



Polycentric governance of commons through multi-stakeholder platforms: insights from two case studies in India

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Abstract

Commons governance is complex and polycentric, involving a range of actors, working at different scales with different concepts of development, and different types of power. Multistakeholder platforms (MSPs) have generated considerable attention as a way to address these tensions among multiple and overlapping decision-making centers operating on different administrative levels. Yet establishing MSPs that effectively involve community, various government actors, and private sector actors is far from straightforward. This paper analyzes the Indian NGO Foundation for Ecological Security's (FES) experience of strengthening polycentric governance through case studies of two MSPs in Gujarat and Odisha working at the block (sub-district) level—encompassing multiple communities situated around a commons landscape. We gather information from a variety of sources including a survey of MSP participants, focus groups and semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, media articles, as well as institutional knowledge such as FES project reports. By analyzing local environments, institutional arrangements, stakeholder interactions, governance processes and the evolution of MSPs in the two cases, it distills lessons on the tangible and intangible benefits of multi-stakeholder engagement, scale, and enabling conditions useful for scaling up MSPs. We argue that the groundwork carried out to build community-level collective action supports effective polycentric governance of resources on the landscape-level, especially through block-level MSPs that facilitate inter-community collaboration and learning, strengthening local voices and building trust between stakeholders over time. The cases also highlight that MSPs can evolve in different ways as the various actors interact and exercise influence. External actors like NGOs thus play an important role as facilitators and through mobilizing communities to help them claim their agency. We find that nesting village-level institutions in federations and federations in larger MSPs is important for robust and sustainable collective action and bridging sectoral and institutional boundaries.

Keywords Commons · Multi-stakeholder platforms · Polycentricity · India · Governance scale

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1 Introduction

Finding a viable and sustainable system of governance has become a central question in discussions around commons (shared natural resources). Commons governance is complex, involving a range of actors, working at different scales with different mental models of ‘development’ and different types of power. Efforts to improve the management and governance of commons requires a multi-pronged approach with different stakeholders, at different levels, and enhancing human capacities at these levels. This is particularly the case in countries like India where the landscape is characterized by ‘mosaics’ of commons, encompassing multiple resources (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2021).

The appropriate scale of resource governance is an important question, as common-pool resources are diverse in scale, with linkages across units (Thiel et al. 2019). On the one hand, because of the interconnected biophysical aspects of many resources, conservation outcomes often call for coordinated land use and resource management at a landscape-level (Ros-Tonen et al., 2018; Kusters et al., 2018). Yet, operating on smaller human-settlement boundaries may be easier and more effective for collective action (Sarker, 2014), because it builds on existing social institutions and networks. For example, in Indian watershed management, Kerr (2007) finds village or habitation projects more successful, partially because NGOs implementing them focused on social organization in single villages, which directly benefitted their commons and livelihoods. Moving from the community level to higher scales increases the risk that decisions are taken from ivory towers rather than being based on local realities (Warner et al., 2008). Establishing effective governance at a landscape-level is further complicated because natural resource boundaries like watersheds, forests and landscapes are often not the units of social or administrative organization (Warner et al., 2008; Kerr, 2007; Warner, 2006).

Because of the multiple overlapping and interlinked physical units and institutional jurisdictions, neither top-down or bottom-up approaches are sufficient, as power, responsibilities, skills, and resources needed to make change happen are spread between different actors, agencies, and networks of organisations. Polycentric governance offers a way to navigate through these tensions among multiple and overlapping decision-making centers operating on different administrative levels and scales (Ros-Tonen et al., 2018; Thiel et al. 2019). A polycentric system of governance is characterized by multiple centers of decision making that operate with some autonomy, but within an overarching framework that provides for formal and informal coordination, cooperation, conflict resolution, mutual adjustment, and shared learning (Ostrom, 1999; Nagendra & Ostrom, 2012). The concept includes both hierarchical institutions nested within each other, as well as cross-sectoral institutions and decision centers.

Despite these potential advantages of polycentric governance, coordination among actors often does not emerge spontaneously. Multi-stakeholder platforms (MSPs) offer a tool to enable and facilitate effective polycentric governance, creating linkages between diverse stakeholders and the different governance levels (Acosta et al. 2019). A comparative study of 11 sustainable land and resource use MSPs in Brazil, Ethiopia, Indonesia, and Peru found significant optimism about the potential of MSPs being more equitable decision-making spaces (Sarmiento Barletti & Larson, 2021). Yet the findings also show that just bringing diverse stakeholders to a common platform is not enough as deliberate measures need to be taken to ensure power is balanced within MSPs, suggesting a pressing need for MSP

improvement with respect to adequate representation, voice and influence of marginalized groups, and pointing to a knowledge gap regarding the factors affecting engagement in, and outcomes of, MSPs. Further, little is known about what scale of governance is most effective for setting up MSPs, particularly in a setting of polycentric governance.

This paper aims to consolidate and disseminate emerging lessons from ongoing multi-stakeholder processes and engagements reflecting on the experience of the Foundation for Ecological Security (FES), using two case studies of MSPs facilitated by FES in Gujarat and Odisha. A central research question is what factors and conditions contribute to or hinder meaningful convening of and engagement in MSPs for commons in a polycentric setting? A secondary question is what are the benefits of convening commons-centric multi-stakeholder processes at the meso scale? Democratic governance below the block level (sub-district) is often weak as local governments are structurally not empowered with funds, functions, and functionaries (FES 2018). MSPs can be set up as citizen-led platforms that can facilitate deliberative democracy and work alongside governments to improve governance outcomes (Ratner et al., 2021). The paper thus also contributes to the discussion of governance scale in the literature by analyzing FES's experience of convening MSPs at the block level—a meso-level encompassing multiple communities situated around a commons landscape. This experience involves building on village or community level institutions and their federations (collectives of community-level local institutions) and improving cooperation and coordination with local government, block and district level government agencies, other NGOs, and private sector.

The findings are consistent with Sarker's (2014; p.50) findings from a Japanese case study that "a large group can generate greater collective action performance when it is divided into many federally connected subgroups." However, the implementation science of engaging such diverse actors is only recently emerging. It requires a robust political economy understanding and long-term engagement to build trust among diverse (and sometimes competing) actors. This paper presents two case studies to distill some critical lessons in developing a more replicable institutional design for scaling-up such initiatives, and the possible outcomes and its contribution to larger landscape-level governance initiatives. While FES engages in various other MSPs across India, these two cases were chosen because they were at a relatively more advanced stage compared to other locations, focus on different environmental and societal aspects at the landscape-level, and display different outcomes.

We briefly examine the literature on multi-stakeholder engagement for polycentric governance, particularly contextual and design factors affecting MSP dynamics and outcomes, before giving an overview of the governance landscape in India. We then present two MSP case studies that describe FES's experience with multi-stakeholder engagement, followed by discussion of outcomes and lessons learned from these two cases, reflecting on the dynamics of MSPs, their roles in building community capacity and the various roles played by external actors. Based on that we offer some conclusions and recommendations for multi-stakeholder engagement for governance in India and beyond.

2 Multi-stakeholder platforms

2.1 MSPs as ‘action arenas’

Multi-stakeholder platforms (MSPs) and dialogues are purposefully created to convene relevant stakeholders to take part in collaborations, negotiations, knowledge exchange, and oftentimes decision-making regarding commons governance (IUCN, 2012). This is especially important in contexts of high diversity of both the user groups and the common pool resources in a given landscape, as is the case in India. MSPs are developed in contexts of decentralization and co-management, as a more inclusive and participatory approach for resource management. These forms of governance recognize the interest and contribution of different actors including local communities, civil society, government agencies and private sector (d’Armengol et al., 2018; Ros-Tonen et al., 2018).

The framework we use for presenting and examining these comparative case studies is based on the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework (Ostrom, 2011), as adapted and applied to MSPs by Ratner et al. (2022) (Fig. 1). MSPs can be seen as ‘action arenas’ created for the purpose of inclusive dialogue for governance of resources. The action arena is dynamic where power relations and structure are important. Many contextual and design factors affect stakeholder interaction in these arenas depending on the actors and their characteristics, the action resources they can utilize for participation and negotiation, and the rules of engagement in MSPs. This, together with the context where the MSP operates (characteristics of the resource in question, their users, and existing governance arrangements, etc.) affect MSP outcomes, including those related to resource conservation, adaptive learning, capacity building, and equity (Sarmiento Barletti et al., 2020). While a

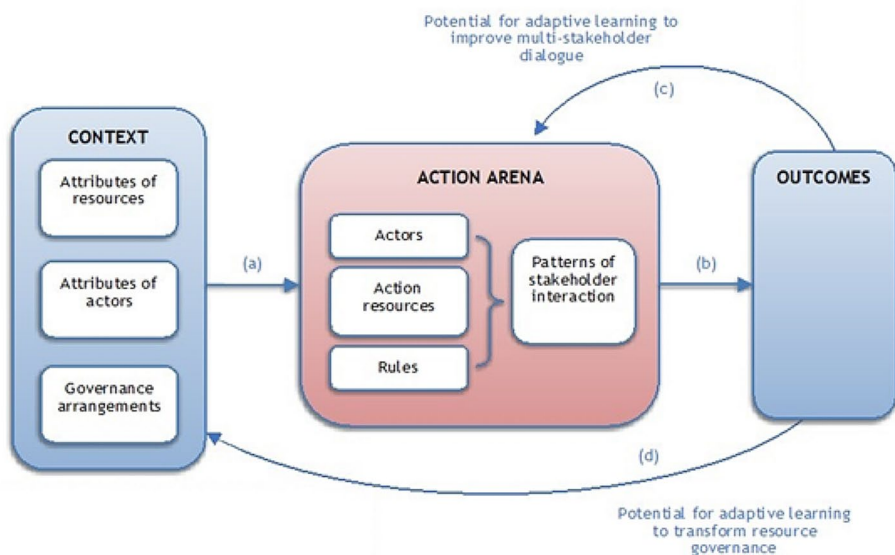


Fig. 1 Dynamics of multi-stakeholder dialogue and adaptive learning in natural resource governance. Source: Ratner et al. (2022)

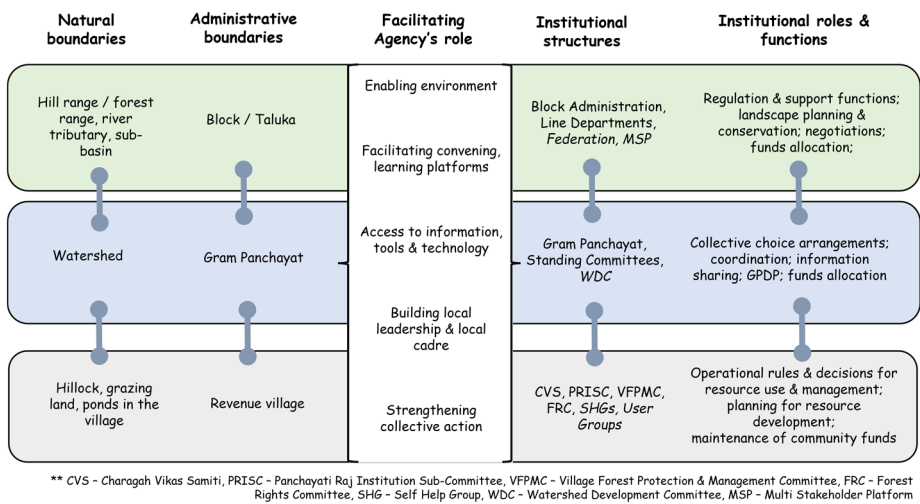


Fig. 2 FES conceptual framework for natural resource governance. Source: Authors (FES)

full exposition of these elements is beyond the scope of this paper, we draw on this framework in showing how different elements contribute to the outcomes.

2.2 Factors affecting meaningful participation and outcomes in MSPs

Participation in MSPs requires time and effort and often needs to be incentivized (Warner, 2006). For local communities, the importance and likelihood of participation in MSPs for resource management increases when they are more dependent on the commons for their livelihoods (d'Armengol et al., 2018; Hart et al., 2016). Stakeholders may not be willing to participate if they don't trust other actors or perceive benefits to participation. For example, it could be difficult to convince various government actors to attend MSPs with local communities if they consider them culprits in resource degradation and vice versa. Thus, MSP organizers may struggle to build trust between government actors and local communities and identify common grounds (Warner, 2006; Faysse, 2006).

Inclusion of all relevant actors is essential when designing MSPs and goes beyond making sure there are representatives from government and non-government sectors to ensuring inclusion and representation of sub-groups of resource users. For example, exclusion of small fishermen from lake co-management discussions in Africa caused conflict (Ratner et al., 2018). Simply giving local communities a seat at the table does not guarantee meaningful participation and social inclusion in the process, especially as weaker groups or those who lack the negotiation skills and resources may not speak up or be heard (Faysse, 2006; Sarmiento Barletti et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important to consider existing power relations when setting up and designing MSPs for outcomes that empower local communities and lead to social justice.

Action resources are characteristics or assets that give actors agency and help strengthen their claims in co-management and stakeholder engagement processes (di Gregorio et al., 2008). These include money, authority, and social standing, negotiation skills, social capital and social networks that help actors gain influence, form alliances, and reinforce identities

(Ros-Tonen et al., 2018). Information and different types of knowledge can also be important, where for example lack of technical knowledge or knowledge about one's own rights disables some groups from active involvement in discussion (Fayesse 2006; Kusters et al., 2018).

Procedures and rules set up in the platform itself can be designed to give a chance to those with less action resources and authority to meaningfully participate. This can include the rules set up for interactions in MSPs like voting rules and decision-making regimes (Faysse, 2006; di Gregorio 2008). This is particularly important in contexts with high diversity and power differentials among groups, where the more privileged can dominate. For example, a watershed MSP in India only voted on decisions with the attendance of at least 90% of its members and had a rule to rotate MSP leadership between different sub-groups for fair opportunity (Mudaliar & Koontz, 2018).

Raising the capacity of weaker groups for a more equitable process can be partially achieved through considering such rules and procedures within the MSP, but also through having capacity building as an objective (Mudaliar & Koontz, 2018). This can help increase action resources of weaker groups and give a fair chance for meaningful participation. Capacity building and knowledge exchange are seen as increasingly important components of many MSPs, as outcomes in themselves (IUCN 2012).

The involvement of NGOs and others as external facilitators and liaisons is often beneficial in MSPs. They are important for initiating and maintaining MSPs, as they are often able to bridge different sectors and levels together and mobilize local actors, support, and funds. This helps build trust and social capital, in an environment for collective learning (Ros-Tonen et al., 2018; Kerr, 2007). Further, because of power imbalance concerns in MSPs, third party 'watchdogs' are needed to defend the interests of weaker groups. Hoogesteger (2013) argues that they greatly aid cooperation on a higher level across different communities, giving the example of NGOs in Ecuador building trust and helping establish water user associations between various communities on the landscape-level, including forming rules and institutions to govern resources between them.

3 Polycentricity in practice

3.1 Context in India

Common lands in India¹ like forests, pastures and wastelands (common lands that are seen as less productive but used by communities collectively) have gone through cycles of centralization and decentralization. While in recent decades, a paradigmatic shift towards decentralization has led to the formal recognition of a role for local communities in common-pool resource management, many of these have not been implemented on the ground or face weak governance arrangements (RRI, 2015). Simultaneously, many land and other

¹ According to the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO, 1998), Commons refer to "all such resources which are accessible to the whole community and to which no individual has exclusive property rights." In the context of rural India these include village pastures and grazing grounds, village forests and woodlots, protected and unclassified government forests, waste lands, common threshing grounds, watershed drainage, ponds and tanks, rivers, rivulets, water reservoirs, canals, and irrigation channels.

common pool resources remain under state control with different bundles of rights for local communities.

The complex systems of resource management seen today are a result of multiple superimpositions of actors, institutions, jurisdictional boundaries, natural boundaries, policies and practices, that have occurred over time. Administrative levels in India are nested such that a group of habitations form a revenue village; a group of revenue villages form a Panchayat; panchayats are further nested within blocks; a group of blocks form a district; and finally, a group of districts are nested within the state.

Natural resource user groups dependent on the resources for diverse purposes (religious, economic, cultural, etc.) and exist at the habitation, revenue village or panchayat level. As natural boundaries transgress administrative boundaries, the entire resource system has multiple user and management groups (Kerr, 2007). In some cases, these groups may be federated to higher levels, which may or may not be legally recognized.

National and state governments play an enabling role in policy formulation and making investments through schemes, policies, and programs such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Forest Rights Act (FRA), Biodiversity Act, and Joint Forest Management. Below the state level is a three-tier system of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI): Gram Panchayats (GP) at the village level, Panchayat Samitis at the block level, and Zilla Parishads at the district level. At state, district and block levels, there are line departments which work on specific thematic areas such as health and family welfare, irrigation, animal husbandry, education, agriculture, etc. At the district level, the Revenue Department Collector plays a coordinating role across line agencies. Revenue and Forest departments are especially important in resource governance. Similarly, GP may have committees such as forest protection committees, forest rights committees, biodiversity committees, etc. (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2021).

Besides community and government institutions, various civil society organisations, influential local leaders and politicians, private players also influence resource governance in a particular landscape. For example, the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) facilitates agriculture loans with subsidy schemes for local communities and can be leveraged on many levels by the village institutions, federations, GP, etc. NGOs such as FES and others work with all these actors on the different levels.

This exemplifies a loosely coordinated polycentric institutional arrangement, since authority is dispersed with different institutions, as opposed to a single hierarchy (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2021). While GP and revenue villages are formal governance structures established by law, village institutions are informal governance structures with social networks and connections. Other organizations are independent, but all have a stake in resource governance and have a mandate or interest in managing resources. FES has been working to develop MSPs to strengthen coordination across these institutions.

3.2 FES approach to MSPs

Despite the plethora of actors and authorities involved, there is a governance vacuum at the meso scale, particularly with actors working in silos. Even though the subjects of planning, development and welfare schemes technically are earmarked for the PRI, the administrative set-up has not been re-aligned appropriately to equip the latter for becoming effective self-governing institutions, often resulting in conflicts and lack of coordination or cooperation

between the institutions, and information asymmetry between different entities (GoI, 2009). PRI structures are often not empowered with adequate powers and funds, with scant attention towards the capacity building of functionaries, leaving the sphere of planning open for bureaucratic capture (GoI, 2007; Harilal, 2013). This results in PRI inability to ensure meaningful community participation in planning processes. Many line departments work independently of the PRIs and prepare their own plans without converging with PRI plans. More importantly, planning exercise at the block level and below lacks space to engage non-state stakeholders or allow convergence of the different stakeholders' action plans (Rajesh et al., 2018).

To address this gap, FES has been facilitating landscape-level multi-stakeholder processes for effective resource governance in the diverse geographies that it works in. These processes are driven by rural communities who are predominantly dependent on natural resources. The process has been evolving, building on academic work and lessons from the field, and centered on identifying context-specific pressing issues (or motivating factors) and connecting different actors to collectively develop a local vision and a coordinated plan of action. It builds on a 'systems view' which appreciates the relationships and reciprocities between nature and people. The following figure illustrates the governance framework envisioned, illuminating the natural and administrative boundaries from village to landscape-level and the range of institutional structures, roles and functions at different scales:

At the smallest scale, the institutions' areas of decision-making and functions focus on operational issues such as time and duration of harvesting produce from a forest in their village. As the size of the resources and the users increases, the institutions' power and functions become more regulatory and supportive in nature. They have an important role in promoting cooperation and coordination between resource users across different villages in the landscape, allocating funds for resource development and locating the site-specific plans within the larger landscape plan for conservation.

4 Case studies

The following section presents two case studies of MSPs facilitated by FES in the west Indian state of Gujarat and east Indian state of Odisha.

The Samvaad Karyakram in Gujarat and the Krushak Mela in Odisha have evolved in differing contexts to address different prevalent issues, but both are products of long-term engagement between FES, local communities, and various stakeholders at multiple scales. A comparison of key contextual factors of the cases is given in Table 1.

Before presenting the findings for these studies we present the rationale for the case study selection and key elements of our case study methodology.

4.1 Case study selection and methodology

Case study methodologies provide multi-perspective analyses of different actors in a system through triangulation of different sources of information (Tellis, 1997). Our case studies were developed by gathering primary qualitative information, where sample size was based

Table 1 Contextual factors of MSP case studies

Nature of Factor	Samvaad Karyakram, Mahisagar – Gujarat (“Dialogue program”)	Krushak Mela, Angul – Odisha (“Farmer Fair”)
Scale of organization	Encompassing village federations around 3 watersheds and a hill range.	Encompassing village federations around a river catchment, forest area, and hill range on the borders of a wildlife sanctuary.
Population composition	Less heterogeneous ethnicity: Bhil scheduled tribes; scheduled caste.	More heterogeneous ethnicity: tribal and non-tribal; different castes.
FES intervention areas and duration	FES working with communities since 1998: • Restoring commons, groundwater management and soil moisture conservation, and convening the MSP.	FES working with communities since 1997: • Restoring commons, gaining community forest management and grazing rights, and convening the MSP.
Prevalent issues	History of displacement due to dam construction. High out migration and poverty.	Industrial zone rich in minerals. Forest dependent communities (industry - ecology tension).

on saturation², and secondary data. The case study method captures nuances through individual narratives provided by actors involved in the platforms.

In Gujarat, 11 semi-structured interviews were carried out with different stakeholder groups (community members, federation/ village institution members, women groups, government representatives, private sector, NGOs/civil society organizations, thematic experts, and FES team members) attending the bi-annual MSP convening in 2019. We applied a purposive sample, selecting participants by making sure to interview at least one person from each stakeholder group, from among those individuals participating in the MSP. In Odisha, a semi-structured focus group discussion was undertaken with federation members and another with FES field team members in 2019, in addition to 4 semi-structured interviews conducted later in 2022 with FES team members to capture the institutional memory of those working closely with federations. In Gujarat, we supplement qualitative data with analysis of data from a community perception survey of 486 MSP participants conducted by FES earlier on in 2016. For the Odisha case, information was also distilled from local newspaper articles. Krushak Mela is no longer facilitated by FES, hence the information is a historical reconstruction of the past convenings, and the same level of details is not available as for the Gujarat case³.

² The study was conducted using a qualitative research design where the sample size is based on ‘saturation’ (i.e. interviewing enough participants until answers and themes converge), rather than a typical representative sample size required for quantitative sampling.

³ Despite that, the Krushak Mela in Odisha case is included in our research because it illustrates broader sectoral issues, the diversity of stakeholders and tensions involved.

Further, secondary information about the two cases was gathered from FES field team meeting minutes, team member experiences and project reports. Drawing on institutional knowledge and the lived experience of the NGO and its field staff provides invaluable research insights (Lokot & Wake, 2021), especially through their contextual and intimate knowledge of MSP processes, and deep relationships with stakeholders. These sources also complement participants' testimonies to give a more complete picture of the process from both the participants and facilitators' sides. Qualitative analysis of quotes from semi-structured interviews was supplemented by iterative and reflective discussions between academic partners familiar with the MSP literature and frameworks, and FES colleagues familiar with the cases.

4.2 Samvaad Karyakram - Mahisagar, Gujarat

4.2.1 Context

Samvaad Karyakram (literally “dialogue program”) was initiated by FES in 2013 to bring together community members within a watershed to discuss and collectively act on landscape-level issues. It aimed to provide a link between the community, government, and FES by generating conversation and building trust among them. At the outset, FES assumed a leadership role in the MSP which over time devolved into a facilitator role, with the community driving the agenda and taking more ownership of the platform. While the core issues around which the MSP evolved remain, the focus broadened to include a wide variety of issues and a diverse range of crucial stakeholders. The MSP convenes twice a year, alternating between Kadana and Santrampur blocks (Mahisagar District). In Santrampur the MSP convenes at the Mangadh hill, an important historical and cultural landmark for the community; in Kadana it convenes in different locations every year (Fig. 3).

Santrampur and Kadana blocks are in the foothills of the Aravalli mountain range. Around 13% of the region's geographic area is covered by forests while 16% is categorized as other common land, comprised of wastelands and pastureland (FES 2017-18). The region is predominantly rural and mostly occupied by tribal population facing high poverty rates (37%) (ibid.). People are largely dependent on smallholder rainfed agriculture and livestock rearing. Forests, although partly degraded, continue to contribute significantly to livelihoods. The poorest rely heavily on forest lands for fodder and fuel wood. Out-migration rates are high.

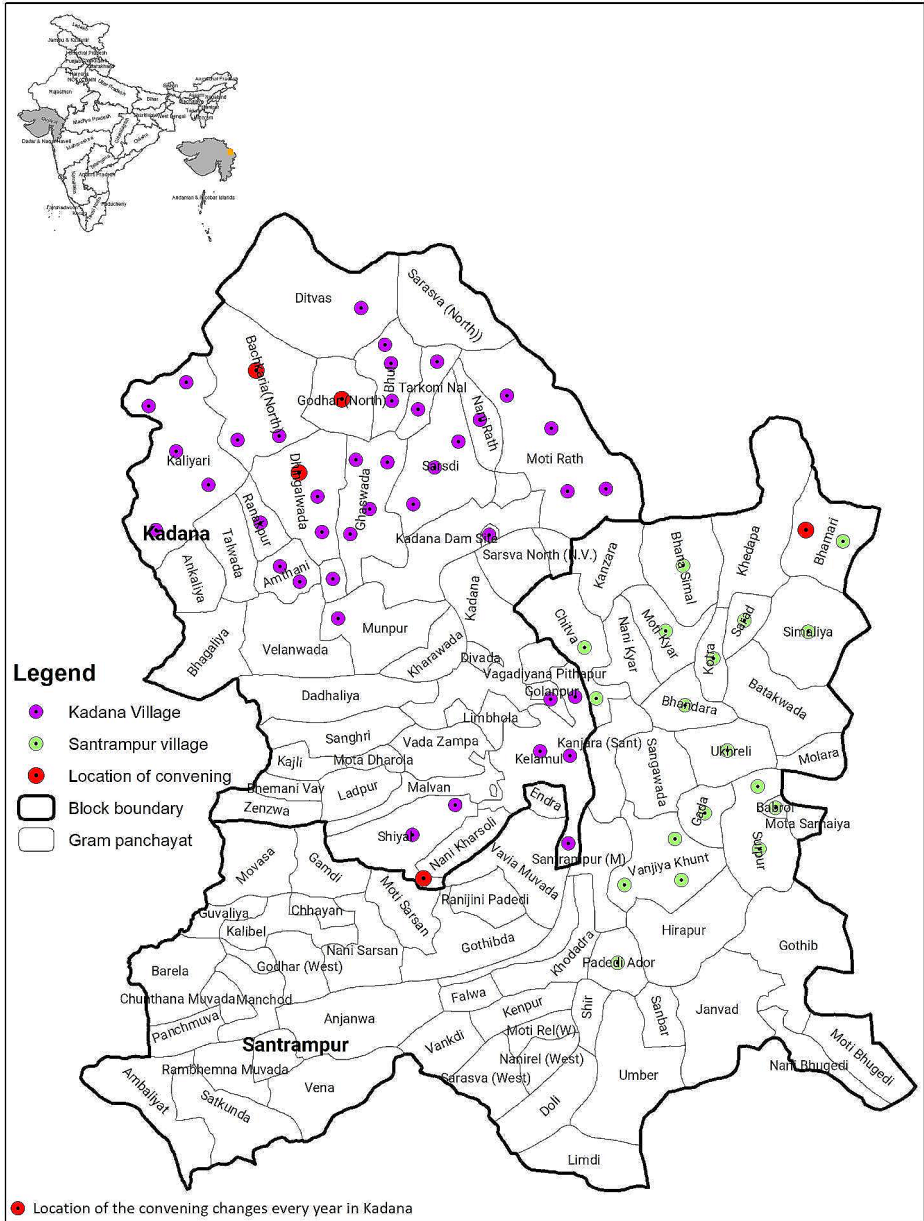
4.2.2 Action arena

The platform constitutes a diverse set of stakeholders including members of the village community, local leaders, village federations, panchayat members, civil society organizations, district, and block level officials (including the Collector, representatives from the Agriculture, Forest, and Animal Husbandry Departments.), financial institutions (mainly agricultural banks), and occasionally the media. Private sector actors have some presence but are more heavily involved when the focus of the agenda is related to agriculture service delivery, including seeds and fertilizer provision.

Samvaad serves different purposes for different stakeholders. Community members view the platform as an effective medium to gather and share information. Participants men-

Samvaad Karyakram, Mahisagar

GUJARAT, INDIA



Note to Scale

FES internal use only

Not for Sale

Fig. 3 Map of Gujarat study area. Source: Authors (FES)

tioned it is a good source of information on scientific agricultural techniques including crop diversification, spacing, mulching and drip irrigation. Community members also view it as a social gathering to meet and celebrate with people. Further, through the platform, community members can interact with previously inaccessible government officials, increasing the latter's accountability. A Santrampur federation member expressed that through the MSP, *"we are able to interact with government officials easily which was previously difficult, because usually for a person from the village, government officials are hard to approach... In fact, now when authorities come and speak here, we are able to challenge them also to a certain extent. They've become more accountable now."*⁴ Government department representatives, skill development agencies, and experts from agricultural universities view the Samvaad as a means to reach many (remote) villages through a single platform.

Despite efforts to be inclusive, women's participation in federation meetings and agenda setting is limited. Some reasons women cited for low participation were domestic chores and distance of the convening from their village. Restrictive gender norms further limit women's mobility and participation, even when they are present. However, FES makes special efforts like providing transport and ensuring participation of women's collectives (e.g., self-help groups), to boost inclusivity. Women members of such groups expressed feeling more empowered to speak out in such a gathering and could serve as effective role models. Other local innovations include a rule that women eat first, considering that they may need to leave earlier if they live far away. Women are better able to participate in local events more than in block-level fairs, because of shorter distance and travel time.

Samvaad Karyakram convenes in the form of a fair with information/live demonstration stalls and a designated area for speeches, dialogues, and discussions. Stakeholders engage with each other during discussions and speeches, and informally at information stalls. Community members lead discussions on issues such as the importance of community forest rights, interconnectedness of production systems, etc. Study reports compiled from data collected by community resource persons (CRP's) are presented to relevant authorities during these discussions. Because information is a critical resource, the collecting and sharing of information helps strengthen community agency and action resources⁵.

Federations take up the major responsibilities of setting the agenda, deciding the stakeholders to be invited, sending out invitations, getting permissions, coordinating with village and cluster level government officials, preparing the budget, making and financing logistical arrangements, submitting study reports to relevant government officials during the program, organizing the entertainment program and resolving any issues that arise during the program. The federations' increasing ownership of the MSP can be partly attributed to deliberately designed principles that guide its functioning⁶. For instance, a 'no chair system' is followed during the convening, consequently everyone sits on the floor, symbolizing equality of caste and community-government hierarchy. As the convening is attended by people with different (often conflicting) political affiliations, a deliberate effort is made to keep the platform free of political rhetoric.

FES plays a supporting role by facilitating the process of sub-committee formation during federation meetings, developing survey formats to conduct studies to back the federa-

⁴ Interview with community members (MSP attendees), March 2019.

⁵ Refer back to the "action resources" in the MSP action arena in Fig. 1, which affects MSP interactions and outcomes.

⁶ Refer back to the "rules" of the MSP action arena in Fig. 1, affecting MSP interactions and outcomes.

tion's agenda with evidence, facilitating the survey through CRPs, undertaking analysis and supporting preliminary discussions with federations and relevant government officials based on findings. Further, FES helps with other logistics such as preparation of pamphlets, finalization of the design and content of banners, stalls, and program schedule, supporting the preparation of invitation letters, inviting research institutions, experts, NGOs, and district officials, on behalf of the federations, approving the budget, ensuring that all village institutions have been invited, identifying success stories and photographic, videographic and process documentation, and preparing press releases.

4.2.3 Tangible outcomes

Several tangible economic and social outcomes emerged from the MSP, reflecting its value for various stakeholders. Many community members who regularly participate in the platform reported that agricultural productivity improved as a result of suggested alterations to agricultural practices, which enabled some to start selling on the market⁷. Also, local canal maintenance was a protracted issue between neighboring villages. As maintenance required pooling of financial and labor resources, commitment was not always forthcoming, often leading to conflicts between villages, and the canal remained in disarray for over a decade at the cost of local farmers. Repeated federation meetings as part of the MSP presented an opportunity for conflict resolution and led to the canal's repair.

Further, through sustained efforts of the federations and FES, the MSP emerged as an important advisory body on various occasions. While the federations and MSP outcomes are non-binding for the government, through continuous engagement the MSP has often been able to steer public fund investments towards issues highlighted by the community. For instance, lack of water for irrigation is a cross-community issue raised repeatedly in the Samvaad Karyakram. A short needs assessment survey of irrigation structures conducted by CRPs was presented to the district collector, who visited some of the sites where irrigation structures needed to be built or repaired and channeled MGNREGA funds for these structures.

The district administration often requests the platform to advise on issues they have taken note of. When the district administration became aware of the lack of drinking water in many habitations, they approached FES to raise the issue through Samvaad. Information on drinking water infrastructure and quality was collected and presented by the federation members during Samvaad, which resulted in improvement of drinking water facilities in many habitations⁸.

Continuous engagement on forest-dependent livelihoods and the importance of community forest rights during the convening led the district administration passing an order which allowed direct payments to the accounts of locals selling non-timber forest products (NTFP) from commons in Kadana. Sale of tendu leaf is a major livelihood for the tribal communities but middlemen appointed by a state corporation bought them at minimal prices. After the federation raised the issue with local politicians and media, demanding the payment be directly paid to collectors as per the Gujarat Panchayat Raj Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA) enacted in 2017, the government conceded to their demand. An

⁷ Based on semi-structured interviews with community members (MSP attendees).

⁸ Semi-structured interviews with federation members and FES team members.

MSP participant reported that this significantly increased community members' incomes, enhanced their rights to the forest, and made them more conscious of preserving it for their own livelihoods⁹.

All these engagements also led to FES formulating the district vision document for the district administration and FES' inclusion in the block planning committee.

4.3 Krushak Mela – Angul, Odisha

4.3.1 Context

Krushak Mela (or “Farmers Fair”) was initiated by FES in 2005 to promote interaction among farmers within a forest landscape at the shared boundary of Angul and Athmalik blocks (Angul District) (Fig. 4). The platform also aimed to conserve/revive traditional practices, such as farmer seed exchanges previously prevalent in the region. Considered the industrial capital of the state, Angul has experienced rapid development of public and private sector undertakings. By bringing together diverse stakeholders, Krushak Mela sought to influence the larger system by generating a conversation around the growing negative impacts of increased commercial exploitation of natural resources on local communities. For ten years, local federations and FES facilitated the platform until it was halted when the government initiated a parallel multi-stakeholder process at the block and district level. FES and community members now participate in the government-led MSPs.

Angul is a predominantly rural district with a heterogeneous population, including 32% scheduled caste/scheduled tribes. Poverty rates are high, and people are mostly dependent on rainfed, smallholder agriculture and grazing cattle for their livelihood. Further, 43% of the district is covered by forests (Forest Survey of India, 2017) which provide them with timber, firewood, and NTFPs (Government of Odisha, 2015). Around 30% of the total geographical area is classified as non-forest common land. The district has rich flora and fauna with the Satkosia Gorge Wildlife Sanctuary. Important minerals like coal, sand, and quartz are commercially exploited.

4.3.2 Action arena

The seeds of the Krushak Mela were planted by local federations who realized the potential power of collectives even before FES' intervention in the region. In 1987, community members of three panchayats collectively protested in the sub-collector's office, demanding the initiation of a bus service in their isolated villages, which the district administration granted. Subsequently, the collective grew and started demanding other services like better roads. Today, all the villages in the region are connected with paved all-weather roads. In 2005, FES started actively engaging with the federation on the issues of open grazing. Through regular village and federation meetings over three years, communities evolved rules for controlled grazing. Simultaneously, the Krushak Mela was also initiated in several parts of the block and took place on an annual basis for 10 years.

⁹ Based on semi-structured interviews with community members (MSP attendees) and federation members.

Krushak Mela, Anugul

ODISHA, INDIA

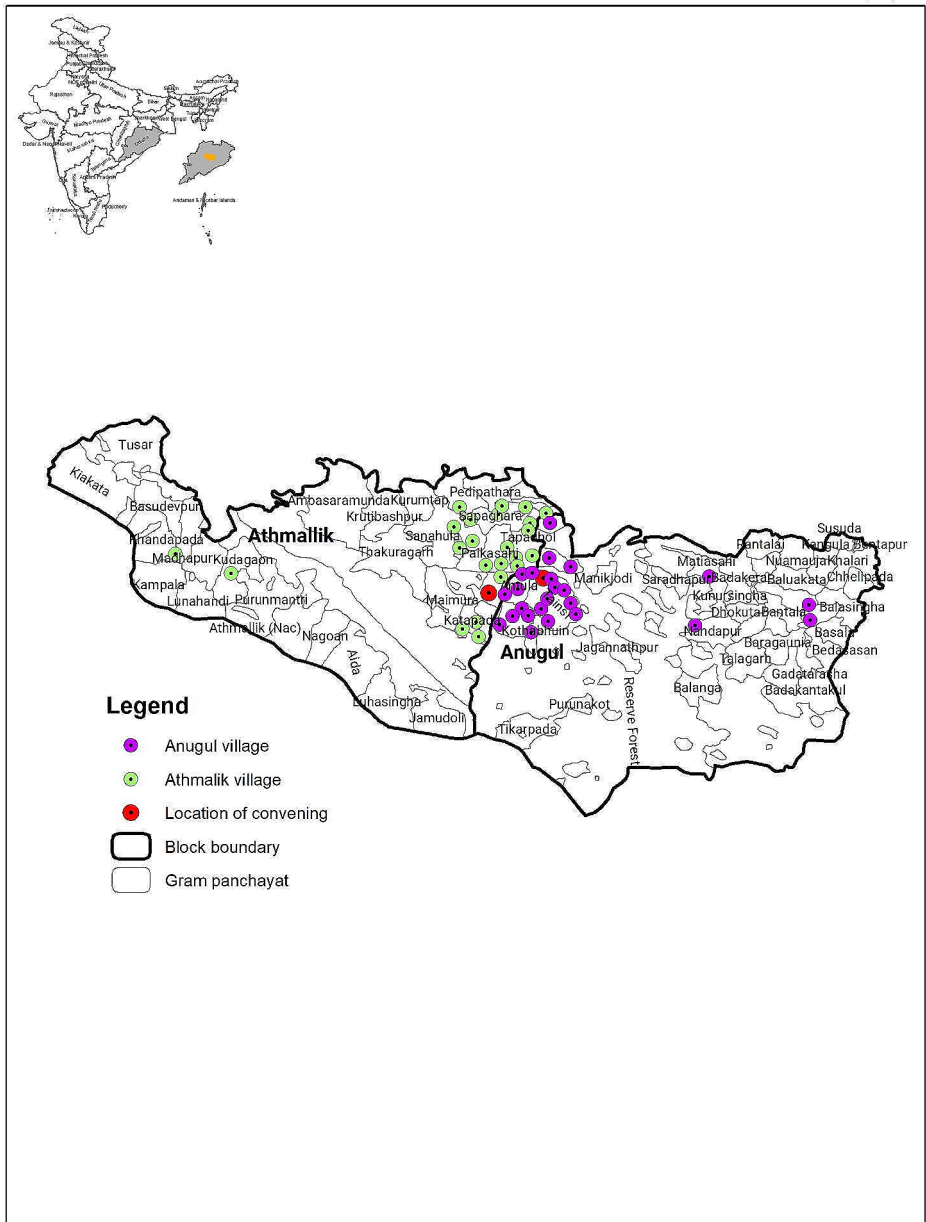


Fig. 4 Map of Odisha study area. Source: Authors (FES)

Since the beginning, the federations assumed major responsibilities in the planning and execution process.¹⁰ The process involved collection of relevant village level information, discussions on land use and management patterns, traditional practices/wisdom, varieties of indigenous and other seeds, agenda setting for the event, designing stalls, making logistical arrangements, formation of sub-committees to oversee discipline, food, cultural programme, expert-farmer interactions, and sending out invitations. FES supported the process by obtaining permissions from the concerned authorities, and helping communities gather information, design stalls and make logistical arrangements.

Around 3,000 diverse stakeholders usually participated in the Krushak Mela, including community members, village institution members, panchayat representatives, District collector, officials from line departments (Agriculture, Soil Water Conservation, Horticulture, Animal Husbandry, Rural Water Supply and Sanitation, Watershed Development, National Rural Health Mission, and National Rural Livelihoods Mission), and sometimes higher level officials like local members of parliament and state legislative assembly. They were joined by ecologists and agriculture specialists, activists, NGO's, NABARD and other financial institutions with a mandate for agricultural lending, and local media (FES, 2012-13). However, other than some agro-industries, the platform did not engage much with the private sector, particularly extractive industries operating in the region who in this case are important players representing different agendas and power balances.¹¹

Participating stakeholders engaged in dialogue in multiple ways. Usually, community members, government departments, FES and other civil society organizations put up stalls to showcase best practices. The government department representatives conducted live demonstrations at their stalls to promote farm mechanization, reduce drudgery, and share information on schemes and programs that the farmers could benefit from. Community members showcased traditional seeds and crop varieties, practices in agriculture, and innovations. FES shared information on best practices in land use management and soil and moisture conservation. The convening would typically start with speeches by experts, government officials, politicians, or activists. Expert-farmer technical sessions, interactive sessions and other activities like quizzes then took place. Participants roamed around the stalls and engaged with each other. In the spirit of a fair, information sharing was blended with entertainment through magic shows and other forms of local folk media.

Some important design rules enhanced the effectiveness of the platform.¹² For example, the fair was planned after the harvest season, to ensure more participation. To prioritize easy access for community members, the fair was held in centrally located rural areas rather than towns with better infrastructure and accessibility for other actors. To mediate power differences, every actor was given equal importance and opportunity to participate during the fair as well as village and federation meetings, where the agenda was decided and major planning was undertaken.¹³

In 2015, the original Krushak Mela was halted when, upon finding value in the event, the agriculture department of the government of Odisha started organizing similar district-

¹⁰ Based on FGD with federation members.

¹¹ Refer back to the “actors” of the MSP action arena in Fig. 1, affecting MSP interactions and outcomes.

¹² Refer back to the “rules” of the MSP action arena in Fig. 1, affecting MSP interactions and outcomes.

¹³ Based on FGD with federation members.

level farmer fairs.¹⁴ This allowed the events to happen at a larger scale, as government has more resources at their disposal, and allowed participation of more stakeholders like those from private sector. However, the platform has seen excessive commercialization, changing from a place where farmers could benefit from information exchanges to a more commercial middle-class consumer fair that is more export oriented and less informative for local farmers¹⁵. Although communities have transitioned from determinants of the process and agenda-setters to participants, the federations are still active in raising issues that concerns them, and FES with community members continue to put up different stalls in these fairs. Yet farmer participation is declining in the new MSPs. One major reason is the distance, as farmers have to travel long distances to attend the event in district headquarters, while the events used to take place in hubs closer to villages where communities frequent.

4.3.3 Tangible outcomes

Krushak Mela increased direct interface between farmers, local representatives, civil society organizations and government departments. One of the biggest tangible achievements was the revival of a marketplace in the Charmalik region¹⁶. After the Krushak Mela of 2014, federation members channeled a portion of the logistical budget towards renovation of the marketplace. Every village contributed labor and construction materials. FES contributed a small portion of the construction material cost. The renovation of the marketplace boosted the local economy by not only providing a viable space for farmers to sell their produce within the region but also attracted buyers willing to pay higher rates from nearby towns. The success of the marketplace also catalyzed investments from the state and district administration¹⁷. The renovated marketplace became a model, later replicated by other federations.

Krushak Mela contributed further to improved local livelihoods by reviving traditional seed exchange, which reduced the cost of inputs and revitalized community networks. Similarly, Patnaik et al. (2017) find that local seed banks maintained by Dalit women in India had an empowering effect, reviving community practices, knowledge sharing and social identities, while improving self-sufficiency. The federation was also able to pressure the agriculture department to make seeds available timely for farmers, thorough proactively convening meetings, threatening to boycott seeds from the department, and discussing the negative effects of tardiness in providing seeds on community livelihoods and delaying of the sowing season,. Further, where in Odisha implementation of the FRA to recognize individual and collective rights to the forest was delayed due to the absence of coordination between the forest and the tribal welfare departments, federation interventions helped communities file more claims and receive faster approvals as well as FRA awareness sessions from the department.

The MSP also improved agricultural practices and cross-village conflict resolution regarding issues of open grazing¹⁸. Village federations started maintaining facilities to

¹⁴ Based on interviews with FES team members.

¹⁵ The Times of India. December 2018. 'Krushak Melas need to be more informative for farmers' <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhubaneswar/krushak-melas-need-to-be-more-informative-for-farmers/articleshow/67199278.cms>.

¹⁶ 10 Based on focus group with federation members.

¹⁷ Based on interviews with FES team members working with federations.

¹⁸ Based on FGD with federation members.

impound cattle crossing village boundaries, that previously damaged crops and flora in village commons. Owners can now only reclaim their cattle upon paying a fine. Changes in agricultural practices as a result of sustained collective action at the federation level combined with expert interaction at the Krushak Mela, also led to reduction in bamboo fencing and shifting to iron ploughs which reduced the need for wood for agricultural implements. Exposure to mechanized agricultural tools contributed towards reducing drudgery, particularly for women.

These outcomes illustrate how the platform successfully facilitated cross learning among communities and other stakeholders, reducing pressure on commons resources. However, it is evident that a major limitation of this MSP process was the lack of engagement with mining corporations that are shaping the ecology-economy tensions occurring in the region, as well as implications from the MSP process taking a different turn with the government takeover.

5 Discussion

5.1 Intangible outcomes; knowledge, cooperation, trust, and morale

Polycentric governance is often evaluated by outsiders in instrumental terms, focusing on tangible economic or environmental outcomes. This limited view can miss valuable factors which motivate stakeholders to participate. When Gujarat MSP participants were asked open-ended questions about the perceived benefits of village institutions, less than 15% mentioned tangible benefits such as prices of farm produce; instead, they listed a range of other, less tangible benefits (Fig. 5). Over 80% of respondents mentioned increasing village harmony and confidence, and more than half mentioned village institutions being an opportunity for knowledge sharing and finding collective solutions for village-level problems. One example of village harmony is agreement on boundary demarcations and rules, where a village is able to enforce collectively agreed upon rules when surrounding villages also honor them. Discussions in MSPs that bring neighboring villages together help foster collective action at a larger level. Thus, seemingly intangible outcomes can have practical implications in terms of resource management in the long term (such as evolved institu-

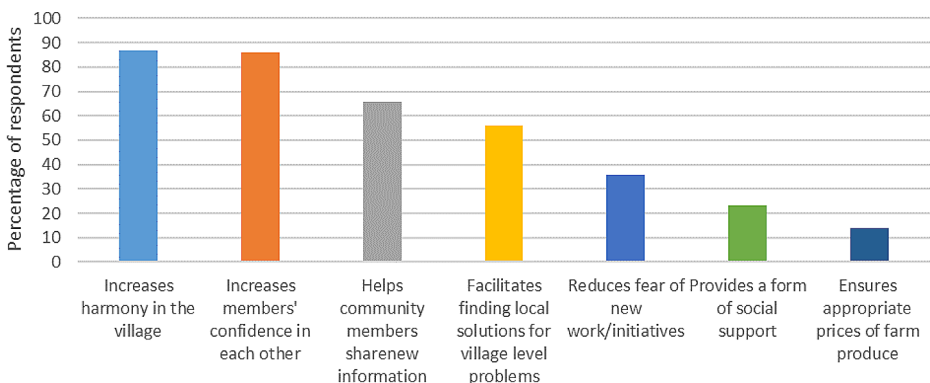


Fig. 5 Community perceptions on the benefits of village institutions. Source: Illustrated by authors, from FES survey of MSP participants in Santrampur, Gujarat; February 2016

tions for ending open grazing conflicts in Odisha). Returning to the conceptual framework, outcomes that improve harmony, confidence, or problem-solving link back to the action arena, while improvements in resource management exemplify longer-term feedback from outcomes to the context.

The two MSPs provide space for learning and knowledge exchange as well as strengthening networks within and between communities and other stakeholders, which community members appreciate as a valuable experience.¹⁹ MSPs have also aided in boosting community morale, particularly in remote and marginalized locations. Being part of the MSP gave a sense of optimism and accomplishment to community participants, especially as they play a big part in organizing the program.

By bridging the gap between government and communities, MSPs facilitate knowledge exchange and build trust. The platforms expand the outreach of government, where community members gain technical knowledge about agriculture and livestock, and how to access various government schemes. Government representatives get information from communities as federation members share their experiences on management of commons, which demonstrates that communities are good stewards of the commons, helping assert community rights to resources. Thus, knowledge exchange is valuable in itself, and contributes to other more tangible outcomes such as adoption of new practices or stronger claims on resources. Over the years, in Odisha, community participation increased in MGNREGA planning processes as communities increasingly became aware of their rights. This is also evident in the increasing community participation in GP planning processes and increasing efforts from the local governments to ensure participation of communities, recognizing community agency to shape their resources.

Through continuous participation in the MSP, cooperation between government and village federations improved, especially as the MSPs gained recognition and secured participation of higher-level officials like ministers. Evidence of various tangible and intangible benefits from the MSP cases confirms Warner's (2006) argument that while decision-making authority for MSPs can be beneficial, this is not a necessary factor for success.

By involving local authorities every year and constant follow-up discussions, MSPs improved the former's accountability towards taking concrete steps to deliver on the discussions undertaken. The two cases show that such increased accountability has led to two-way interaction, with communities also gaining some power to bring forward issues related to their livelihoods and the commons they manage. Raising these issues in the MSPs is also a step towards the realization of the need for different departments such as water, sanitation, and irrigation to work together in different districts and blocks.

It is noteworthy that the basis of this goes back to the establishment of village-level institutions, which were building blocks for MSPs, and helping provide the action resources for meaningful participation of community members and towards gaining equal grounds with other stakeholders.

5.2 Data as an action resource

Like intangible outcomes, intangible action resources are also valuable. Knowledge is one less tangible action resource that enables actors to negotiate and influence opinions and outcomes (Di Gregorio et al., 2008). The federations' ability to collect local data regarding their

¹⁹ Based on interviews with community members (MSP attendees) and federation members.

situation helped communities strengthen their claims of rights over resources and development demands and enrich the discussion. In Gujarat for example, federation members took up the issues of water scarcity, with CRPs collecting data on faulty or damaged handpumps, check dams, community and as water structures like ponds which require de-siltation from each village.²⁰ Presentation of this data during the MSP was fed into subsequent year's MGNREGA and GP plans resulting in improvement of water structures. They helped the government recognize inequalities between villages in the block, especially remote villages' lack of infrastructure and services such as healthcare centers. Local information gained credibility to supplement government data, playing a role in obtaining commitments from various government entities for local development and representing a step toward more equitable and inclusive governance decisions. Building on local action resources such as local knowledge and capacity helped to empower local actors and make the agenda setting process community- and data-based.

The village institutions appointing local youths as CRPs to collect and present local data serves as capacity building for them as important members of those rural communities. Depending on the issue at hand (fertilizer use, number of families unreached by government schemes, or water infrastructure needed etc.), CRPs conduct surveys, present results in a simple and relatable manner (including pie charts), and jointly discuss solutions. For MSPs to have an enabling and inclusive environment, utilizing and improving community capacity and information is necessary (Akhmouch & Clavreul, 2016). Such data can aid in polycentric governance, by allocating responsibilities and clarifying which actor can be leveraged for which of the community needs.

5.3 Local ownership

Capacity building is a key strategy that can contribute to greater local 'ownership' or the sense of belonging and control that the community feels in the multi-stakeholder process. Awareness of their rights, entitlements, and channels for action -knowing who can help and how- will lead to communities stepping up to the task, creating a feeling of being active agents of change rather than passive recipients of benefits. This will lead to building of common knowledge or shared understanding of the complex issues about their resources, livelihoods, and other concerns.

As communities and federations increased their role as main organizers of MSPs, it created a sense of confidence, empowerment. In both cases, federation members displayed agency in organizing the agenda, recurring events, and discussions. Carefully designed principles like channeling funds through the federation, sending out invitations to all stakeholders and leading logistical arrangements further strengthened this feeling of ownership in communities. Continuous engagement further highlighted the value of collective action, and that learning to work together takes time but has positive spinoffs. This is consistent with Mudaliar and Koontz's (2018) finding that, by being part of a platform where they can meaningfully participate, members of lower castes gain symbolic capital, pride, and a sense of community they are otherwise denied.

Increased local ownership has implications for conservation. When communities take over, agendas can shift focus away from natural resources management and conservation towards livelihood issues that may or may not be related to conservation. Although this can

²⁰ Based on interviews with federation members and community members.

seem to defeat the original purpose of convening on the block level for land use planning and commons management on the landscape-level, it is not necessarily a failure, because communities see livelihoods and conservation as interconnected, especially as those villages are highly dependent on commons. Hart et al. (2016) report producer movements usually form in response to livelihood challenges (like improving the economic viability of the production system or raising farm productivity) then improvement of governance and landscape restoration follows, as either a means to achieve such higher productivity or as a byproduct.

It is also important to consider that while they continue to be dependent on commons for their livelihoods, these communities are changing. The forces of urbanization and commercialization often disconnect perceived links between conservation and livelihoods. Local communities are part of a dynamic process; searching for employment and engaging and benefiting from industry and mining, but also having an interest in working towards conserving the commons. This is evident in the Odisha case, where industry and commons tension clearly exist, and where community members depend on both for their livelihoods and thus fight for more employment opportunities and forest rights.

Flexibility in setting the agenda enables the federations to discuss other relevant issues, to voice their concerns and establish ownership of the process. By engaging in a wider range of issues, the MSPs became more attractive for a wider range of stakeholders, which helps leverage support for the platforms (FES, 2016). For example, representatives from the health and education sectors recently started joining the discussions. Although complex to manage, this process seems to have good potential for more actors to join the MSPs when they see a common concern.

There are, however, potential tradeoffs between government ownership and local ownership, as in the Odisha case, where increased government ownership of the MSP and increasing participation of the private sector reduced community participation, ownership of the process, and the extent to which their interests are represented. Although government initiation of block and district level MSPs is a positive step of recognition of this mode of governance, it has become a more top-down process as the local federations' role was reduced from organizers to invitees, which means local dynamics, history, power relations and social diversity get ignored (Cockburn et al., 2020). The MSP now represents an 'event' rather than a process that local people influence and are meaningfully involved in.²¹ This raises concerns related to future agendas, how much leverage local communities, NGOs and other stakeholders will continue to have over governance, and eventually the levels of conservation and land use change in those commons.

Community ownership in each step of the process is essential to ensure that it benefits the community. For example, the expanding scale of the now government-led MSP in Odisha has proved to be less effective for the farmers, as quality discussion and useful information exchanges are lost in the 'buzz' of the more commercialized platform on the district level. Further, the purpose became relatively more scattered, with limited participation compared to the block-level and community-owned MSP.

²¹ Based on FGD with federation members in Odisha.

5.4 The role of external actors in MSPs and polycentric governance

Beyond facilitation, we distinguish five important roles external actors like NGOs or research organizations can play in MSP's and discuss their effects on MSP outcomes.

First, as others have found, outsiders can act as a mediator between the communities and different government actors (Warner, 2006; Faysse, 2006; Ros-Tonen et al., 2018). By being a mediator, an external agency can facilitate MSPs by taking into account the history, social diversity, and local dynamics of power-relations between communities and government institutions, which is important for building positive relationships between all stakeholders (Cockburn et al., 2020). Because FES has been active within the case study areas for decades, it gained trust from communities and government actors. This contributed to constructive dialogue, especially influencing government actors to listen to local communities' concerns and demands regarding livelihoods, infrastructure, and services. Such mediation is key as effective conflict resolution between stakeholders is an important characteristic of polycentric systems governance (Carlisle & Gruby, 2019).

Second, well-connected external actors can leverage the most relevant authorities that would address community needs, as well as keep track of policy level changes, new laws, and developments in jurisprudence that has a bearing on resource management (such as in the example of Gujarat's PESA act), while simplifying and disseminating such information to communities in a speedy manner. Because of its work with different entities on different scales related to commons management, FES is well connected to polycentric actors and can see the greater picture (often better than communities can). This includes distinguishing which authorities overlap and which are most relevant to leverage for what purposes. For example, if communities want to work on restoring a watershed or a forest patch, there are certain approvals and funds required including approvals from the Revenue and Agriculture departments, permission from the District Collector, and employment budgets from MGN-REGA. Such NGOs act as liaisons helping communities obtain legitimacy and facilitate permissions and legal processes.

Third, external actors can build on and strengthen local community capacity and voices in MSPs. The case studies illustrate two pathways where FES helped achieve this. One is through helping communities form local institutions for resource governance and inter-village alliances (village federations) to claim their rights and better manage the commons. This supports Hoogester's (2013) notion that NGOs as external actors have an important role in catalyzing formation of inter-community institutions, which are often not as organically formed as village institutions. NGOs can also help build recognition for these local institutions at the different levels of government and different line departments. The second way is by helping develop action resources that the communities need. FES assists federations to collect and present relevant information and data, which expands communities' action resources in an MSP. For example, in Gujarat when local federations show initiative by collecting data and presenting their case during the MSP, FES supports the federations by visualizing this on a spatial map to help get information across in a language familiar to other stakeholders.

A fourth important role is for external actors to flexibly facilitate (rather than lead) the convening of MSPs. Gradually, FES's role had shifted from agenda-setting to facilitation, which encouraged communities to participate and see themselves as partners rather than subjects of an intervention, which contributed to community confidence and ownership.

Finally, external facilitators also help linking, balancing, and highlighting both livelihoods and conservation/commons agendas, mediating between different groups' interests but keeping the bigger picture clear and redefining goals to strike a balance whenever a trade-off exists. By clarifying such linkages, the external actors can reveal the inter-connection between social-economic-ecological and political systems and foster a landscape approach. For example, upstream deforestation causes flooding and soil erosion in downstream communities. Such negative externalities of actions may not be easily visible to communities. One way FES does this is by reinforcing the 'environmentality' of local communities, or their willingness to invest in conservation efforts. Another way is to clarify to various stakeholders the important linkages between sustainable resource governance and improved livelihoods.

6 Conclusions

While much of the literature on governance focuses on the local or state and national levels, this paper argues for the benefits of meso-scale level MSPs and illustrates their dynamics and benefits for communities and landscapes, particularly in a setting of polycentric governance. The FES experience co-convening MSPs helps distill lessons on the enabling conditions, outcomes, and value of engaging in MSPs. While village level organizational efforts often do not address landscape-level conservation outcomes, the literature on higher-level MSPs, and the Odisha case study, point out the risk of losing touch with the realities on the ground, resulting in high-level 'detached' planning (Warner et al., 2008). In the cases highlighted, FES's facilitation of inter-village MSPs built on local collective action institutions and helped spark action plans across villages at a landscape-level, but on a meso scale that would still allow for sufficient interaction and connectedness, especially through forming active village federations.

On the block level, interactions and planning are inter-village, clustered around larger watershed, forest patches or rangelands, thus facilitating dialogue on landscape-level governance issues. This allows convergent plans to consolidate and restore larger patches of commons. MSPs convened on this level encompass various institutions on or below the block level which can aid effective polycentric governance. Confirming Kerr (2007) and Sarker (2014) findings, nesting village-level institutions in federations, and then federations in larger MSPs, is important for robust and sustainable collective action as well as to effectively bridge sectoral and institutional boundaries.

The case studies also show that intangible as well as tangible outcomes are important when evaluating MSP effectiveness. Just as getting roads or water supply is important, the institutional capacity strengthening to pull in those resources is key, strengthening the action resources of communities and accountability structures.

Building community capacity is an important but slow process that requires sufficient time to mature (de Montalvo & Alaerts, 2013). Indeed, achieving the current levels of synchronicity in the MSPs took nearly a decade of engagement. Over time federations were able to take on more responsibility of convening the MSPs, setting the agenda, and bringing the issues that concern them forward. This was far from a linear process, thus exactly when outcomes like increased cooperation and accountability started emerging is difficult to pinpoint.

MSPs evolve over time. The platforms evolved from a narrow focus of information sharing to also focus on agendas for landscape-level conservation and local commons governance, and other important livelihood agendas for the communities around those landscapes. This process took time to gain momentum and for the federations to get buy-in from the government, which eventually enables the setting of block plans and builds accountability. However, the outcomes differed between the cases: in Gujarat FES continues to co-convene the MSP aiming to keep a balance between livelihoods and conservation concerns in the discussion, while in Odisha government initiation of parallel multi-stakeholder engagements took over the more organic efforts led by village federations.

It is noteworthy that the success of these MSP cases is partially based on the long-term and repeated engagement between FES, local federations, and various government agencies. The groundwork carried out with FES supports effective polycentric governance of resources on the landscape-level, especially through MSPs on the block level that provide a chance for inter-community collaboration and learning, strengthening local voices and building trust between stakeholders over time. Trusted NGOs can help influence the government to listen to local communities' concerns and demands and vice versa, to bridge the communication gap, increasing trust and constructive dialogue.

While mid-level MSPs can play important roles in facilitating polycentric commons governance, they represent a long-term institutional investment. As a way forward, FES is seeking ways to scale up support to formation of MSPs (Ratner et al., 2021). But it is not only initiation that matters: while external actors play an important role in initiation, organization and facilitation of MSPs, efforts also need to be directed towards exit strategies that empower communities to sustain MSPs and ensure MSP continuity does not depend on a single entity. Further research on the implementation science and evolution of MSPs can provide important information to improve landscape-level governance of critical natural resources.

Data availability Data is not publicly available due to ethical restrictions. The data contains information that could compromise the privacy of research participants who did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly.

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