Managing commons: Need and challenges

Author - Manisha Shah, Manohar Rao, Published on - 7.2.2020

Plantation in Gomala (Image: Foundation for Ecological Security)

Common pool resources, popularly known as "commons", are those resources which are accessible to the whole community or village and to which no individual has exclusive ownership or property rights. Commons have two essential characteristics: non-excludability and high-subtractability. Non-excludability means that it is impossible or very costly to restrict a user from using the resource, and subtractability or "rivalness" means that use of the resource by one user will diminish benefits for other users. In the context of India, commons include community forests, common grazing grounds, tanks and tank beds, foreshores, threshing grounds, rivers and riverbeds, where well-defined property regime may not exist. Around 26 percent of India's land mass (180 million hectares) can be classified as commons (

Chopra and Gulati, 2001

). In addition to meeting livelihood needs of rural population ($5 Billion annually,

 Beck and Nesmith, 2001

), these resource systems serve critical ecological functions and services by contributing to carbon sequestration, biodiversity conservation, hydrological supplies and act as buffer zones or corridors to biodiversity rich areas. In spite of these vital services, commons have faced neglect due to unfavourable usage rights and weak institutional arrangements for local management and governance leading to widespread degradation. In September 2019, the Government of India pledged to restore 5 million hectares of degraded land by 2030. The Forest Rights Act and several other policy initiatives such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) provide the much needed investment for securing the commons. Groundwater is a rapidly depleting common-pool resource and is interconnected with land and forests for sustainability. It is recognized as commons in the newer water policies but seldom managed using its principles. On December 25, 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the long-awaited Atal Bhujal Yojana (

ABhY

, Atal Jal). The Panchayat-led programme's design incorporates principles of participatory groundwater management and behavioural change with primary focus on demand side management in seven states of India. Success of the program would depend largely on its ability to create mechanisms for managing groundwater as a common pool resource. *Challenges in managing commons* As widely studied and acknowledged in the past, commons are facing overconsumption and under-investment leading to depletion. This often results from individuals trying to maximize their own gains rather than work towards collective outcomes, which is referred to as [tragedy of commons](). Forests are being wiped out for development of infrastructure and industries, catchments feeding into water bodies are degraded, tanks and riverbeds are encroached for agricultural and real-estate purposes, and groundwater overexploitation has resulted in loss of livelihoods and even life in some cases. India's poor, whose reliance on commons to meet basic life requirements is high, are now forced to migrate under distress. Agriculture, which supports food security and livelihoods of majority of rural population, is under stress as farmers are finding it difficult to meet irrigation needs to protect their crops in drought situations.

The main challenge with managing commons stems from the existence of multiple uses and users that compete for the resource. Because of shared rights of usage, unrestricted access and unregulated use, the accountability for maintaining commons is largely not established and users often resort to blame-game on the face of dwindling resources. A major hurdle in making commons management work sustainably is to shift from competition to cooperation, which is heavily dependent on existing social capital.

Management of any common pool resource requires institutions formed by users and protectors of the resource. Institutional arrangements to manage these resources are, however, either non-existent or non-functional. These institutions must set rules and regulations, which take shape of social protocols that establish mechanisms to penalize defection. There are few instances of communities taking back their rights to manage their commons effectively. In case of groundwater, for instance, several NGOs have been working with communities to establish models for participatory management. All these models, however, require extensive handholding of communities and long-term engagement by resource organizations - which are not possible at scale given the limited human resources available. To enable such a change at national scale, local communities need to be involved and self-governance institutions need to be promoted to sustainably manage and govern natural resources. Doing this requires community members to acquire necessary knowledge and skills to enhance their capacities. Role of technology, knowledge, and capacity creation in management of commons Collective action of local communities can help balance the use of commons for ecological well-being, social justice, and economic opportunities. This requires amalgamation of traditional knowledge with scientific understanding of resources. Communities already understand the former but need a nudge in the right direction to utilize them in action. *Foundation for Ecological Security (FES)*, an NGO founded in 2001, has been engaging with communities to restore commons and has successfully intervened in over 10,000 villages, restoring more than 200,000 hectares of common lands and forests, apart from water resources in India. Through their [Prakriti Karyashala model](), they have been strengthening community

institutions, building capacities of local resource persons and panchayat functionaries to map, restore, and manage commons better by leveraging government funds under MGNREGA. This has helped in overcoming the gaps in programme implementation and building stewardship over the assets
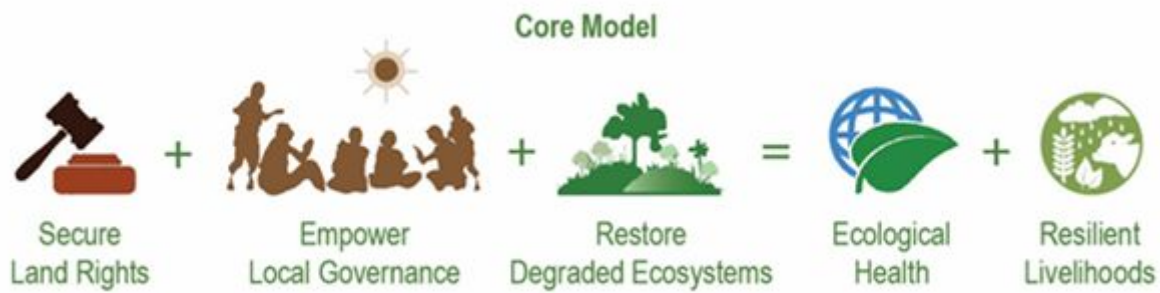
created.

(Source: Foundation for Ecological Security) FES has initiated the use of technology to democratize knowledge and assist in better decision making at the community level. The technology solutions support local communities and other stakeholders in harnessing the potential of data and information for informed conservation action at scale and evidence-based decision making. Using tools like Composite Land Assessment and Restoration Tool has helped in demarcation of common land to outline encroachments and understand potential for securing commons. FES has also promoted tools for performing Crop Water Budgeting exercises collectively in villages on a regular basis for efficient management of water resources. The whole process from identification of commons to securing and restoring them is done by empowering communities with knowledge, data, and tools.

Seed dibbling in common land (Image: Foundation for Ecological Security) The field trainers of FES who engage directly with communities are equipped with necessary tools to map commons, build and strengthen community institutions, mobilize resources, and support community to sustainably manage the secured resources. But, given the depth of engagements, the trainers often find it difficult to reach out to communities in multiple villages allotted to them. Often, sensitive issues like clearing of encroachments require consultations with government authorities at higher administrative levels and entails collaborative efforts of multiple stakeholders. The field trainers currently depend on ad-hoc communication mechanisms to reach out to concerned stakeholders leading to delays in decision making. Mechanisms to resolve some of these communication barriers could help these resource agencies scale up their work much faster and cater to more number of villages - which is the need of the hour given the scale of the problem around commons management. **Ending note** But, can India rely solely on efforts of NGOs to empower communities and build their agency to manage commons? Can MNREGS and other government programs work in convergence to involve people for better planning and governance of commons and not limit their participation to manual labour work? There is an urgent need to glean what we can from the existing knowledge of what works and scale it up to suit local contexts. Otherwise, we might soon be looking at degraded watersheds, grasslands turned to wastelands, dangerous groundwater levels, massive deforestation, unbreathable air, and worse of all- a country not ready to cope with the adverse effects of climate change. First published by

India Water Portal

on 6 Feb. 2020