat and Mundamor have been prepared. However in a recent meeting a strategy for reactivating the process was initiated and claims of four villages namely Patadiya, Muglavat, Dandaniya and Mandvada have been signed, approved and forwarded by the gram sabha. The claims filed provide details of the uses of 38 species found in the forest and the general conditions related to forest protection in the District of Chhota Udepur.

Summary of Action taken and Achievements

Sr. No	Action Taken	Details	Result
Gujarat			
1.	Federation of 82 villages in 3 Tehsils of Chhota Udepur	Protection of 22, 061.84 has of land and creation of awareness of the wealth of the biodiversity and its relevance for livelihood	CFR claims filed in 4 villages

Jharkhand:

In Jharkhand the Jharkhand Majdoor Kisan Union (JMKU) has outreach to 469 villages in 09 districts. Through its 938 volunteers JMKU is in direct contact with more than 5000 persons. The formation of regional federations of Gram Sabhas in different blocks of nine districts is under progress; for this initially village level Gram Sabha committees have been constituted in 60 villages.

Under the process of Forest Right Act, currently 23 villages (Gram Sabhas) in 14 panchayats in two districts being facilitated for preparation and filing of CFR claims. There is lots of resistance and obstruction created by the forest department in implementation of FRA. But with the handholding support of JMKU to FRA claimants they have succeeded in getting 47 new IFR claims recognized in past few months. The forest officials are continuing with registering cases against traditional forest dwellers and forest dependent communities arbitrarily. JMKU is providing legal help to the innocent persons booked by the forest department. During March 2020 representatives of JMKU participated in national meetings with other organisations and also made representation to the union minister of Tribal Affairs.

JMKU is periodically organizing orientation, capacity building and training programs for the members of FRCs so as to help them use their rights and duties laid under the FRA act. It also

collaborates with other organisations in organizing the programs. Under that a training program on ‘utilization of global positioning system (GPS) in spot verification and area demarcation of land claimed under the FRA’ was organized for members of FRCs on 3rd December 2020 in collaboration with IELA. The FRC members were assembled at JMKU office and online session was conducted by IELA staff from Rajasthan. Apart from describing the use of mobile GPS apps and online demonstrations, in-situ hands-on practice was also conducted for the participants. The trained volunteers were then engaged in surveying the sites of FRA claimants to mark their geographical location and extent of land holdings. The IELA team from Rajasthan was kept involved online during follow-up with the trained volunteers. Another collaborative program between JMKU and IELA was organised on ‘orientation and capacity building of FRCs and Gram Sabha’, on 14th March 2021, at village Ratnag in district Palamau. Online sessions by IELA team and in-house discussions were conducted with the participating FRC members. As always, the follow-up mechanism has been ensured. JMKU is helping FRCs in preparation of CFR claims, for which certain secondary data is also required for documentation. IELA is helping JMKU in this regard as well. In this way an inter-state federation approach is also emerging; Gram Sabha federated in a state are also being facilitated to interact with Gram Sabha federated in another state. The exchange of ideas, expertise, technical support and collective action for preparation and submission of CFR claims is going on.

Summary of Action taken and Achievements

Sr. No	Action Taken	Details	Result
Jharkhand			
1.	Federating for Forest Rights	469 villages in 9 Districts through 938 volunteers	Action against violation of Forest rights by the forest department
2.	Conducting of gram sabhas	Gram sabhas conducted in 60 villages	Rights under FRA and local self governance of PRIs being taken up
3.	Pursuit of IFR claims	23 villages of 14 panchayats have succeeded in getting 47 new IFR claims approved	Process of training for filing CFR claims underway

Other States

Due to COVID19 lockdown the AIFFRS study which was completed in June 2020 could not be taken forward in the manner expected. Following the five policy briefs submitted to the Minister in August 2020 along with a covering note outlining the major issues, a study was

commissioned by Akhil Bharatiya Mazdoor Kisan Sangharsh Samiti (ABMKSS) in September 2020 with the idea of tying up the loose ends and placing the study on a different footing with respect to covering the totality of issues related to local self governance. Draft report for Maharashtra and Jharkhand have been produced and circulated for comments. The report is being revised based on the feedback received. The study of Chhatisgarh is underway, after which the study will attempt to link up the issues emerging at the National level drawing on the five policy briefs as a framework to upscale to the larger framework.

Development of the approach related to gram Sabha and issues related to COVID

Rajasthan

The Covid-19 lockdown period has on one hand caused misery to the people, especially restricting their livelihood opportunities, and on the other hand it has helped people in knowing their other constitutional and statutory rights (along with already known forest rights) when they had to access and demand for the relief measures declared by the union and state governments. Therefore, while keeping the basic thrust on capacity building of traditional forest dwellers and forest dependent communities for submitting and asserting their CFR rights and individual forest rights, the activities of providing handholding support to the local community for accessing relief measures started by the government amidst COVID-19 lockdown, were also carried out.

Institute for Ecology and Livelihood Action (IELA) and Badad Majdoor Kisan Sangathan (BMKS), a regional federation of tribal villages in Chittorgarh district) also took certain initiatives regarding public awareness on different rights including right for labour under MGNREGA, rights to access to minor forest produce, welfare schemes under scheduled tribal area etc.

Access to Government support schemes: Prior to conducting public meetings, IELA and BMKS jointly with the help of village volunteers conducted survey of the families in 19 villages of 5 village panchayat areas in Rawatbhata tehsil and listed out families that still do not have access to different household and livelihood schemes. The team identified more than 200 families that are eligible but do not have access to government schemes to avail benefits. Based on the survey results the families were categorized under four categories – **(1)** Below Poverty Line (BPL) families (families who are living below the poverty line specified by the state government); **(2)** Above Poverty Line (APL) families who live above nationally designated poverty threshold; **(3)** Deen Dayal Upadhyay Antyodaya scheme (a convergence and accountability framework aiming to bring optimum use and management of resources allocated by 27 Ministries/ Department of the Government of India under various programmes for the development of rural areas); and **(4)** Annapurna scheme (aims at providing food security to meet the requirement of those senior citizen who though eligible have remained uncovered under the National Old Age Pension Scheme). The survey data was communicated to the local MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly), Sub-District Magistrate (SDM) and the Sarpanch of respective panchayat with the request of enlisting the needy

families under different schemes. After continuous pursuance of the matter by BMKS and IELA rural volunteers, the administration and panchayats were forced to take necessary measures swiftly.

Handholding support in registration for food security scheme: IELA and BMKS team also identified families that were facing food crisis amidst Covid-19 lockdown and helped them know about The National Food Security Act, 2013 (also 'Right to Food Act'), an Act of the Parliament which aims to provide subsidized food grains to approximately two thirds of India's 1.2 billion people. More than 100 families were facilitated to file online registration under food security scheme and now they are availing its benefits. A letter to the local MLA was also communicated in the month of October to arrange government's help for registering families of Kushalgarh panchayat that belong to Above Poverty Line (APL) but facing food crisis due to Covid-19 lockdown and loss of livelihood.

Advocacy and technical support to MGNREGA job card holders (including FRA beneficiaries): To provide livelihood support to rural families under Covid-19 relief measures, the central as well as state governments started different work in various departments under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), but the benefit of government's relief measures was not reaching to the people. IELA and BMKS team conducted a sample survey in the month of July in one panchayat (Kushalgarh) to know that how many days' work a MGNREGA job card holder gets against the 100 days work assured under the Act. Overall 114 MGNREGA job card holders were surveyed and it was found that none of them had got more than 50 days work in the last financial year!! The MGNREGA Rojgar Sahayak Sachiv (Employment Assistance Secretary - EAS) whose job is to receive the job applications from the job card holders was unreasonably reluctant to receive the job applications and the panchayat officials as well as elected representatives were also ineffective to help the poor people and take action against the MGNREGA secretary.

IELA and BMKS team started handholding support to MGNREGA job card holders that were living in villages as well those who had migrated to other places due to unavailability of work and had to return back due to loss of livelihood amidst Covid-19 pandemic and were facing crisis of livelihood, in filling their job application forms and in approaching the higher administrative authorities so as to compel them to make necessary arrangements for receiving the job applications and release muster rolls of sanctioned work to provide work to the job card holders. As a part of peoples' mobilization for asserting their rights for getting work under MGNREGA act, BMKS along with local peoples groups sent two letters to the Prime minister of India in which they demanded extension of MGNREGA work assurance from 100 to 200 days, extra daily tool allowance, increase in daily wage etc. The advocacy for MGNREGA job card holders (including FRA beneficiaries) continued in the successive months and in this regard continuous pursuance with the SDM was done through reminder letters. As a result, from July 2020 to February 2021 in a span of eight months, total 870 job applications were filed by job card holders with the help of IELA and BMKS team. Muster rolls of works under MGNREGA are being released and people are getting livelihood support

under MGNREGA through our team's assistance. The assisted beneficiaries belong to 07 villages (Ganeshpura, Manpura, Badla Ka Khera, Nali, Kanti Ramnagar, Arena Kalan and Kheda Viran) in Kushalgarh and Mandesra panchayat of Rawatbhata.

Gujarat

Keeping in mind the need for a more comprehensive and organised approach to deal with the issues has been worked with Habitat Ecological Trust. A plan for development of local leadership in 101 villages of Kavant, Naswadi and Pavi Jetpur has been prepared by AAJ which has been shared with the HABITAT team. This includes the following

- a. Development of the leadership including women to help facilitate the protection and development of the biodiversity as preliminary to issues related to livelihood protection and enhancement in these villages.
- b. Facilitation of women leadership to take forward issues related to introduction of local foods into the mid day meal scheme and its relevance for improving the linkage between traditional knowledge and the formal education provided by schools.
- c. Development of leadership among children to take up issues related to the Sustainable Development Goals and the relevance of the knowledge of the local biodiversity and ecological issues related to livelihood sustainability as means for their empowerment.
- d. The relevance of renewable energy and organic farming for sustainable livelihoods and in this connection the importance of the bio-gas plant installed on the campus with the help of Habitat Ecological Trust.

At the global level, aspects related to the relevance of decentralised governance for sustainable livelihoods are being facilitated with the help of Especioza Trust. Especioza trust is following the principle of rebuilding broken family and societal ties as a means to address global concerns related to Climate Change, sustainable livelihoods and overall Well Being.

Work related to Children's parliaments and campaign on Malnutrition

One child and one teacher participated on behalf of AAJ, and One Child and two facilitators from Gayatri Seva Sansthan, participated in the National Inclusive Children's parliament in Delhi in Jan-Feb 20 and the follow up in Jan- Feb 21. This was followed up with Habitat in terms of three trainings imparted to the children of Bhekadiya on the process of creation of creation of a Children's Panchayat. The experience of these trainings is the basis for further development on this issue and relating it to school curriculum with the help of Habitat team. In the case of Gayatri Seva Sansthan, Children's Parliament was formed in Sarada and Salumber Block of Udaipur District, children of these blocks raised the issues related to the non functioning of the mid day meal scheme as a result of closure of schools during lock down and issues related to the limitations of interior schools being able to function in online manner in an e Bal Sabha organised by Gayatri Seva Sansthan on the occasion of children's week commemorated in November 2020. A plan for taking up these issues was discussed

with NICP and a campaign for highlighting issues related to the functioning of the mid day meal scheme and its impact on the nutrition of children has been formulated.

The relevance of a rights and governance based approach through Children's parliaments around the seventeen SDGs as a means to provide deprived and marginalised children with the wherewithal to engage on their own terms with issues related to education, health, nutrition and overall well being for all is being explored with IELA partners in collaboration with PRATYeK which acts as the secretariat for the NICP. To start with a joint campaign on issues related to functioning of the Mid Day meal Scheme and its impact on nutrition of children has been initiated.

Action research agenda for examining the relevance of appropriate collective spaces to empower women

Considering women as central to any issue related to ecology and sustainable livelihoods, in discussion with partners, IELA is developing an action research programme related to empowerment of women through the use of appropriate collective spaces and the relevance of health, nutrition and overall well being as core activities following the COVID19 pandemic.

Goal: To understand the relationship of women's empowerment to the process of facilitation of collective spaces in the new context of rural life where traditional collective meeting points for women have been dismantled.

Overall Objective: To create spaces for women that is at the core of their realisation of their true potential as human beings and as nurturers of nature

Objective 1: Provision of basic economic and cultural security through collective action emerging from internal discussion of options available as a precondition for self assertion.

Objective 2: To use this enhanced vision of self and society as a means to engage meaningfully in larger community activity at the gram sabha and federation level so as to be better able to find expression for their potential.

Objective 3: To develop association with like-minded organisations at District, State, National and International level so as to exchange experiences and widen horizons for self actualisation and basic economic and socio-cultural security.

Objective 4: To engage with implementation and policy at Panchayat, Block, District, State, National and International level.

Accordingly discussions have taken place with Habitat Ecological Trust in Visnagar, Mahesana, Gujarat, Adivasi Jan Utthan Trust in Bhekadiya, Chhota Udepur, Gujarat, Gayatri Seva Sansthan, Udaipur Rajasthan and Especioza Trust, Porvorim, Goa. While the latter is more about participation in global email and other discussions on wider questions and issues related to women's empowerment, the first three relate to discussions on putting together a programme related to kitchen and nutrition gardens and use of local foods in the diet of the mid day meal scheme for schools and anganwadis.