

CEPF FINAL PROJECT COMPLETION REPORT

Organization Legal Name:	Action for Community Organization, Rehabilitation and Development (ACCORD)
Project Title:	Strengthening Conservation through adivasis' traditional practices and Forest Rights Act
Date of Report:	6.8.2015
Report Author and Contact Information	Stan Thekaekara, stan@jutchangeindia.com

CEPF Region: Western Ghats

Strategic Direction: Strategic Direction 1 of the Ecosystem profile: Enable action by diverse communities and partnerships to ensure conservation of key biodiversity areas and enhance connectivity in corridors.

Grant Amount: 59770 USD

Project Dates: June 2013 to November 2015

Implementation Partners for this Project (please explain the level of involvement for each partner):

The project has been implemented largely in partnership with the local community based organization in Gudalur, Adivasi Munnetra Sangam or AMS. The Shola Trust, another local conservation organization has provided technical support in implementing certain aspects of the project. In addition, ACCORD has also formed informal collaborations with different organizations working on Forest Rights Act in the country. These include Vasundhara (Orissa), Western Ghats Hornbill Foundation (Kerala), VGKK (Karnataka) and Tribal Health Initiative (Tamil Nadu).

The implementation of the project activities has been primarily carried out by the community leaders from the AMS with support from ACCORD. AMS is recognized by the State Government as the representative body of the adivasis of the area. It consists of 312 village sangams clustered into 8 areas and covers a population of nearly 20000 people. Most of these leaders have been associated with ACCORD and AMS for over a

decade now and are well familiar with the pulse of the community. The community leaders played an active role in building awareness and mobilization of the larger adivasi community in Gudalur valley towards the movement of asserting their rights in the forest. It can be safely said that while ACCORD handled the management of the project, AMS undertook the actual implementation.

The Shola Trust (www.thesholatrust.org) works with the local community on conservation related issues in the Gudalur valley. The Shola Trust organized trainings on the use of GPS and preparing maps for the adivasi youth and community mobilizers. The CFR maps for the Gram Sabhas (village councils) were also developed by The Shola Trust team.

ACCORD conducted exposure visits for the Gram Sabha leaders to B.R.Hills in Karnataka, Vazhachal in Kerala and Kandhamal in Orissa. These visits were planned with the objective of learning from their successful experience and reflecting on ways to replicate the success stories in Gudalur valley as well. The visits were made possible because of the support and collaboration of respective NGOs whose names have already been mentioned above.

Conservation Impacts

Please explain/describe how your project has contributed to the implementation of the CEPF ecosystem profile.

One of the major components of the project has been to make adivasi communities in Gudalur valley aware of their right and responsibility to protect and manage the forest. While the internalization of such a right and responsibility will come only with its exercising, there is definitely a high level of awareness and interest among the adivasis of Gudalur to play a bigger role in forest management related decision making. The development of community based conservation and management plans has been initiated for the Community Forest Resource (CFRs) in selected Gram Sabhas.

The adivasi community in Gudalur has witnessed severe encroachment of their forest by both the Forest Department and immigrants over several decades now. Large tracts of forest have been converted into tea estates. The community found itself powerless and defenseless against the encroachment. With the decrease in forest cover, the community also witnessed a decline in their traditional forest based livelihoods. The Forest Rights Act has emerged as a tool of power against such processes. The community realizes that the provisions of CFR can be used to check further encroachment of the remaining forest. There are many instances where the Forest Department, in its attempt, to get ownership of unclassified land, planted trees like eucalyptus and pine, which have little or no value for the adivasi community. The community is also looking at using CFR provisions to regenerate some of their traditional grass, plant, tuber and tree species which are not as abundant as they used to be in the past. There are also cases where bad practices by the Forest Department and immigrants, mainly tea estates have led to a deterioration of the

community forest resources. The community is looking forward to using CFR to put a check on such practices.

In a public demonstration to demand the recognition of their rights in the forest, the adivasi community of Gudalur demanded financial support for the development and implementation of CFR management plans. The Taluk administration has promised to support such processes. These directly link with sub sections of CEF Investment priority 1.

Please summarize the overall results/impact of your project.

One of the biggest impacts of the project has been the fact that the cause of forest rights has become a political movement in Gudalur. This movement has not only united the adivasis in Gudalur but also initiated a process where all the stakeholders in Gudalur are talking about its implementation. Even the Forest Department officials who had so far been acting unaware of the provisions of the Act have also been brought into its fold. The DFO had recently called for a meeting with Gram Sabha leaders to discuss the Forest Rights Act. This has been the first instance that the Forest Department has even acknowledged the existence of an Act that recognizes the rights of forest dwellers.

The other significant impact has been the change in the power relations of the adivasis and the Forest Department. The Gram Sabhas have emerged as a crucial institution by which the community can interact with the government on a more equal footing. The level of awareness of the provisions the Act and the understanding of its relevance in the Gudalur context has been such among the community leaders that they are able to negotiate with the government of their own without any NGO participation whatsoever.

The community is now aware of their rights in the forest and is exercising their right of accessing forest and collecting forest produce fearlessly. They report, challenge and deal with any violation of forest rights. We have also learnt of cases where the community in some villages has restarted their traditional practice of collection of forest produce which had been stopped due to the many restrictions that existed.

The cultural significance of Sacred Groves in Gudalur has also witnessed a revival owing to the mapping exercise that was undertaken as a part of this project. There are examples where the performing of the annual Sacred Grove festival had been renewed after their mapping and interview with the Karnavar (traditional elder). As most interviews on traditional forest practices with community elders were carried out by the youth from the community, this has also led to inter generational transmission of traditional knowledge.

To summarise, two things stand out. One is the revival of sacred groves. Just doing the mapping exercise, but because it was done by youth from the community accompanied by the traditional elders, this has led to a huge interest in sacred groves - that will continue

much beyond the project phase. The other is the relationship with the government. The Gram Sabhas are now formal institutions and the leaders have reached a point of being able to deal with the government on their own. ACCORD representatives have been able to take a back seat.

Planned Long-term Impacts - 3+ years (as stated in the approved proposal):

1. Empowerment of communities to negotiate with other stakeholders.
2. Revival of traditional governance system of forest resources.
3. Increase in the role of communities in forest management related decision making.
4. Check on further encroachment of sacred groves.
5. Better understanding and implementation of ways to strike a balance between conservation and development.
6. Inter generational transmission of traditional knowledge on conservation.

Actual Progress Toward Long-term Impacts at Completion:

At the end of these 2 years, we can safely say that the progress towards each stated impact in the approved proposal has been significant. Impacts like revival of traditional forest governance systems and increase in role of community in forest management related decision making are more long term changes that one has to wait and see, discussions towards the same have been initiated.

The community is feeling empowered more than ever to negotiate as equals with other stakeholders. The encroachment of sacred groves is not going unchecked anymore as it used to in the past. The community now realizes that they do not have to be helpless victims in cases of encroachment anymore. They are raising their voice and seeking legal advice to stop it. There is now a demand to carry out the mapping of village burial grounds as well which face similar threats of encroachment from the dominant communities.

Planned Short-term Impacts - 1 to 3 years (as stated in the approved proposal):

1. Better understanding of FRA provisions among all stakeholders.
2. Better understanding of the cultural and ecological significance of sacred groves among all stakeholders.
3. Foundation for effective CFR governance models in the Gudalur valley would have been laid.
4. Contribution of Gudalur experience to the body of knowledge around CFR across the country.
5. Community equipped with materials and information to negotiate with Government and other stakeholders to establish their rights.

Actual Progress Toward Short-term Impacts at Completion:

At the time of project completion, most of the short term impacts have either been realized or are near realization. The relevant officials in the Revenue and Forest Department as well as the community definitely understand the provisions of the Act much better now. The community has been provided with handbooks on FRA, case studies of successful implementation of the Act have been shared with them at regular meetings of leaders and multiple trainings and exposure visits conducted for increasing their understanding of the factors leading to the success of the implementation in other states. The foundation for effective governance of CFR is being laid slowly and steadily. The Gudalur experience has been documented and is ready to be shared with the larger community working on FRA.

As a community organization, we have not stressed on the ecological significance of the sacred groves too much. The cultural significance has grown organically with the mapping exercise without the need for organizing separate meetings to discuss it.

Please provide the following information where relevant: Not Applicable

Hectares Protected:

Species Conserved:

Corridors Created:

Describe the success or challenges of the project toward achieving its short-term and long-term impact objectives.

While the project has been highly successful in achieving the proposed impacts, there were many challenges that prefaced during the course of implementation.

At the start of the project, the role of the government agencies had been quite counterproductive in the process of implementation of the Act. Several claim forms had been misplaced at the Taluk level and the Gram Sabhas were informally asked to resubmit their claims, making the legality of these claim forms a joke. There was little knowledge among officials at the range and taluk levels about the Act. Despite their limited knowledge of the Act, they, especially the Forest Department, would attempt to de-motivate the Gram Sabha leaders at the Sub Divisional Level Committee (SDLC) meetings by finding flaws with the claim forms. Most often, their assertion was absolutely baseless. Such attempts to make the community feel unsure of their understanding of the Act and the processes were successful. As the understanding of the Act grew among the Gram Sabha leaders, they have not only challenged the officials at these meetings, but also displayed examples of their sound knowledge of the provisions of the Act.

There is limited awareness of the Act among the forest watchers and guards, who interact with the community on a daily basis. Occasional cases of Forest Department continuing to harass the community when they go into the forest to collect forest produce are reported. For instance, rumours were spread in 2014 that cameras had been installed all across the Tiger Reserve and any adivasi caught on camera would be punished. Clearly this was a strategy on part of the Forest Department to instill fear in the minds of people. All of this is done very informally. While this is often a huge challenge, ACCORD has used such opportunities to re-initiate the dialogue with the community to reinforce their faith in the Act.

The SDLC meetings were hardly held until 2 years back. Through consistent efforts from the Gram Sabha leaders over the last 2 years, these meetings have started to happen more regularly. Another limiting factor has been the fact that there has been very little progress with FRA for the communities to see in the last 5 years. In the absence of much visible progress, it becomes difficult to keep the interest and motivation of the community sustained.

In 2014 when the Kattunayakans of various Gram Sabhas started honey collection, they sent notices to the Forest Department stating they would be exercising their traditional forest. We assumed that it would be a good way to take the Forest Department into confidence until title deeds are issued. We also realized that we could not wait forever for the distribution of title deeds as most of it is outside the control of the Gram Sabhas. As it is quite clear that the Gram Sabhas are the most powerful bodies under the Act, the adivasis have begun to assert their various rights. We however, have been ensuring that Gram Sabhas follow the due process as required under the Act and that they have approved the claims and forwarded them to the SDLC before they start exercising their rights of access, sustainable use and conservation of the forest as outlined in the Act.

Were there any unexpected impacts (positive or negative)?

As has been the case in most other states, we expected the Forest Department to not acknowledge the existence of the Forest Rights Act. This was the case until a few months before the project completion. Though there have almost no cases of harassment of adivasis going to the forest, the Forest Department would issue them informal threats and make statements that were in violation of the Act. In an attempt to work together, the Gram Sabhas decided to conduct a workshop where the community and Forest Department sat together and discussed the Act. The Revenue Department was quite supportive of the idea and took responsibility for intimating the concerned stakeholders to attend it.

Though the workshop had to be cancelled for reasons of logistics, there was an unexpected positive impact. The Forest Department got on its guard after receiving the intimation. The

DFO of Gudalur decided to 'teach' the adivasis about the Forest Rights Act instead of being 'taught'.

Whatever the intentions behind their idea, it has been the first time that the Forest Department has been willing to acknowledge and even speak about the Act.

Project Components

Project Components: *Please report on results by project component. Reporting should reference specific products/deliverables from the approved project design and other relevant information.*

Component 1 Planned (as stated in the approved proposal):

Understanding and documenting the role of sacred groves of indigenous communities in biodiversity conservation.

- 1.1 Report to CEPF on compliance with Safeguards Policy on Physical and Cultural Resources and Indigenous Peoples
- 1.2 Communities through Gram Sabha informed on project safeguards and redressal mechanism
- 1.3 Document on history, perspectives and status on sacred groves and their biodiversity values
- 1.4 Map of Sacred Groves in Gudalur valley
- 1.5 Possible classification of Sacred Groves as ICCAs

Component 1 Actual at Completion:

- 1.1 The Compliance reports with Safeguard Policy have been submitted every 6 months along with the performance reports.
- 1.2 Posters on project safeguards and redressal mechanism were developed and put up at community centres to inform community.
- 1.3 Document on history and status of sacred groves in Gudalur has been prepared.
- 1.4 The map of sacred groves in Gudalur valley is ready
- 1.5 ACCORD had consulted the ICCA team regarding the criteria for classification of areas as ICCAs. We learnt that Sacred Groves of Gudalur would not qualify for the classification. We are now working towards seeking formal recognition for sacred groves from the State Tribal Welfare Department with support from the Revenue Department.

Component 2 Planned (as stated in the approved proposal):

Streamlining the process of CFR claim application under Forest Rights Act, 2006

- 2.1 Better understanding of FRA provisions among all stakeholders
- 2.2 Development of CFR maps

2.3 Resource use calendars

2.4 Submission of CFR claims by Gram Sabhas to SDLC

2.5 Document on process of FRA implementation in Gudalur

Component 2 Actual at Completion:

2.1 There is definitely a better understanding of FRA among the community, especially the leaders. There has been a lot of discussion on FRA between stakeholders in the last 2 years. These discussions have been the fora where FRA's implications have been debated and resolved, all of which has led to improving the understanding of the Act among the stakeholders.

2.2 CFR maps have been developed for 23 of the 30 Gram Sabhas. There are some Gram Sabhas that have decided to not claim CFR rights as much of the forest around their villages has been converted into plantations or towns and there is almost no forest area where CFR rights can be exercised. For such Gram Sabhas, CFR maps have not been prepared.

2.3 Resource use calendars had been initially planned for all the Gram Sabhas. After discussions with the community, it made sense to prepare these calendars community wise. Accordingly, resource use calendars have been developed for the Paniyas, the Bettakurumbas and the Kattunayakans.

2.4 At the time of reporting, 15 Gram Sabhas had submitted their CFR claims to the SDLC. The remaining 8 Gram Sabhas have scheduled to submit them by the end of September as Gram Sabha meetings to approve the CFR claims could not be conducted during the project duration.

2.5 Document on process of FRA implementation in Gudalur has been prepared.

Component 3 Planned (as stated in the approved proposal):

Capacity Building of communities to protect, conserve and manage forest resources

3.1 Document on traditional management practices and current conservation goals of communities in the region

3.2 Development of management, conservation and monitoring plans

3.3 Foundation for effective CFR governance models.

3.4 Document on lessons learned for CFR management experiences

Component 3 Actual at Completion:

3.1 Documentation on traditional management practices is ongoing. We have been continually modifying our framework to solicit better responses from the community elders. We have finally finalized a framework that appears to be working fine. The interviews are being carried out by the youth from the community. The final document will be ready before the end of September.

3.2 This has not taken off yet. It has taken two years for the community to start exercising their community right of access and collection of forest produce confidently and fearlessly. We were not confident of starting the development of management plans unless the right to protect and conserve forest starts to get internalized by the community. The discussions have been initiated and there is a high level of awareness and interest among the community about their forest protection right but there is still some way to go before they start asserting these rights.

3.3 We have identified a combination of processes for CFR governance and discussed them with community leaders. These are yet to be formalized and implemented.

3.4 We have prepared a document that is a compilation of varied and interesting CFR management experience of grassroots organizations in different states of the country. The document is ready to be shared.

Were any components unrealized? If so, how has this affected the overall impact of the project?

One component that remained unrealized by the end of project duration was the development of CFR conservation and management plans. Our team of community mobilizers was not very comfortable in conducting meetings to develop formal management plans with the community if its implementation could not be started immediately. It has taken two years for the community to internalize that they can exercise their traditional rights in the forest fearlessly. As already mentioned above, it will take some more time for them to start exercising their conservation and protection rights. The slow progress with this has also delayed the achievement of the proposed impact of increase in the role of community in forest management related decision making. Having said that, the communities are now aware of their right and responsibility to manage forest and there is excitement and interest among them to co-manage the forest together with the Forest Department.

Please describe and submit (electronically if possible) any tools, products, or methodologies that resulted from this project or contributed to the results.

We are submitting the following documents (products) that resulted from this project.

1. Document on history and status of Sacred Groves
2. Document on FRA implementation process in Gudalur. CFR maps of a few Gram Sabhas have been included in this document.
3. Document on CFR management experience

Lessons Learned

Describe any lessons learned during the design and implementation of the project, as well as any related to organizational development and capacity building. Consider lessons that would inform projects designed or implemented by your organization or others, as well as lessons that might be considered by the global conservation community.

Project Design Process: (aspects of the project design that contributed to its success/shortcomings)

During the project design, we were very clear that the project would be community driven. We have always work on the principle that it is easy for a group of outsiders to carry out the activities and meet the deliverables. The community in such cases becomes passive recipients with little clue of what is happening. As this was a project designed to impact local communities, the ownership needed to lie with the community to ensure sustainability. Clarity on this aspect made us ensure that even if deliverables were being met slowly, the community knew exactly what was happening.

Project Implementation: (aspects of the project execution that contributed to its success/shortcomings)

There have been many lessons we have learned during the period of project implementation which were accordingly incorporated in our approach. When we started, we underestimated the need and knowledge that community mobilizers had of FRA issues on ground. We assumed we could start work directly with the Gram Sabhas on CFR implementation. This was not the right assumption to make. As this understanding developed between us, we decided to start the implementation in a more staged manner with the training of the community mobilizers on CFR provisions. This was followed by training of FRC members and exposure visits of community leaders, many of whom are FRC members also.

We had also assumed that we could focus on community mobilization in the first year of the project, following which the process would grow organically. Given the land complexities, absence of visible results for people to see and the changing aspirations and priorities of the adivasi population here, our assumption was not entirely correct. We realized that mobilization had to be an ongoing and sustained process for at least another year.

We also modified our mobilization strategy to factor in the present aspirations and priorities of communities to whatever extent possible. For example, housing emerged to be one of the biggest needs of the communities. People are not able to build their traditional houses with bamboo and thatch because there have been restrictions on the collection of bamboo and thatch is not easily available in the forest anymore. Forest Rights Act provided the answer to both the problems - first by allowing harvesting of bamboo and second, by

providing the right to regenerate their traditional resources. We have found this to be an effective way for people to relate to the Act and understand it.

Another important lesson that we learned during this period was that pressure needed to be built at all levels to get things moving with the implementation of the Forest Rights Act. While community mobilizers were spending a lot of time and energy motivating the Gram Sabha members, we felt that more needed to be done with the government as well so that there are visible results for people to see. We strategically increased our engagement with government stakeholders at the taluk, district and state level.

The amount of pressure built on the Taluk administration by the Gram Sabha leaders for the speedy implementation of the Act has been huge over the last 6 months. The administration has felt bound to respond. They have been using the fora of SDLC discussions to not only discuss FRA but also government schemes. Infact, in a Gram Sabha leaders meeting organized in March, it emerged that the administration is trying to sideline FRA almost entirely. While the implementation and sanctioning of government schemes in the name of Gram Sabhas is a welcome move, it appears to be a deliberate attempt on the part of the administration to show progress and appease the community. There are two sides to it. Yes, there is visible progress for the community now which will reaffirm their faith in the power of Gram Sabhas. No, it is not the implementation of FRA in its letter and spirit. This was made very clear during the meeting of Gram Sabha leaders and strategies to have a discussion that addressed both were discussed. Now the Gram Sabha leaders have decided to ensure that the processing of FRA claims receive as much priority as development schemes.

The exposure visits also taught us valuable lessons, among which the most important was perhaps to increase the engagement with the Tribal Department in the implementation of the Act. In the other states where formal recognition of forest rights has been done already, the Tribal Department has played an instrumental role. In Gudalur, their involvement is negligible. There is no exclusive Tribal Department here and what exists in its place is a Social Welfare Department which is happy to deal with schemes. They have so far not felt any accountability to ensure the effective implementation of the Act. We have started conversations with the concerned officers in these departments both at the taluk and district level. This, we are hopeful, will yield positive results.

Other lessons learned relevant to conservation community:

Not Applicable.

Additional Funding

Provide details of any additional funding that supported this project and any funding secured for the project, organization, or the region, as a result of the CEPF investment in this project.

No other funding has been sourced for the financing of the project.

Donor	Type of Funding*	Amount	Notes

****Additional funding should be reported using the following categories:***

- A*** *Project co-financing (Other donors or your organization contribute to the direct costs of this project)*

- B*** *Grantee and Partner leveraging (Other donors contribute to your organization or a partner organization as a direct result of successes with this CEPF funded project.)*

- C*** *Regional/Portfolio leveraging (Other donors make large investments in a region because of CEPF investment or successes related to this project.)*

Sustainability/Replicability

Summarize the success or challenge in achieving planned sustainability or replicability of project components or results.

From the time the project started, we were very certain that the ownership of the project lies with the community and we have been successful in achieving it. We are confident that the impacts of the project will be sustained.

From using GPS to map sacred groves to mapping CFR boundaries to mobilization, the entire implementation of the project has been carried out by members from the community including the community leaders and youth. Today there is a strong team of Gram Sabha leaders who negotiate with government stakeholders as equals. A movement has emerged for the cause of forest rights and the Gram Sabha leaders are motivated to take it forward. Strategies for the same are discussed regularly at the quarterly meeting of these leaders. Already during the project duration, ACCORD had taken a backseat and the community was

engaging directly with the government. While ACCORD will continue to support the strategies of the

Summarize any unplanned sustainability or replicability achieved.

Not Applicable

Safeguard Policy Assessment

Provide a summary of the implementation of any required action toward the environmental and social safeguard policies within the project.

There have been no environmental and social safeguard issues during the course of the project.

Additional Comments/Recommendations

Information Sharing and CEPF Policy

CEPF is committed to transparent operations and to helping civil society groups share experiences, lessons learned, and results. Final project completion reports are made available on our Web site, www.cepf.net, and publicized in our newsletter and other communications.

Please include your full contact details below:

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*****If your grant has an end date other than JUNE 30, please complete the tables on the following pages*****

Performance Tracking Report Addendum

CEPF Global Targets

(Enter Grant Term)

**Provide a numerical amount and brief description of the results achieved by your grant.
Please respond to only those questions that are relevant to your project.**

Project Results	Is this question relevant?	If yes, provide your numerical response for results achieved during the annual period.	Provide your numerical response for project from inception of CEPF support to date.	Describe the principal results achieved from July 1, 2013 to May 30, 2014. (Attach annexes if necessary)
1. Did your project strengthen management of a protected area guided by a sustainable management plan? Please indicate number of hectares improved.	No			Please also include name of the protected area(s). If more than one, please include the number of hectares strengthened for each one.
2. How many hectares of new and/or expanded protected areas did your project help establish through a legal declaration or community agreement?	No			Please also include name of the protected area. If more than one, please include the number of hectares strengthened for each one.
3. Did your project strengthen biodiversity conservation and/or natural resources management inside a key biodiversity area identified in the CEPF ecosystem profile? If so, please indicate how many hectares.	No			
4. Did your project effectively introduce or strengthen biodiversity conservation in management practices outside protected areas? If so, please indicate how many hectares.	No			
5. If your project promotes the sustainable use of natural	Yes			

resources, how many local communities accrued tangible socioeconomic benefits? Please complete Table 1below.				
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If you answered yes to question 5, please complete the following table

Total																					

If you marked "Other", please provide detail on the nature of the Community Characteristic and Socioeconomic Benefit: