

Case Study

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Applying sustainable forest management to poverty reduction: strengthening the multi-stakeholder approach within UNFF

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“A New Green Deed: Community Action for Forest Regeneration and Poverty Reduction”

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OVERVIEW:

This case study was designed to review the implementation of the Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme in one of the forested districts of the state of Kerala, India. The case study examines the extent to which JFM has achieved the original objectives of forest conservation and livelihood security in the study area. The case study also explores the possibilities opened up by the implementation of more recent legislation known as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). Highlighting both the opportunities and the constraints of these conservation-based livelihood assurance policies, the study argues that the NREGA can complement initiatives taken under the JFM programme in Kerala in significant and beneficial ways. However, the study also evaluates the challenges that surface in translating legislated forest-related provisions into practice.

INTRODUCTION:

This case study focuses on the humid tropical state of Kerala in south India, an area that has witnessed significant forest degradation over the past couple of centuries. While environmental concerns have recently led to the protection of certain segments of forests, much of the area remains exposed to forces of degradation.

With origins in extensive Colonial timber extraction and conversion of natural forests to plantations and agricultural lands, post-Independence policies have continued to be focused on trade concerns. Additionally, the dispossession of forest-dependent communities that originated in the Colonial era did not cease after Independence. However, heightened social and environmental awareness of the 1970s led to significant reversals in forest management priorities in India during the 1980s, including the institution of the National Forest Policy (NFP) of India in 1988. This policy articulated the twin objectives of ecological stability *and* social justice, in contrast to the earlier objectives of maximizing revenue and promoting commerce (Sarin et al. 2003). The new strategy enshrined in this policy, referred to as “Joint Forest Management” (JFM) focused on providing for the subsistence needs of local communities while also regenerating and maintaining natural forests. Under JFM, by giving local people a central role in the protection of public forests, space was created for the participation of these communities in forest management.

Indigenous and local communities (referred to as “tribal communities” in the Indian context) play a special role in the implementation of JFM, as over 90% of the indigenous people in India live near forests (Lele et al. 1994), yet most have been dispossessed of forest resources. Lack of access to forest resources is targeted as one of the critical factors responsible for sustained high levels of poverty among forest-dependent communities, as these communities utilize forests for subsistence (Kumar et al 2000).

Despite opening up possibilities for participation of indigenous and local communities in forest management, questions have been raised regarding the overall effectiveness of JFM in actually mitigating forest degradation (Saigal n.d.). Studies have also questioned whether having a higher stake in the collection of minor forest products serves to reduce poverty levels. Using data collected in this case study, I argue that, while JFM programmes have increased the official participation of forest-dwelling communities in designated forest protection activities, there are reasons to raise concerns regarding democratic decision-making under JFM programs. This is, in part, due to the institutional location of JFM activities under the Forest Department, which is a hierarchical and bureaucratic agency.

More recent legislation known as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) came into effect in 2005 in India. The objective of the NREGA is to enhance

livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. Under the NREGA, workers have the right to demand work at any time of the year, and are entitled to receive work within 15 days of their application.

Of particular significance for this case study, the NREGA, unlike prior legislation, outlines a priority for undertaking employment-generation activities with a clear emphasis on soil and water conservation, afforestation and land development activities on common lands. Thus, the NREGA has the explicit potential to address both environmental *and* social concerns. In forested regions, this gives immense scope to design programmes for both livelihood security and resource sustainability..

Forests have become a primary source of common lands available for intervention under the NREGA programme in the state. Implementation of the programme was expected to boost employment generation opportunities for the poor tribal communities in this region, as the 100 days of work provided under the NREGA is to be allocated in addition to work provided by any existing JFM programme for forest-dwelling communities.

The results of this case study support the argument that, while the JFM programme serves to legitimize the stake of forest dwelling communities in forest management (both in its protection and in sharing of benefits associated with forest products), the NREGA gives prime importance to the rights of the worker to livelihood security. Additionally, the NREGA has the potential to be utilized to provide funding for programs due to the legislated requirements to provide work. The right to worker security under the provisions of the NREGA, however, has not always resulted in programme implementation that is compatible with environmental sustainability.

The recommendations provided in this report are designed to point policy makers in the direction of how to address issues associated with poverty alleviation in a manner that also conserves forest resources. The shortcomings of the JFM Programme (as will be elaborated later) illustrate that issues of forest conservation and poverty alleviation span beyond the scope of one particular government department and thus should be treated as broader governance issues. Multiple departments and institutions must be interconnected in order to deal with the range of issues associated with the environmental and social issues related to deforestation. In Kerala, this

involves a considerable co-ordination between the activities of the Forest Department, the Rural Development Department and the local governments (*Panchyats*), the latter playing the most critical role in the decentralisation reforms implemented by the state¹). Such coordination is especially critical if the provisions of the NREGA can be utilised to achieve the objectives of forest conservation and livelihood security—objectives that JFM alone does not appear to achieve.

Background of the case study

The study was undertaken in what is known in India as the tribal and forested district of Wayanad in Kerala. Wayanad is one of the northern districts in the state of Kerala, an eastern sloping hilly plateau² located in the Western Ghats mountain ranges³, within the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve⁴. This hilly district within the Western Ghat tract is also home to one third of the state's indigenous population. Forest and agriculture-dependent tribal communities comprise 17% of the total population in this district. Once heavily forested, the region has witnessed serious deforestation.

As an outcome of official policies (both Colonial and post-Colonial) of the past few centuries, indigenous communities have suffered considerable dispossession from forest resources. The government's pro-migration policy, for example, led to a large influx of settlers into Wayanad. This contributed to a situation where indigenous communities were alienated

¹ Kerala's decentralisation reforms commenced in 1997. Over the past decade, local governments (panchayats) have been vested with considerable financial and decision making powers in the area of local governance. While they have been vested with decision making powers in certain areas of natural resource management, forests have largely remained outside their purview. With the NREGA being implemented exclusively by the panchayats, it provides them with an opportunity to intervene in the area of natural resource protection

² Wayanad which is known for its high altitude wetlands including paddy lands derives its name from the term 'vayal nadu' meaning the land of wetland paddy. Both the forests and the wetlands were reduced to one fourth of their extent at the turn of the twentieth century.

³ The Western Ghat mountain ranges harbour the most extensive tropical forests in the Indian Peninsula in the states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

⁴ The Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve was launched in September 1996, extending over the forests in the Nilgiri Mountains, that falls in three southern states of India, viz. Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The entire Wayanad Sanctuary falls in this reserve (Nair 1991).

from their agricultural land as well from their forest resources. Indigenous people were compelled to work as agricultural labourers on the farms of the settlers. They also began to depend more heavily on increasingly-scarce forest resources for both livelihood and income generation.

JFM initiatives in Kerala and Wayanad

The JFM programme was first implemented in the Wayanad district in 2003. Under the provisions of the JFM, forest protection committees called “*Vana Samrakshana Samitis*” (VSSs) were set up in forest areas. There are currently approximately 40 VSS committees in the district of Wayanad. Each VSS has jurisdiction over an area of at least 150 hectares of forest land. The VSS is tasked to prepare a “micro plan” for a five-year period, outlining such things as the specific needs identified by the community, the main problems that the area faces with regard to forest protection, and the agreed formulae for sharing of usufruct. At its inception, the VSS committee and the Forest Department enter into an agreement to jointly protect a specific forest area.

As in other parts of the state, the main activity of each VSS committee in Wayanad involves afforestation. The micro plan forms the basis of commencing afforestation activities in any given area. Funding for afforestation activities comes from the centrally sponsored scheme called the “National Afforestation Programme” (NAP). For each hectare of forest area that is planted, the VSS is allocated Rs 4000 under this programme, which is added to the core fund of the VSS. Thus, funding for potential livelihood-generating activities is channelled through the VSS core fund.

Methodology

Fieldwork for this case study was conducted in the following parts of Wayanad district: Tirunelly, Bathery, Meppady and Churli. Fieldwork was also conducted in certain parts of Trichur district, with a focus on the forested areas where NREGA work has been conducted.

To gain an understanding of the implementation of the NREGA programme, discussions were held with NREGA district-level officials, NREGA staff in the concerned local government, field-level supervisors of the programme and labourers. In order to assess the ongoing JFM

implementation through the VSS forest protection committees, discussions were held with Forest Department officials, with VSS office bearers, members of the VSS groups who were involved in running forest micro-enterprises, tribal officials of the Forest Department and with local people.

Presentation and Analysis of data

The data gathered for the case study is presented in two sections. The first section presents the findings concerning the implementation of JFM in the areas studied. As the VSS is the committee through which JFM activities are coordinated, I assess VSS activities in this section. The second section discusses the implementation of NREGA in the district, and the possibilities of convergence between JFM and NREGA in working towards forest protection and livelihood security.

Data Presentation and Analysis Segment I: The Forest Protection Committees (VSS) in Wayanad

Planning for Forest Protection and Livelihood Security

As mentioned earlier, the VSS must prepare a micro plan that follows a detailed appraisal of the area, forest protection issues and people's livelihood requirements. My study found that, very often a detailed consultation between the Department and the people has *not* preceded the constitution of the VSS and the preparation of the micro plan. For example, in Wayanad, the process of VSS formation was rushed through to meet time deadlines. It has been reported that VSS committees were formed without considering important elements. While the core fund of the VSS (from afforestation payments) is to be spent on community assets, the term "community assets" does not have a clear and agreed-upon definition. In some cases, "community assets" have been defined as infrastructure projects such as the construction of community centers, child care centers, roads, and drainage channels. Thus, the core fund has represented a point of contention for some community members. The research conducted for the case study indicated that very rarely has this fund been used for activities like agriculture, which could potentially

provide immediate and sustained livelihood security, thereby having the potential to reduce pressure on forest resources.

While this is the general situation in Wayanad, there have been instances where VSS committees *have* designed innovative livelihood-support programmes. Though very few in number, they illustrate the possibilities inherent in the policy. The case of the Haritha VSS in the Tirunelly forest range and the Churli VSS in the Periya forest range has been described in detail in Appendix I. The Haritha VSS primarily took up paddy land cultivation and other smaller income-generating activities based on collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs). The Churli VSS embarked on a range of livelihood-sustaining activities with the corpus fund.

In both cases, it is clear that the availability of a core fund with the VSS enables communities to undertake a range of activities that supports their livelihoods directly and indirectly. Naturally, when there is greater livelihood security, the resource demands on the forest are found to be mitigated. For example, in the case of Churli, it has been pointed out that incidents of poaching which were prevalent in the region had declined since the functioning of the VSS. However, as the following instances illustrate, changing patterns of resource use create new challenges that VSS committees must address.

Non-Timber Forest Products: Changing patterns of resource pressures.

Collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) meets some of the livelihood requirements of indigenous and local communities in addition to bringing in a small amount of income. The collection of NTFPs has, however, undergone changes over the past few decades as a result of increasing urbanization and growing pressures of tourism. Currently, NTFPs are collected for income generation as well as livelihood sustenance, which has implications regarding sustainable harvesting of forest products. These issues deserve attention given the contemporary emphasis on rights-based approaches contained in programmes such as the NREGA. The research conducted for this study indicates that, without policies that ensure environmental sustainability as well as economic security, labor-generation activities legislated by the NREGA may lead to unsustainable use of forest resources.

The case of firewood

The region of Tirunelley has experienced the growth of religious tourism and eco tourism. This has led to an increase in the migrant population in the area, and to an increase in the facilities required to cater to this growing population, such as hotels and transportation. The firewood demand has increased in order to cater to the influx of tourists. Some indigenous and local community members have now become regular firewood collectors and suppliers to hotels and other commercial establishments. This has changed the pattern of fuel wood collection from gathering dried twigs and branches from the forest floor to cutting bigger branches and even debarking trees in order to dry them to facilitate firewood extraction. This is a trend that has serious implications for the forests.

Increasing demand for honey, medicinal herbs and shrubs, select fruits.

The demand for NTFPs like honey, medicinal herbs and certain fruits has also registered an increase in the recent past. With regard to medicinal herbs, the growing demand for the traditional classical health care systems (known as *Ayurveda*) across the state and the associated growth of health tourism has led to a greater demand for indigenous herbal plants which were once found in abundance in forested regions such as Wayanad. Increased demand for these herbs has contributed to a neglect of the traditional seasonal restrictions over their harvesting. As a result, some of the medicinal herbs can no longer be found in the forests of Wayanad. While it may have temporarily increased the income of people engaged in such collection, such over-extraction has jeopardized their long-term livelihood security.

Honey was traditionally collected once in a year, during the ecologically-appropriate season. Currently, it is collected repeatedly. In most forested areas, the government has constituted a collection and sale mechanism for NTFPs. Co-operative Societies, referred to as *Girijan* Societies, are entrusted with the collection and sale of NTFPs. Some of the VSS members interviewed for this case study indicated that they felt that the *Girijan* society in their district did not value prudent collection of NTFPs. Some of the individuals interviewed opined that the society should not accept honey collected off-season from the forest, which would help to prevent over-exploitation.

Acacia Concinna is a shrub-like tree with medicinal properties. The pods of this tree have been used as a natural shampoo for centuries in India. Since it has a high commercial demand, its

extraction has also increased. Once again, local people have been found to resort to easy means to harvest the seed pods of *Acacia Concinna*, which is resulting in destruction of the tree. People have been found to burn the lower parts of the tree so that it dries up. Whole branches are cut down so that the seeds can be gathered easily. All of this brings immediate money, but the tree is destroyed in the process.

While there are many more examples that could be provided to illustrate this dynamic, all of these cases reflect the fact that, while collection of NTFPs brings important income and livelihood assurance to indigenous and forest-dwelling communities, there is a serious need to ensure that NTFPs are harvested sustainably. Increased demand for NTFPs has not been accompanied by a corresponding tightening of restrictions over the harvesting of these products. While the VSS is an agency which could have prompted individual collectors to exercise restraint, and which could also channel funds towards livelihood-generating sustainable activities, this has largely not taken place.

Positive Examples: Involvement of Communities in Resource Conservation

Prevention of Forest Fires- The Role of Peoples' Action

During the dry summer months, forest fires are the most critical hurdle in forest conservation across the state. Many forest fires are human-made. They usually start at the fringe areas where there is extensive human contact, so measures are taken by the VSS committees and by the Forest Department to ensure that fires do not spread into the forest interiors.

The most common measure undertaken by the Department is to maintain fire lines around the forest to prevent fires from spreading. Under the provisions of the JFM, the work of fire line maintenance has been entrusted to the VSS (in contrast to the earlier situation when it was entrusted with private contractors). In addition, a certain number of paid firewatchers are recruited from amongst the VSS members by the Department. Over the past 5 years, forest-dependent communities who have been part of the VSS have received some employment assurance during the period of fire line preparation. The involvement of the VSS members in this activity is reported to have enhanced their feeling of responsibility towards the protection of the forests. From many areas, it has been reported that, in the event of a fire, it is not just the

appointed firewatcher who engages in fire fighting, but members in the vicinity involve themselves voluntarily. Forest officials report that a cumulative impact of the enhanced involvement of VSS members in fire protection and the department's campaign against forest fires is beginning to manifest in the reduced incidence of forest fires. During the summer of 2010, there were only two incidences of forest fires in the Tirunelli range, despite the fact that it was a very dry summer. In both of the cases where fire did occur, the fire had been stamped out before the Department personnel arrived. This type of report stands in sharp contrast to the earlier situation where people would wait for the Forest Department. Apparently, the Tirunelli range is not an isolated case, as reduced rates of forest fires was also reported from the Meppady forest range in 2010.

Local participation in forest management

The VSS is a fledgling institution operating under the auspices of the Forest Department which has had typical hierarchical and bureaucratic ways of functioning. Thus, the VSS has an important role to play in giving local people a say in matters related to the forests. Additionally, the VSS provides opportunities for directing financial benefit from forest protection and regeneration activities to local communities. Significantly, the VSS has also provided an avenue for collective decision-making, which was the defining feature of traditional systems of governance that may have been dismantled under colonization.

Having said this, the data gathered in this study indicate that a lot more needs to be achieved for the VSS to transform itself into an institution that is capable of making democratic and informed decisions, and creatively intervening in the area of forest protection and livelihood assurance. Discussions with VSS members and forest officials in Wayanad suggest that the interest and commitment shown by the higher forest officials (such as the Range Officer and Divisional Forest Officer) are very critical in ensuring the proper functioning of the VSS. Additionally, the study found that the secretary of the VSS (who is a Forest Department official) plays an important role in decisions taken at the VSS level, and functions as an important link between the Forest Department and the VSS.

Data Presentation and Analysis Segment II: NREGA, Forest Conservation and Livelihood Security

After having examined the NREGA implementation in select forest areas of Wayanad and Trichur districts, the following observations have been made:

Institutional Mismatch:

In Kerala, the NREGA is exclusively implemented through the local governments (*Panchayats*). Since forest lands are beyond the jurisdiction of the *Panchayats*, implementing the NREGA in forest areas has called for coordination between the local governments and the Forest Department. The focus of the NREGA is on employment generation whereas the Forest Department targets the protection and regeneration of forest areas. Synchronising the two objectives is important if the goals of livelihood enhancement and environmental sustainability are to be achieved.

Neglect of Conservation:

In the process of integrating employment generation with natural resource conservation, the local governments and the rural development department have given a greater emphasis to employment generation. The issue of conservation has received only secondary emphasis. One of the common activities undertaken under the NREGA is roadside cleaning, clearing up stream and river channels, cleaning and desilting of ponds etc. In all these three types of activities, what results is a huge biodiversity loss, as vegetation along road sides, stream, river and pond margins are indiscriminately cleared in the name of employment generation.

An activity that is commonly undertaken in forest areas is the laying of elephant trenches. In Wayanad, laying of elephant trenches was the single largest NREGA activity undertaken in forest areas. Elephant trenches are pits that are about 8 feet deep and 3 feet wide, dug mostly at the boundary between public forests and private agricultural land, to prevent wild animals, especially elephants from raiding agricultural fields. The fast degrading, fragmented and shrinking forest cover in Wayanad has intensified elephant and wild boar raids into agricultural lands, as the forests are not able to satisfy their food requirements as in the past. Apart from the fact that laying elephant trenches are not a permanent solution to the human-wildlife conflict, the

manner of laying these trenches has aggravated soil erosion. In all cases, trenches have been dug along and across the slope, which then quickly transform into deeper gullies after the monsoons. In many cases trenches have encircled forest swamps, significantly reducing recharge into these swamps from where streams originate.

The NREGA is a demand-driven programme, which means that work has to be given by the *Panchayat* whenever the labourer demands for work. If there is a demand for work, the *Panchayat* cannot legally deny the labourer his or her right to work. Thus, unless mechanisms are put in place to ensure that the work is not environmentally damaging, the imperative of labor generation may outweigh the environmental costs.

Despite the above-mentioned constraints in implementations, the provisions of the NREGA contain potential for both poverty alleviation and natural resource conservation. A significant advantage of the NREGA is that there is no upper limit on the funding available for employment generation. What is needed is the capacity at all decision-making and implementation levels to appreciate and respond to the conservation potential that is inherent in this employment-generation programme. As a first step in forest areas, the programme can reinforce the recent initiatives taken by the VSS by providing the additional funds to meet the labour costs involved in both afforestation and livelihood-support measures. Some possibilities are given below:

a) Regenerating degraded forests. Currently the VSS undertakes planting works on only a limited extent of land due to lack of funding. If NREGA is able to provide the wage component, such planting and protection work can be organized through the VSS on a much larger scale. Widespread planting has immense employment absorption capacity. This will facilitate the regeneration of a large area of degraded monoculture plantations⁵. If such opportunities for wage employment were available, it is likely that they would be prompted to reduce over extraction of NTFPs like honey and medicinal herbs from the forest.

⁵ A large area of natural forests in Wayanad that had been converted into monoculture plantations of teak and eucalyptus are in a very degraded state today.

- b) Planting along stream and river margins. Currently, most of the stream and river margins have lost their original vegetation. This had enhanced side bank erosion, which has resulted in concrete sidewalls being constructed along streams and rivers to prevent erosion and breaching of the watercourse. Very often, such concrete sidewalls aggravate damage during floods. Vegetative protection through planting is an alternative, which also carries the potential to absorb labour. This is an activity that can be undertaken by the VSS in forest areas, with support from the NREGA programme.
- c) Protection of newly regenerated patches. One of the biggest drawbacks of the JFM programme is the inadequate protection given to newly planted saplings. Almost all degraded forests are exposed to the pressures of grazing. This counters all efforts taken at regeneration. Appointing people to protect the newly planted saplings is an activity that can be funded under the NREGS.
- d) Nursery raising activity under NREGA. This is yet another activity that can be supported through the NREGA programme. In Wayanad very few nurseries have been raised under the NREG programme. Given the potential for afforestation activities, there is a need for nurseries. It can be undertaken as a round the year programme, providing labour opportunities in the process.

Conclusions

In the context of global climate change and mounting biodiversity loss, the protection and regeneration of the humid tropical forests is critical. Conservation-based livelihood approaches with a focus on regeneration and protection of forests are emerging as important strategies to address this issue. This study has examined two such efforts initiated by the government to address forest protection and livelihood security in the forested district of Wayanad in the state of Kerala in south India: the Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). With regard to the former, the constitution of forest protection committees (the VSS committees) and the legitimization of the livelihood requirements of forest-dependent communities was an important starting point. It opened up possibilities for integrating forest conservation with livelihood security and thereby poverty alleviation. It also institutionalized the participation of local communities in conservation efforts and in decision-making processes.

With the exception of a few successful initiatives however, the functioning of the VSS in Wayanad has not reached its potential. The VSS as an institution remains very much within the fold of the forest department. As such, initiatives are dependent on the capability and commitment of the VSS officers. The VSS by itself has not evolved into a self-governing institution capable of developing its own programmes.

On the other hand, the NREGA gives far more importance to the rights of the worker. It pressures the local government to ensure that the livelihood rights (i.e. the right to work) of the workers are met, thereby emphasizing a rights-based framework of governance. However, it has not been able to address the issue of resource conservation, particularly forest conservation when implemented in forest areas.

While both these programmes face constraints, an effective convergence of both can work towards forest conservation *and* poverty reduction. Both forest conservation and poverty reduction are issues that need to be located in the overall sphere of governance. They cannot be left to the prerogative of particular departments and institutions. The convergence of both these programmes needs to be therefore located within a governance framework that emphasises on both natural resource protection and livelihood security. This requires a re-orientation of perspectives and visions of governance, as well as a reform of established procedures and practices of governance.

Policy Recommendations

1. Provide capacity building to sensitize VSS committee members to the goal of resource conservation contained in the original JFM policy. The VSS must be transformed into an institution that develops actions that are designed to reduce pressures on forest resources. The VSS needs the capacity to develop regulatory frameworks for the extraction of NTFPs, while also being given the opportunities to fund livelihood-generating activities with the core fund. This could help to prevent the over extraction of NTFPs which is important in ensuring the regeneration and protection of the forests that remain.
2. Highlight the eco-restoration potential of the NREGA. The problem lies not with the NREGA framework but with the style of implementation. NREGA functionaries in the

rural development department and in the local government need to appreciate the link between employment generation and natural resource conservation. In creating employment opportunities, the issue of long-term ecological security must be taken into account. While ecological objectives are codified in the Act, in actual practice, implementing officers and the local governments have often created employment that jeopardizes environmental sustainability rather than enhances it.

3. Enhance the collective decision-making ability of the VSS. While the VSS is intended to function as a collective body that plans and makes decisions, in practice it has degenerated into a bureaucratic arm of the Forest Department. The VSS needs to gain autonomy from the Forest Department and must ensure that its actions are directed towards the original twin objectives of JFM—forest regeneration and livelihood security.
4. Ensure a sustainable and dependable funding mechanism for JFM programmes. Currently, funding for JFM activities is dependent on a centrally sponsored scheme, or externally funded projects. In order to sustain the activities of the VSS such that regeneration and protection of forests is an ongoing activity and not time-limited project-based, there is a need for policy changes and budgetary allocation that ensure sustained funding.
5. Formally link the JFM and NREGA policies so that the afforestation activities contained under JFM can be funded through NREGA legislation-related funds. The local governments need to play an important role in the convergence of the JFM and NREGA programmes and will need to work in coordination with institutions such as the VSS. The local governments have been entrusted with the responsibility of drawing up and implementing an “Anti Poverty Sub Plan” to alleviate poverty. They have however not been able to reach out adequately to the poor indigenous communities inhabiting the forests and forest fringes. Given the fact that the VSS as an institution functions closely with these communities, bringing the panchayat and the VSS closer will enable the VSS to make use of the provisions and budgetary support available with the “Anti Poverty Sub Plan”. By undertaking a range of livelihood assurance programmes under the Sub Plan, the VSS can achieve its objective of reducing pressure on the forests.

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Appendix I:
Detailed Description of Innovative VSS-Use of Core Funds for Livelihood-Generation Activities

The Haritha VSS (consisting of only indigenous community members), in the Tirunelly forest range was constituted in 2003. One of the notable initiatives taken by this VSS was the initiation of paddy cultivation by taking paddy land on lease. This is also an activity in which a lot of the women VSS members were involved (S. Santhi, 2007). Tirunelly is an area with a substantial indigenous population, but most of them do not own land. They normally work as agricultural labourers on land that was once theirs, but is now owned by the migrants from the plains. Over the past few years, a lot of the paddy land has been lying fallow. The landlords were however not in favour of giving the land on lease to the indigenous community, especially women. At this point the forest department intervened through the VSS and the lease was arranged (ibid).

To begin with, 3 small groups of farmers from within the VSS took land on lease and cultivated paddy. Of the three groups, two groups took about 1.5 acres of land on lease, while the third group took 3 acres of paddy land on lease. These groups borrowed money from the VSSs common fund to buy seeds, hire labourers when required, and hire a tractor and a tiller. All of them were able to repay this money after the harvest. They were also able to pay a small food subsidy to the families who undertook cultivation, for they had forgone their daily wage opportunities to undertake cultivation. The groups cultivated traditional rice varieties which included a rare fragrant rice variety, the Gandhakashala, which has been threatened by modern chemical farming. In all cases, the sale of straw alone after harvest enabled the group to repay the loan they had taken from the VSS. Of the three groups, one was a women's group, who did not hire any machinery and did almost all work on their own or with women's help to whom they gave paddy in return. This grew into a large collective of women who proved to themselves and to others that women were able to undertake all activities, including those which were considered to be a man's forte such as night vigil and ploughing. In the second year, about 8 groups engaged in this form of cultivation.

This was an activity that helped to establish the link between forest protection and food security, for it was the corpus generated from forest protection activities that enabled the VSS to undertake paddy cultivation that assured them of food security. The success with paddy cultivation prompted the Haritha VSS to undertake other income generating activities. One was setting up a small pickling unit, wherein the VSS members collected wild mangoes from the forest, pickled them and sold them. The other was filtering and packaging of honey to be sold. A small team of dedicated VSS members worked hard at all these new ventures, and they received wholehearted support from the then VSS secretary, who belonged to the indigenous community himself. The VSS however was not able to sustain the momentum generated as some of the key people involved in the experiment moved out of the area. This is also indicates that the VSS requires a high degree of handholding to be able to carry forward its activities.

The other is the case of the Churli VSS falling in the Periya forest range in North Wayanad division. This VSS consists of 50 families belonging to the Kurichiya indigenous community, whose settlement is located within the forests. The Kurichiya community is one where social cohesion is high, with strong intra community bonds. The Churli VSS was constituted fairly recently, in 2005-06.

With the core fund of the VSS, it took up activities that directly addressed some of the constraints they faced as a community. The first was to address the non-availability of public transportation. With the core fund of the VSS and a bank loan, they purchased a jeep to facilitate transport to the nearest town. Since many of them derived their livelihoods from the sale of milk, the purchase of the vehicle facilitated the

same. This VSS was also able to integrate the VSS funds with the Tribal Sub Plan funds (a special budgetary allocation for areas with a substantial population of indigenous communities) and undertake a wide range of activities. These ranged from the construction of about 27 houses and 20 cattle sheds (which was provided for from the Tribal Sub Plan funds), setting up a drinking water scheme for 7 families using gravity flow systems, constructing a pond for fishing, preparation of bio-compost and maintenance of a check dam. The community also undertook paddy, coffee and banana cultivation using the TSP funds. They bought a power tiller and also lent money to self-help groups to run a shop in the area and to undertake cultivation. Profit made from plantain cultivation has enabled the VSS to repay the loan on the jeep, and now it is completely owned by the VSS.

In both the Haritha and the Chulri VSSs, the secretary belonged to the indigenous community. The department and the VSS members feel that the VSS now feels more responsible for forest protection, as they are able to see the link between forest protection and livelihood security. Both these cases are exceptional in many ways. In Haritha, a dedicated team of VSS members supported by the VSS secretary played a key role. In Churli, the cohesiveness within the Kurichiya community enabled them to take up a range of collective activities. In both cases, members of the VSS exclusively belonged to the indigenous community, thereby reducing possibilities of manipulation. These cases are illustrative of the potential of collective action inherent in the VSS initiative. The success of the Churli VSS also indicates how the successful integration of the VSS with the Tribal Sub Plan funds helped to consolidate the activities of the VSS.