

## Executive Summary

The legal framework for Protected Areas has a strong bearing on the livelihoods of the local communities and the conservation ethics therein. The communities have a huge dependence on the forests for their fuel-wood and fodder requirements and while it is not allowed by law, they resort to illegal and unsustainable means to collect fuel wood, fodder and Non Timber Forest Produce (NTFPs) both for their consumption and sale. This is actually a loss-loss situation, where neither the natural resource is conserved nor are the people able to earn a decent livelihood and to add to the woes they are on the wrong side of the law.

FES or 'Foundation for Ecological Security' initiated the project titled '*Reconciling Biodiversity Conservation and Livelihoods in Periphery of Kanha National Park*' in Bichhiya block of Mandla district with a view to Conserving and improving the biodiversity and faunal habitats of the Kanha National Park (KNP) and its adjoining buffer and periphery regions in the Khatiya and Sijhora ranges of the Kanha Wildlife division through providing support to the livelihoods of the forest-resource dependent rural population, revival of the local conservation ethics and village-level institutions. The villages that are included in the project are all located in Buffer zone of the Kanha Tiger Reserve within the Khatiya and Sijhora ranges. They form a part of the Bichhia tehsil of Mandla District in Madhya Pradesh located in the south-eastern side of the state.

The project has been on for three years and concluded in March, 2013; therefore, this evaluation attempts to make an assessment of the project progress, outputs, outcomes and achievements *vis-a-vis* the committed objectives, outcomes and output so as to draw key lessons for future project activities and recommendations on planning future activities. The study for impact assessment primarily aims to examine the ecological, social and economic impact of the project. The evaluation attempts to find answers to following:

- a. The extent to which the efforts of FES have borne fruit in bringing communities together for forest conservation?
- b. What are the key drivers for this and lessons learned that could lead to a scale-up?
- c. The assessment of the coordination between forest department, district authorities, village communities and other stakeholders in conserving the forests while ensuring sustainable means of livelihood of local communities.
- d. An assessment of the capacity building initiatives for the local village communities for conservation and management of forests and other natural resources?
- e. What has been the impact of strengthening and diversification of livelihood portfolio for communities and gaps if any in the same to ensure long term sustainability?

What are the activities of the project that have worked best and the opportunities, if any, for their scale-up or uptake by the state government agencies' programmes by leveraging their grants so as to build a larger constituency for conservation?

The project has helped in strengthening community protection of forests in 1630 hectares of area around Kanha. A total of 44000 saplings of trees have been planted on revenue wastelands as well as forest lands. There are instances of improved community protection and village level leaders for conservation have begun to come together into an informal gathering and collect as a group for supporting conservation. The project team has attempted to build trust between community and forest department.

The project has also reached out to about 1224 households directly through various livelihood activities, helped build capacities at the village level for biogas construction, improved agriculture practices, pump-set repairing and vaccination of cattle and poultry. About 200 farmers have cultivated rabi crop for the first time with support from the project which will have immense impact on the village economy as well as on the need for fodder during summer. Plantation of saplings by about 500 farmers during the project period has also been an important achievement. Piloting of certain livelihood alternatives like lac and honey has achieved a mixed success.

In all, 20 villages along the periphery of Kanha national park have developed byelaws for protecting their forest patches or common lands within their village. The rules that have been developed are user-boundary rules and pose sanctions against fuel-wood collection by outsiders. Out of the 20 villages, 4 have even collected fines from people of other villages for collecting fuel-wood for selling or for grazing in their forest area.

About 84 bio-gas plants and 200 improved chulhas were put up in the project villages. However, the success in terms of bio-gas plants has been a mixed bag. The improved chulhas have by and large been successful in reducing the use of firewood. However, after the reconstruction and repair of houses the chulhas need to be made again which has been not done for many houses and therefore the effective number is low. Over 500 families have planted trees, especially *bamboo*, *Gmelina arborea*, *Embllica officinalis* and the like.

Due to the push by the bureaucracy, and the awareness generation in last two years, the team was able to improve the governance around MGNREGA to a certain extent in the project villages. It has also helped the diversion of people from selling fuelwood to the work available under MGNREGA.

A total of 6 ponds came up in the project period, 3 through the project funds and the rest 3 under MGNREGA with support from the team on planning, layout and site selection, a sizeable water storage capacity has developed. Village institutions have brought back three redundant stop dams in use. A total of nine water storage structures have a potential to support about 400 households put together. Besides the irrigation infrastructure, the project has also made investments at few critical sides where soil erosion was a major problem.

In last three years, the project has reached out to more than 600 farmers with agriculture interventions. The yields from paddy have increased in a range of 20% to 100% for the farmers who adopted improved practices of paddy cultivation (SRI). About 400 farmers have received support from the project for demonstrating improved practices in rabi such as inter-

cropping, seed treatment, and pest management. About 50 farmers have been engaged in vegetable farming, though now vegetables are largely being cultivated from nutrition point of view.

During the project period, 60 families have been supported with backyard poultry as a livelihood alternative. Piggery proved to be a viable option by the end of last year. However, this year, significant mortality in piggery was seen. Families who had begun to benefit with piggery, have even bought piglets again on their own for rearing. In the first year, the team tried to work with some farmers on lac cultivation. With a lot of persuasion, people came up for lac cultivation only on trees which were on private lands. Similarly, use of honey harvesting kits while collecting honey in order to ensure that biodiversity concerns are not compromised for livelihood outcomes are being advocated. About 40 people have undertaken training for sustainable honey harvesting this year without any consideration for villages to be within project area. With very little investment, fishing has helped not only in improving the productivity of the existing water bodies and provide a rich source of protein to households, but collective fishing has also helped revive the institution in the village. It is also a good example of optimization of benefits when a common resource is managed well.

It is a good idea to start with a whole portfolio of opportunities to ensure survival even if one or many fail. However, instead of first attempting to deliver in terms of numbers by spreading too thin dilutes the ration of success. It is a good idea to look at the presence of underlying parameters, select couple of villages, generate a success story and then scale it up to more villages. Recommendation by peers increases the success ratio of implementation.

The project needs a stronger engagement with the state-level policy & decision makers to influence resource allocations for interventions especially the ones that are common to the project and the district administration, forest department and other NGO's working in and around.