

National Consultation with Civil Society Organizations on **Non Timber Forest Produce Policy and Management**

Workshop Report

15th and 16th September 2005



Organized by
Centre for People's Forestry

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on Non-Timber Forest Produce Policy and Management

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Supported by

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Background

After World War II, the attention in forestry centred on the production capabilities of forests for commercial timber, particularly in tropical forests. For over three decades the actual and potential role of the multiple products and environmental services offered by forests were virtually ignored. The technocratic approach to natural resource management overlooked and frequently even despised the traditional knowledge and customary rights of people who lived in and around the forests extracting different resources from them (Saxena 1997). The consolidation of old colonial rules or the establishment of new laws asserting state rule over empty, free forestlands consecrated this situation. Thus, three themes now considered extremely important, namely people's livelihood, environmental functions and the broader economic roles of most tropical forests, were assigned very low priority, i.e. if they were considered at all. However, by the late 1970s it became apparent that forestry dissociated from people was producing major failures, thus giving birth to the first social and community forestry programmes. In this context, the role of minor forest products (also called Non-Timber Forest Products, NTFP) attracted renewed attention. The conservation community had started to recognise the need to address social issues if a conservation agenda was to be successfully implemented. This led to proposals to promote what was considered to be a less damaging use of the forest, based on NTFP. At the same time some forest dwellers and organisations became aware of the potential synergy that this could offer to their own agendas.

Formerly discrete and unconnected paths started to merge in the late 1980s, with initiatives coming from one sectoral perspective expanding their constituency and potential impacts by assimilating elements of other interest groups. Hence, human rights advocates and development assistance NGOs became more environmentally conscious. Meanwhile, conservationists attempted to bridge gaps with local communities' interests after realising that, in the political debate, to be pro-saving plants and animals but unmindful of the plight of poor rural communities was an untenable position. The somewhat flexible sustainable development concept emerging as an internationally accepted





objective gave credibility to the growing consensus that conservation, development, and socio-political rights were all facets of the same global goal.

There has been an ongoing debate on different ways to attain a balance between conservation, socio-economic development, and political rights. A key issue is to what extent economic improvements can lead to gaining further control of

natural resources management by local populations and help in achieving the ultimate goal of securing long-term economic and political rights. A market approach maintains that improving prices to producers, adding value locally, and organising people to achieve these aims, while increasing people's interest in conserving forests, can also lead to the long-term economic and political rights goal. *

The Regional Consultations

In the Scheduled Areas, a majority of the people living close to forests depends on forest produce, both timber and non-timber, for their subsistence and for cash income to augment their meagre earnings. It is estimated that out of the 260 million people who live below the poverty line, more than 100 million are partially or wholly dependent on forest resources for their livelihood. Of them, 75 million are tribals. The forest forms the hub of the tribals' life. They depend on the forest for the food they eat (leaves, fruits, nuts, fibres and tubers), the beverages they drink, the medicines they take to cure ailments, the houses they live in, the clothes and ornaments they wear and for fodder for their animals. While the forest fulfills all the important needs of the tribals, the most important need it fulfils is that of food — it offers them food security around the entire year. Though the contribution of forests to the national economy is minimal, its share in the local economy is ranked next only to agriculture in large parts of our countryside, especially the forested belts of central India.

The central Indian states like Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand have a rich forest patch contiguous from eastern Maharashtra to western Orissa. This patch is home to a majority of tribals of the country and of their ethnic types. Nearly 60 per cent of the villages on the fringes of the country's forests are located here, with a population of about 70 million, of whom most are tribals. They depend on forest produce for their life and their livelihood. A good majority of people in this area live below the poverty line, as returns from agriculture and from other livelihood options are limited and insufficient. The area has great potential for ensuring livelihood

* Forest Science 45(1) 1999.

security through interventions in natural resource management that focus on forest and NWFP. However, the people have not been able to derive all the livelihood support they could optimally have, because governmental interventions have lacked comprehension of focus and coordination of effort. Particularly, policy and the management of NWFP have been responsible for not only the impoverishment of the people but also their alienation from forests. Major parts of these states are Schedule V Areas, where the right of the tribal communities to minor forest produce (MFP) has been recognised. However, there has hardly been any governmental effort to develop markets or products, or to transfer the skills, technology and back-up support to these tribal and forest-dwelling communities to manage and trade MFP efficiently and effectively. The major NTFP trade centres, all major forest-based industries, the processing and research units and traders are located here. There is, therefore, a strong rationale for forming an NTFP trade zone in the area.

Realising the need for a collective and regional intervention as the only option to augment returns to the primary collectors, the Regional Centre for Development Cooperation (RCDC), the Chhattisgarh MFP Federation, the Girijan Cooperative Corporation and the National Institute of Rural Development initiated a series of regional consultative processes at Bhuvaneshwar, Raipur and Hyderabad respectively during 2004–2005. Discussions were held with different stakeholders, especially the state governments and state-owned corporations dealing with NTFP. The most important issues discussed were the need for a collective process to facilitate changes in policies and practices, with specific regard to nationalised produce; the effective sharing of information and experiences; the need for an appropriate institutional framework to deal with policies, programmes and practices; and the need for focus on infrastructure development for value addition and marketing. One of the important outcomes of these consultations was the felt need for a policy approach unified across the central Indian states.

The Raipur workshop created scope for further debate on

- major state-level policy and management issues related to NTFP,
- issues related to ownership rights in the backdrop of PESA, and
- processing and value addition of NTFP, marketing and sustainable management.

The major areas of discussion in Hyderabad were the needs for

- a regional federation for market development and support to the forest dwellers;
- collaborative research and development for value addition of NWFP and for transfer of skills and technology to the primary collectors and producers;
- mutual help and cooperation for growth and development of forest-based industries and of employment in central India;
- minimum support price for NWFP; and
- the creation of a fund for procurement and trade.

The Need for Consulting Civil Society

Though the primary objective of the regional processes was to initiate a dialogue with all the major stakeholders to contribute inputs to policy-making at the state and regional levels, the involvement of civil society organisations (CSOs) working in the forestry sector, especially on NTFP, was not very encouraging after Bhubaneswar because of several reasons. The recommendations from the three consultations were forwarded to the Government of India for consideration. However, many of the NGOs working on NTFP in most of these central Indian states are not aware of this advanced stage of the process. Therefore, it is important that a consultation on these regional processes is organised so that NGOs

- are aware of the policy developments taking place at the regional and national level;
- contribute valuable policy feedback;
- share crucial information and experiences;
- discuss some of the pressing issues concerning management of NTFP in the context of PESA; and
- propose policy alternatives to the Central Government for consideration.

Therefore, with the above objectives, the Centre for People's Forestry and the RCDC Centre for Forestry and Governance, that have been part of all the three consultations, decided to organise a workshop exclusively with participation of NGOs working on forestry in the states of Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh.

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