

HOW FOREST-DWELLING COMMUNITIES ARE BRAVING THE PANDEMIC

Author - Community Forest Rights (CFR) Learning and Advocacy, Published on - 8.10.2020

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The non timber forest products collection season, which is mainly in the months of April to June coincided exactly with the lockdown (Image: CIFOR, Flickr Commons)

The pandemic and lockdown measures have had a drastic impact on a large population of poor and marginalised communities, causing loss of livelihoods and employment, food insecurity and socio-economic distress. While vulnerabilities, atrocities and injustices faced by forest communities due to forest, conservation and economic policies have increased during the pandemic, yet examples indicate that these communities have coped with the crisis with remarkable resilience.

Hundreds of examples of Adivasi and forest dweller communities' remarkable resilience in coping with the crisis have also been reported, particularly where they have been legally empowered, as per a report by a team of independent researchers as part of Community Forest Rights (CFR) Learning and Advocacy and

Vikalp Sangam

initiative.

This has been most evident in areas where land and forest rights have been recognised under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 and Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA), 1996. Recognition of these rights in many cases has led to overcoming constraints and crises situations. The report titled 'Community forest rights & the pandemic: Gram Sabhas lead the way'

attempts to document some of these examples that can help us in understanding the coping mechanisms of communities during times of wide-scale distress. Released on October 2, the report says, "local communities and gram sabhas better understand the local complexities than local administrations while dealing with a crisis as presented by COVID-19, and respond faster especially when empowered by FRA."

Lack of tenure security has emerged as one of the major reasons for the vulnerable situation of the communities.

Additionally, certain pre-existing conditions in tribal areas such as severe shortage and lack of basic healthcare facilities, lack of healthcare professionals, lack of information and awareness, breakdown of traditional health care systems, among others have created greater difficulties and made tribal areas more susceptible to the pandemic. **In most areas, the lockdown has seriously affected the local livelihoods of the communities. Nearly 100 million forest dwellers depend on various kinds of forest produce for food, shelter, medicines and cash income. The collection season for these, however, is mainly in the months from April to June which coincided exactly with the lockdown.** [Protecting CFR lands](#) The report provides an account of a cluster of 24 Adivasi (mostly Vasava tribe) villages that are a part of the Shoolpaneshwar sanctuary in Narmada district of Gujarat. After a protracted struggle for several decades with the Forest Department and a Paper Mill factory, the enactment of FRA led to the receipt of titles for the entire forest patch by these village gram sabhas for all the Community Forest Rights claims. These titles observe all conditions of the FR Act and Rules. After they got the CFR titles, the gram sabha again elected new Community Forest Rights Management Committees (CFRMCs), each with at least one-third women as members. During the months of mid-March to mid-June 2020, most of the families lost significant incomes from labour and sale of rabi crop. There was a substantial loss due to inability to sell non-timber forest products from March to June which are important months for collection or harvesting of a variety of Minor Forest Produce (MFP). Neither the Forest Development Corporation nor the gram sabhas could complete the process for auction/sale of tendu leaves. While the lockdown resulted in major financial losses, this was also the first time when the gram sabhas were set to be a decentralized authority. In each village, the CFRMC members and other village leaders identified families that were starving due to no income and provided ration to them. The CFRMC members of some gram sabhas took initiatives and initiated land levelling work on each family's private or FRA land from their gram sabha funds. They also formed small patrolling groups and protected their CFR lands, as they perceived there might be more threats to the forests during this severe time. In another case, the report details how the gram sabhas in Rajnandgaon, Chhattisgarh, initiated a holistic Covid-19 governance plan. "The local administration praised and supported the plans of the gram sabhas that encouraged local and forest-based food security, thereby preventing crowding in market places. We can see that gram sabhas created plans around forest protection and conservation, minor forest produce collection and sales, food security and distribution and livelihood management," the report says. **Gram duts play a key role in Baiga Chak** The report shows how in Baiga Chak, an area of dense forests primarily inhabited by the Baiga Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) the communities were initially confused when the lockdown was announced, as they were unclear as to what it meant. They had with the support of the Gramdut Karyakram and Jangal Adhyayan Mandal, two campaigns working on rights-based awareness towards recognition of individual forest rights since 2008 and on the legal recognition of CFRs since 2017. Currently, 10 gram sabhas of Dindori block have their documents and evidence ready to claim CFR, when the lockdown was announced. Between March 24 to April 29, there was not much support or hardly any information that reached Baiga communities about the COVID-19 lockdown. The campaign of volunteers, health workers and panchayat approached the District Collector of Dindori on April 29 and demanded that they be allowed to carry out

support work in the district. They made sure that communities got rations for three months and that radios and other systems were put in place to provide isolated villages with information about the health and other implications of the lockdown. The campaign also worked to communicate the issues of communities directly with the Tehsildars and District Collector. From May 15 onwards, as migrant workers returned to the villages, the campaign demanded that people be quarantined in the district headquarters itself. At the gram sabha level, many villages put up barricades as there was a fear of outsiders coming into their villages through the forests, which are contiguous with the Chhattisgarh border. Women played the leading role in the gram sabhas, organising systems to work with social distancing. Women ensured that when they went to fill water at springs, hand pumps and pipelines that there was no overcrowding. During ceremonies of death, birth or weddings, women ensured that there was social distancing maintained when visiting or supporting the necessary spiritual ceremonies. At ration shops, the women ensured that each hamlet had a specific day and time for collection in order to guarantee no overcrowding at the shops. Pratibha Shinde, a member of Lok Samanvay Pratisthan, a Nandurbar, Maharashtra based NGO provides an account of reduction in migration ever since getting CFR recognition. She adds, "During the Covid-19 lockdown, the villagers had livelihood: in the collection of forest produce, tree plantation through Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and building ponds and water harvesting for irrigation and other purposes through the CFR management committees." In Gondia, Maharashtra, close to 50 gram sabhas are organised as a federation, who guaranteed competitive prices and bonus for the communities for their MFP collection even during a crisis. The federation of 29 villages earned Rs 2.5 crore by selling tendu leaves while managing everything themselves and taking precautions against the spread of Covid-19. **The case studies present examples which may lead us to an understanding that community empowerment, particularly by ensuring tenure security and devolving natural resource governance and management power, can restore ecosystems, create sustainable economies and community resilience to cope with the natural and human-induced calamities such as the COVID-19 pandemic.**

First published by

India Water Portal

on 4 Oct. 2020