Carrying Forward Learnings on CFRR implementation and management to greater Bastar region

In any action research project, how does one balance the need to improve the quality of on-ground interventions with the need to scale-up these interventions to wider geographies? This is a challenge we have been navigating throughout the course of our project on training and capacity building for CFRR recognition and management in Bastar district. For the past year, our team has been working with the Bastar district administration to expedite the CFRR claim making process, to ensure that claims being filed are accurate and thorough, to mediate and resolve conflicts that occur during the claim-making process, to develop mapping systems to aid in claim-making and conflict resolution, to provide support for CFRR management planning and suggest policies to improve forest-based livelihoods.

While we have made considerable progress over the course of the year, the next challenge we faced was how to take forward the work and learnings from Bastar district to benefit other geographies and populations. With this in mind and with the support of the Divisional Commissioner (Revenue), Shri. Shyam Dhawade, and the Bastar district administration, we organised a dissemination workshop on 16th July 2022. The aim was to share our learnings and start a conversation with officials and civil society members from the other 6 districts in greater Bastar: Sukma, Dantewada, Narayanpur, Bijapur, Kanker, and Kondagaon. The workshop, conducted on 16th July, was attended by Tribal and Forest Department officials, elected SDLC and DLC members and representatives of various NGOs and CSOs working in the area of forest rights from all 6 districts. The workshop was inaugurated by the District Collector Bastar (Shri. Chandan Kumar), the Chief Conservator of Forests Jagdalpur Circle (Shri. Shahid Muhammed) and the Divisional Commissioner himself. The ATREE team presented learnings and recommendations from all our areas of interventions, followed by an engaging discussion with participants regarding their own experiences, concerns and suggestions.

Introductory session at the dissemination workshop (photo courtesy Venkat Ramanujam)

There were five main topics discussed over the course of the day, corresponding to our five main areas of intervention in the district.

Training and Capacity Building for CFRR Implementation:
In the past year, ATREE has held training workshops for our own 18 FRA coordinators as well as NGO workers, SDLC and DLC members, patwaris, forest beat guards, and FRC members. Through our experience with carrying out CFR implementation with such a diverse group of people, one of our main learnings is the immense importance of dedicated and well-trained FRA coordinators. Such individuals can not only form a bridge between the administration and the villagers, but also combine bottom-up procedures with technical know-how, which would be immensely useful for fast-tracking the process without compromising quality.

While the claim-making process has gained momentum, a glaring shortcoming is the absence of women from the entire process, which is something that needs to be consciously addressed, especially since it is women who best understand forest-based livelihoods.

Representatives from Bade Kakloor village submitting their CFRR claim (photo courtesy Kamluram Poyam)

Conflicts caused by CFRR claim-making:

During the process of implementing CFRR in the villages, we came across a number of conflicts that had arisen during the claim-making process, some of which we were successful in resolving. This allowed us to ascertain the main causes for the conflicts around CFRR in Bastar, the first of which is a confusion between CR (Community Rights, or the right to access forest resources within and outside one's traditional) and CFRR. By law, one village's CFRR claim over a certain area does not negate another village's CR in the same area. However, due to the incorrect notion that CFRR negates CR, many villages withhold No-Objection Certificates when their neighbours seek to submit a CFRR claim. Another reason for conflict is errors in the CFRR titles that have already been issued, where villages have either been given entire forest compartments that they traditionally share with other villages, or they have been given forest compartments that traditionally are not theirs at all and belong to completely different villages. A third reason is when one revenue village is split into two panchayats, conflicts arise regarding how to share the forest between the two panchayats.

Some of our recommendations for avoiding or resolving conflict would be to spread awareness about the difference between CR and CFRR, use revenue survey numbers as the basis for claim-making instead of forest compartments (which ensures that the claimed area does not fall within the boundary of another village), correcting the wrongly recognised titles, and encouraging villages that are split into multiple panchayats to claim CFRR together. Most importantly, however, the SDLC must discharge its statutory responsibility by taking an active and leading role in resolving disputes that the Gram Sabhas cannot resolve by themselves.
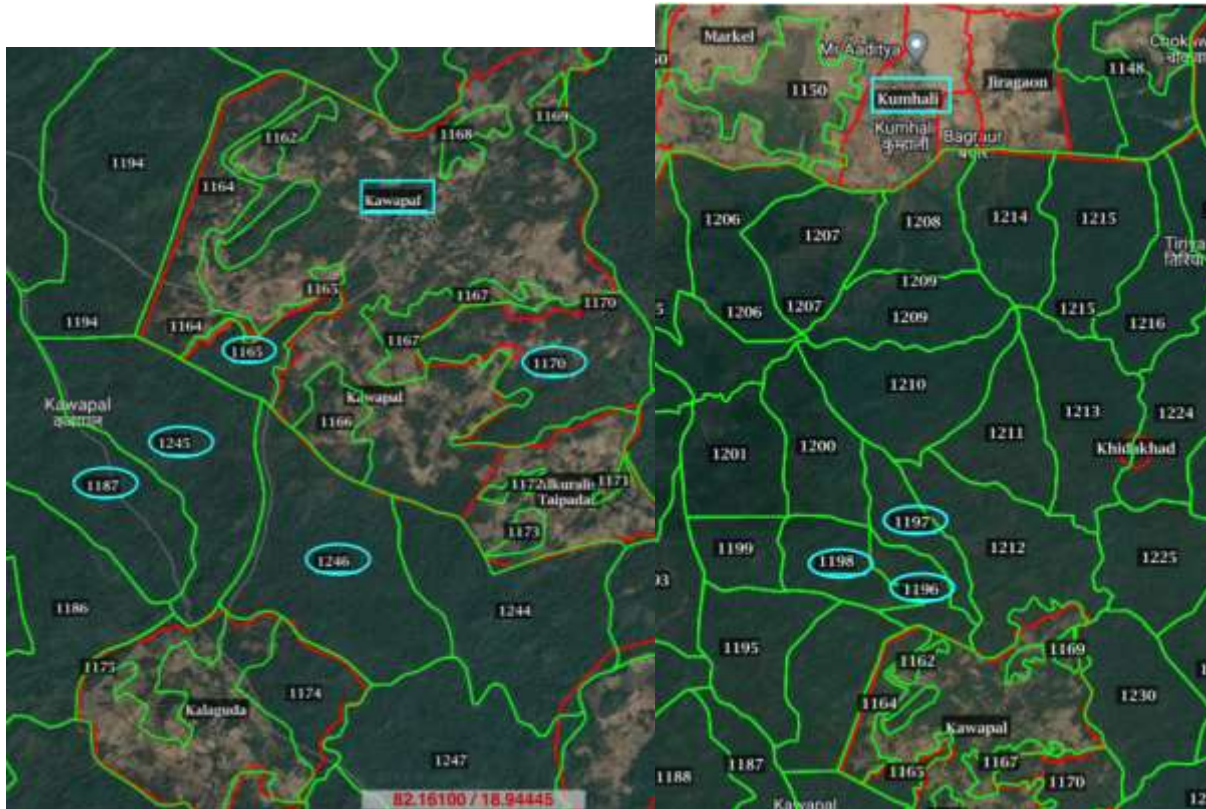
Left: Kawapal's CFR title gives them forest compartments that are shared with Kalaguda and Taipadar
Right: Kumhali's CFR title gives them forest compartments far to the south, abutting Kawapal

Development of a WebGIS system and Mobile Application:
While the FRA only requires villagers to indicate their customary boundary and that too using just a *nazri naksha* or sketch map, there is still a need to use formal maps at some point in the process, because rights can only be claimed on legally defined 'forest land', which needs to be clearly identified. Moreover, when recognizing the title, the administration needs to indicate exactly which lands (in terms of existing demarcations) have been included.

In order to integrate all the different sets of maps that currently exist (revenue boundaries, forest compartments, cadastral maps, and satellite maps) and to make these maps accessible to the public, our team created a WebGIS system that integrated all these 4 types of maps. Anyone using this system can not only see these maps together, they can also view census data for each village and measure area and distance through this platform.

The next step was to make these maps visible *while* walking the CFRR claim boundary, so that villagers know whether they are crossing into another village's boundary, and also making the CFRR claim boundary available permanently and visible to officials screening the claims. So we have also created a mobile application called "Aamcho CFR" ("our CFR" in the local Halbi language). Using this application, people can see their location in reference to all the maps in the WebGIS system, and can map their CFRR area using this as a reference point. Once they have mapped their CFRR area, the track will be uploaded to one common server, which the

SDLC and DLC can use to evaluate and approve claims. This will allow SDLC and DLC members to view the claim not only in reference to existing revenue and forest boundaries, but also in reference to other villages' CFRR claims.

Forest and Revenue boundaries in the WebGIS system

CFR Management Planning:

We have initiated CFRR management planning pilots in 5 villages in the district. Though the villages have not received their CFRR titles yet, they were eager to begin the process of management planning anyway. The villages have planned to put in place measures that suit their specific forest conditions and livelihood needs; some have set up patrols to protect the forest from felling and over-harvesting, some have planned to plant sal trees, and others have resolved to control the harvest of bamboo shoots and remove lantana. Others want to replace existing plantations of exotic species, such as Acacia auriculiformis, with local species such as sal, mahua, and others, that are more useful for people's livelihoods. Across the board, a common refrain is the demand stop coupe felling that is carried out by the Forest Department for timber harvest. Villagers claim that this not only destroys biodiversity, but the opening up of the canopy also leads to the proliferation of lantana, a highly invasive species that prevents the growth of native plants. Once CFRR management plans are prepared, it is imperative that the CFRR areas are removed from the forest department's working plans so that it may be managed by the CFRMC without any outside intervention.

Women discussing management planning in Nagalsar village (photo courtesy Shruti Mokashi)

Integration of CFRR management and NTFP-based Livelihoods:
With the rise in the importance and prevalence of agriculture over the last decade, livelihoods based on non-timber forest products (NTFPs) have reduced, but they still remain a very significant source of income for most forest dwelling communities in Bastar. At the same time, forests too are degrading because of coupe felling, clearing of forests for agriculture, and over-harvesting of NTFPs. There are a number of national and state level schemes and mechanisms aimed at improving forest based livelihoods. The MSP for MFP scheme provides a fixed minimum support price, the Van Dhan Yojana provides for value addition and avenues for marketing, and the Chhattisgarh Minor Forest Produce Federation (CGMFPFED) ensures procurement at MSP.

While these schemes have led to an increase in income from NTFP, they have also increased NTFP collectors' dependence on the state. In order to empower NTFP collectors and reduce their dependence on the state, it is important to start forest management through CFRR Gram Sabhas, where they should be given the option of marketing NTFP themselves or taking the help of the state. If CFRR Gram Sabhas (individually or collectively) have full control over NTFP trade, it will help ensure higher returns, sustainable harvests and the long-term empowerment of the community to manage their own affairs.

Women selling bamboo products in the local haats (photo courtesy Venkat Ramanujam)

The workshop ended with a call by CSO and Adivasi community leaders to deploy the learnings from the ATREE effort in Bastar district to rapidly spread awareness and complete CFR rights recognition in the greater Bastar region.