



The district administration through District Collector and Gramsabha through Community Forest Resource Management Committee, signs an Memorandum of Understanding. This memorandum of understanding includes basic terms of cooperation and makes the activities binding for both the parties. To illustrate, the activities of providing training rests with the district administration and providing necessary information of minor forest produce and other traditional or local mechanisms in relation to the forests. The MoU is meant to set a stage for knowledge sharing and improved cooperation between administration and Gramsabhas.

Intervention:

Through Ekal, Gramsabhas voluntarily signing a memorandum of understanding with district administration are provided with 15 days module. The training is divided in two parts, a residential training of seven days and field training of eight days. The training program is conducted through the Gondwana University which is the knowledge partner of the district administration.

In order to devise the structure and content for the training a study group was established with local experts across the district working in various domains of forest rights. The study group worked for about three months and conducted 11 meetings. The seven days residential training includes, awareness about laws and acts related to tribal areas, forest management, biodiversity, record keeping and audits.

The field training has emphasised on the aspect of implementation of the forest rights acts, biodiversity act and MGNREGA at Gramsabha level. During the field training, trained representatives constitute committees that were not constituted earlier, make all people of the village aware about the rights. They exercise shivar feri or walk through their forest to assess its status and diversity and in last two days of field training, they go through the records of Gramsabha and see the scope of improvement, add records which earlier were not maintained.

The existing MFP list has not included the most abundant item of forest that has the potential to drastically elevate the income with conservation and sustainability as a core: 'Carbon Credits'. If carbon credit is announced as MFP, it will provide income to the gramsabhas, directly in their accounts.

We tried to generate an understanding about how much carbon can be sequestered; in a tropical forest the rate of carbon sequestration 3.2 to 10 tonnes per hectare per year. Considering the forest area in the district, the carbon sequestration rate can be estimated between 3.17 Million Tonnes and 9.9 Million Tonnes per year. This will give direct benefits to gramsabhas and elevate their livelihoods.

Collaboration at Core

The district has 1438 gramsabhas spread across the district, covering all 12 blocks. Some lie in dense forest cover with minimum accessibility and some are accessible easily. It will take a large

mechanism to engage all the gramsabhas. Hence district administration has engaged many government and non-government organisations.

Gondwana University, Gadchiroli is knowledge partner for this project and many Civil Service Organisations have both invited and collaborated to ensure the outreach and quality of the program.

Situated in Local Context:

Considering the demographic and geographic context, the district in collaboration with Gondwana University constituted a study group. This study group included local experts in the respective fields. Tribal individuals working for forest rights act, PESA etc. representatives of gramsabha, academic experts from required fields, non-for profit organisation working in the district. The group also onboarded external experts to support technically. This included experts like Mohan Hirabai Hiralal, Dr. Devaji Tofa, Dr. Satish Gogulwar.

Within the district also, huge extent of diversity can be seen. So while designing study group all areas/blocks are also ensured proper representation. The exercise of empowering the most decentralised unit is performed in very inclusive and democratic manner.

Benefits of the Project



Livelihood Enhancement



Forest Conservation



Single Window System of Services



Structured Market for MFP



Empowerment of most decentralised unit of Governance

Seven-day Resident Training Gram Sabha: 248

Trainee: 972

Forest Management Trained Gram Sabha: 50

Trainee: 175



Gondwana University, Gadchiroli



Ekal:

Gramsabha Empowerment Program



Project Implemented through
District Administration, Gadchiroli
 and
Gondwana University, Gadchiroli

Strengthening Gramsabhas with Community Forest Rights through Capacity Building and Training in activities related to minor forest produce through People's participation

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BACKGROUND

The district of Gadchiroli was sculpted out of Chandrapur district in 1982. It is one of the largest districts by land area in Maharashtra spanning about 14412 Sq. Km. It is positioned in the easternmost part of Maharashtra bordering with Telangana and Chhattisgarh. In the demographic context, the total population of the district is 10,72,942 as per the census 2011. Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Scheduled Caste (SC) population in the district are 4,15,306 (38.70%) and 1,20,754 (11.25%) respectively (Census 2011). Out of this total population as high as 89% of the population lives in rural areas (Social and Economic Review, Gadchiroli District, 2020) as compared to 55% in the state of Maharashtra (Census 2011). Many villages comprise of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs).

As per the Social and Economic Review, Gadchiroli (2020) total working and non-working population of the district is 3,92,886 and 4,88,705 respectively. 45.5% for total working population are farmers, 31.1% are agriculture labourers, 1.9% are production and repair services and remaining are related to other businesses. But in the bid to improve the livelihood conditions of the local through skilling, entrepreneurship and other activities the largest resource at their disposal is often neglected: 'The Forest'. The district has largest forest covers in the state spanning about 9902.8 sq. km. It calculated to be 68.9% of its total geographical area. The forest is rich with Minor Forest Produce (MFP) items. There are about 84 MFP items and out of which 47 can be found in Gadchiroli. The MFP diversity in the district includes Tendu, Mahua, Bamboo, Fruits, Herbs, etc. Out of this total geographical area 1/3rd of land is under Community Forest Right (CFR). At present the district has 1438 Gramsabhas managing their resources due to CFR and fetching their livelihood.

Need of the Project:

In Gadchiroli district, a large population is dependent directly upon natural resources and biodiversity for their sustenance and livelihood. In the areas of rich biodiversity, local communities have acquired traditional ecological knowledge through their interactions with their surroundings over the period of several generations. This interaction has shaped their culture, lifestyle and livelihood making them primary right holders and stakeholders in the biodiversity conservation and its usages. This project has a bifold objectives, one is to enable biodiversity conservation and to assist improvement in local livelihood through empowering Gram Sabha by building their capacities of community and institutions mentioned in The Scheduled Tribe and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA, 2006) in the district and second is providing these

Gramsabhas with direct support by developing institution and infrastructure.

It has already been stated in the district's background that out of its total geographical area 68.9% amounts to forest cover. It numerates into 9902.8 Sq. Km. out of 14,412 Sq. Km, the total geographical area of the district. The CFR land distribution amounts to 5110.07 Sq. Km in the district. This abundance of the forest has led into plethora of minor forest produce items. But there is not enough mechanism to capacitate the sector of minor forest produce (MFP). The capacitation includes, not only facilitating the commercialisation of MFP commodities but also aspects of capacity building and training (CBT) of Gram Sabha (GS) in developing Forest Conservation and Management Plans and its implementation. The intervention expects to develop professional and technical skill set among Gram Sabhas. This project is planned to intervene in the same subject and suffice its objective.

In relation to the second objective, the emphasis of the district administration is to provide Gramsabhas with a proper market since the existing market for MFP is unstructured. Except a handful of MFP items other do not even receive MSP and some of them do not even have minimum support price. The district aims to set up an administrative block will act as a single window system to all services and support needed by the gramsabha. Altogether, district administration is developing a mechanism to aid the training provided to them through support, issuing transit permit and providing market linkages through a dedicated centre.

It is not only limited to training or market linkages, Gramsabhas, Forest Department has very scarcely documented records of available MFP and financial transactions. Existing market for minor forest produce is dominated by Middleman/Thekedars. There are instances of violations of terms and conditions of agreement by the thekedars. The non-timely payment to Gramsabhas is evident. This means those who depend on forest, whose traditions are based on forest, those who follow the natural cycle of forest and those who are proactively engaged in the protection and conservation of forest: the tribal people and OTFD are at loss financially. Hence, the carefully curated intervention of Ekal is needed.

PROJECT CONCEPT

The concept of the project is based on the quartet of Involvement, Intervention, Institution and Infrastructure. The Gramsabhas with community forest rights are involved in the process of the project through a memorandum of understanding signed between Gramsabha and District Administration. Instruction is carried out through the Ekal:



1156 Gramsabhas



5110.07 sq. Km area under CFR



9902.8 sq. Km Forest area



47 MFP items

Gramsabha training module. Institution in the form of single window system to support Gramsabha are developed across the district in the form of Ekal Center and Infrastructure like warehouses are provided to Gramsabhas in order to exercises value addition to their minor forest produce.

Two major aspects of the project are to capacity building of Gramsabhas through training in matters related to community forest rights and to develop Ekal Centres across the districts which will act as a single window system to provide services and permits to Gramsabhas. These centres will be the extension of district administration and also will act as administrative set up.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES:

1. To facilitate the process of making policies at Gram Sabha level more responsive to linkages between sustainable tribal livelihood and biodiversity conservation.
2. To enhance the capacity of Gram Sabha, Community and other institutions in development, management and implementation of Forest Conservation and Management Plan.
3. To develop an institutional and administrative set up to support Gram Sabhas in matters related to minor forest produce i.e. marketing, issuing transit permits and processings.

Involvement:

The very first step that district administration takes is to "Invoke the Janbhagidari". The district administration, by making Gramsabhas aware through continuous village level meetings, district and block level meetings and frequent visits, about the project, invites them to join the administration. This collaboration between Administration and Gramsabhas is completely voluntary.