



GLOBAL AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE LIVESTOCK

GOOD PRACTICE GUIDELINE

Commoning the Commons: Rehabilitating Community Lands in India

KEY MESSAGES:

1. Commons are not only a 'refuge' but also the foundation on which agriculture and livestock production systems rest in a manner that strengthens their resilience. It is the commons-livestock-agricultural complex that provides stability and security in an unpredictable environment
2. While people across all landholding and social groups depend on Commons for livestock, this dependence is higher for the landless, marginal and small farmers, pastoralists and other socially marginalized groups
3. There is a need to recognize common property regime as a viable alternative for management of natural resources alongside 'centralised' and 'individualised/privatised' arrangements
4. Energizing networks of members from civil society, practitioners, experts and planners can help in strengthening the case for Commons

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Overview of practice

Livestock keeping is central to the livelihoods of millions of rural households in India, extending from the landless and socially marginalized to those with access to land and other resources. Estimates suggest that 70% of the agricultural GDP in arid areas and 40% in the semi-arid areas of India come from livestock. Around 3/4th of the livestock in these regions are owned by the landless, marginal and small farmers.

Commons such as pastures, forests, barren and uncultivated lands, river and tank beds, agricultural fallows and in many cases harvested agricultural fields contribute significantly to the survival of livestock production systems in these regions. Estimates suggest that nearly 70% of the households in the arid, semi-arid and sub-humid regions of India graze their livestock on Commons and 45% of their fodder requirements are met from Commons alone. Further, not only are they small ruminants, but archetypal stall fed animals – buffaloes and crossbred cattle also depend on Commons for meeting more than 20% of their fodder requirements (FES, 2010). Commons not only help in meeting the fodder and water requirements of the livestock, but also provide spaces for instituting cooperative mechanisms between different users and strengthening the social fabric that is at the core of sustaining grazing based livestock production systems.

However, Commons are often misconstrued as ‘wastelands’ and diverted for ‘productive’ purposes such as industries, mining, corporate contract farming, bio-fuel cultivation etc. Institutional solutions that have undermined the ability of local communities to organize and self-regulate and instead place emphasis on ‘State’ and ‘market’ and declining grazing spaces, has led to erosion of the traditional institutional mechanisms, increasing inequities and conflicts over resource use with the poor and marginalized usually at the losing end.



Approach

At the Foundation for Ecological Security (FES), we believe that there is a need to centre stage a common property regime as a viable alternative alongside private and State led regimes for governance of natural resources and strengthening rural livelihoods. Building evidence from the ground and energizing networks of members from civil society, practitioners, experts and planners could be the key for rehabilitation of community lands and sustaining the grazing based livestock production systems.

Our engagements at the village level involve: assisting local communities in securing tenurial rights over common lands; helping bring in robust institutional arrangements based on principles of universal membership and social inclusion and improving the democratic character of their functioning; and helping establish and reinforce the inter-linkages between different resource systems (forest-farm-water) and production systems (commons-agriculture-livestock) by nurturing a 'systems perspective'.

Benefits of the Practice

Our experiences of working with local communities to strengthen institutional arrangements for management of common land and water resources through securing rights of communities and improving land and water use have shown that Commons provide a unique opportunity to work through a single platform on issues of poverty reduction, reducing inequalities and improving ecological health. These efforts, often built on long history of cooperation to address collective action problems, enable a code of locally agreed behaviour that both energizes proactive steps and keeps undesirable individual action in check.

A study supported by the South Asian Pro Poor Livestock Programme (SAPPLPP) across six districts in different agro-climatic zones shows that secure collective tenurial rights over common lands, improved local capacities and appropriate biophysical interventions for rehabilitating these lands leads to significant improvements in the soil and moisture regime, biomass and biodiversity, soil fertility and a doubling of the cropping area due to improved availability of water. Standing biomass on common lands increased from an average of 6.64 tonnes per hectare to 15.64 tonnes per hectare while palatable biomass increased from 0.95 tonnes per hectare to 5.37 tonnes per hectare. With improved fodder and water availability, there has also been an increase in livestock holding particularly of the landless and marginal farmers and an increase in income from sale of milk and crops (SAPPLPP, 2009).



Key Characteristics required for success

Secure tenure and rights of access and use play an important role in motivating communities for management of Commons. Defining boundaries and securing community rights over Commons also help in checking individualistic behaviours and brings additional space for livestock grazing by the community as a whole.

Robust institutions which recognize traditional institutional arrangements and adhere to the broad principles of management of common pool resources energize collective action and are more likely to survive and be sensitive to the needs of poor households and livestock keepers.

Ecologically sound regeneration with a focus on restoration of a diverse mix of endogenous grass, shrub and tree species taking into consideration the fodder and feed requirements of both large and small ruminants is important.

Resource growth on Commons need not be uniform and should be planned considering the time and space in which these are placed. Regulated and rotational grazing is an important mechanism for regenerating Commons.

Information on local thresholds of biomass and water usage, choice of species and agricultural practices which reduce resource demands and institutional platforms to engage different stakeholders are important to further strengthen the sustainability of such transformations.



The Good Practice Guidelines intend to provide practical operational information related to the Global Agenda for Sustainable Livestock Focus Area 2: Restoring Value to Grasslands. The information has been drawn from a global inventory of pilot sites connected to FA2. This guideline aligns with FA2 Theme 1 Enabling Institutions. Please visit www.livestockdialogue.org for more information.

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FURTHER READING

[SAPPLPP. (2009). Common Land & Poor Livestock Keepers: Experiences from Common Land Development in the States of Rajasthan & Madhya Pradesh in India. SAPPLPP FES (2010). A Commons Story: In the Rainshadow of Green Revolution]

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DATE PUBLISHED

June 2016