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THEMATIC EVALUATION ON FORESTRY PROJECTS IN INDIA

Food aid and tribal people

ABSTRACT

This thematic evaluation attempts to assess the achievements and effects of WFP assistance to the tribal people inhabiting India's forests. Analyses of available data showed that the projects do reach some of the country's poorest and hungriest people, i.e., the tribal people living in the forests for whom food aid is an appropriate form of assistance. The projects are addressing India's "silent emergency", i.e., they are assisting some of the more than 230 million people who suffer chronic food insecurity.

The evaluation revealed that the design of the projects has evolved and improved, and continues to do so; it has adapted well to WFP's changing mandate and to new concepts, in particular to the demand for beneficiary participation. Despite the various risks of promoting unproven policies, through supporting and strengthening the emerging government policy (known as Joint Forest Management), WFP has gained the respect of the forest departments and other donors.

Areas in need of improvement have been identified and are being addressed by WFP and the state governments; these include the related issues of needs assessment, equitable sharing of project benefits and assets, and the development of processes for conflict resolution. The evaluations have consistently noted the lack of investment in alternative employment opportunities for the people living in the project areas. This continues to be of serious concern.

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BACKGROUND

1. India has the largest number of poor, food-insecure people of any country in the world. More than one third of the population, or 360 million people, live below the official poverty line.¹ On a national level India's food production and buffer stocks have appeared to be improving. However, at the time of writing, reported stocks have again declined. Food insecurity - hunger, malnutrition and nutrition-related diseases - for more than 230 million Indian people, belonging mainly to scheduled tribes and castes, is chronic. The tribal people who inhabit India's forests represent one of the poorest sectors of the population. They have been marginalized and exploited for centuries; but even recently their living conditions have significantly declined.
2. The forests are no longer able to sustain the tribal and other poor people who used to depend upon them for their livelihood and sustenance. The agricultural resource base for these people cannot meet their subsistence needs for more than two or three months a year, while they lack the purchasing power to buy food for the rest of the year. A system of fair price shops, known as the Public Distribution System (PDS), has been established, but it cannot meet the needs of those who do not have the cash to buy the subsidized food commodities. This situation, compounded by the loss of rights and ownership by the local people, has resulted in a further decline of food intake and in living standards, as well as a lack of forest management by the indigenous peoples or the Government.
3. The remoteness of the tribal villages, compounded by the reluctance of many agencies and groups to work in the forest areas, has resulted in few services or development opportunities being made available to the tribal people. The state forest departments are the only agencies with a well established presence and regular contact with the tribal populations, providing significant employment within the forest areas. Recently a new form of collaborative forest management has been emerging: a system known as Joint Forest Management (JFM), which involves cooperation between forest departments and local people, and shared rights to, and responsibilities for, forest produce and the protection and regeneration of the forests. In 1990 the Government issued policy guidelines and a framework for the introduction of community participation.
4. WFP assistance to the tribal and scheduled caste people of the forest areas started in 1972 with an experimental project, which provided food aid in support of forestry activities in Maharashtra. This experience led to the development and evolution of a series of similar projects in the states of Bihar, Gujarat, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. The design of the projects has developed along with the evolution of the concepts and policies of JFM, and new approaches continue to be introduced.

¹ India's official poverty line is currently defined as expenditure required for a daily calorie intake of 2,400 per person in rural and 2,100 in urban areas. This expenditure is officially estimated at Rs. 107 per capita per month in rural areas and Rs.122 in urban areas at 1984-85 prices (one United States dollar equalled 34.7 rupees in May 1996).



5. To date, five of these projects have been evaluated or reviewed, namely:
- India 2683 - Socio-economic development through forestry activities in Bihar (originally approved in October 1983, last evaluated in 1993)
 - India 2685 - Socio-economic development through forestry activities in Orissa (originally approved in 1983, last evaluated in 1993)
 - India 2751 - Watershed development and afforestation in Uttar Pradesh (originally approved in November 1985, last evaluated in 1994)
 - India 2773 (Exp.1) - Employment through forestry activities and tribal development in Rajasthan (originally approved in 1987, the subject of a management review and of a case study in 1996)
 - India 3227 - Rehabilitation of degraded forests and afforestation in Madhya Pradesh (originally approved in June 1988, last evaluated in 1995)

At the time of evaluation while all the projects were at different stages of evolution, none reflected the new approaches.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE EVALUATION

6. Some key policy questions provided the framework for this thematic evaluation. These are related to the best use of scarce resources, targeting strategies, the feasibility of integrating food aid with current forest management policies, and the relationship between government strategies and policies and food assistance. Within this framework the overall objective of this summary evaluation was to provide an assessment of the achievements and effects of WFP assistance to the tribal people, based on reports from previous missions. While none of the evaluations provided a basis for evaluating the new approaches, the thematic evaluation was required to outline those aspects of the projects that had worked and those that had not. An assessment of the relevance of food aid, and the project approach and strategy, was required, together with an identification of the more important lessons learned for the design and implementation of similar projects in the natural resources sector of India, and possibly elsewhere.

THE WFP-ASSISTED FOREST-BASED PROJECTS: EVOLUTION OF PROJECT DESIGN

7. The stated longer-term objectives of the five projects have evolved since the early eighties from the natural resource-based to the more people-orientated goals of the projects of the mid-nineties. This change reflects new concepts, in particular an increasing beneficiary orientation and the intensification of participatory approaches and implementation. For the projects in Bihar and Orissa, as originally approved in 1983, the objectives were primarily to rehabilitate forests, while meeting people's needs for wood was a secondary objective. Poverty was mentioned but food insecurity was not. These issues were not the most urgent for the forest departments, who viewed their mandate more in terms of forest management and protection in relation to the sustainable supply of timber and non-timber products, and this was condoned by WFP. However, the evaluation missions considered the projects' original objectives vague and without clear direction. Similar problems were found with the design of the projects in Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) and



Rajasthan, and, to a slightly lesser extent, in Madhya Pradesh (M.P.), the final project with this design to be approved.

8. The project in M.P. better addressed WFP's mandate, putting considerably more emphasis on meeting the needs of local people. The expansion of the project in Rajasthan (plan of operations signed in July 1993) further stressed WFP's goal of alleviating poverty and food insecurity, as well as emphasizing people's participation and the strengthening of relationships between tribal villagers and the forest departments. This project expansion in fact pioneered the new approaches and strategies that became the model for later projects. The stated long-term objective of a redesigned (February 1995) project combining Bihar and Orissa was "to improve the food security and income levels of poor, forest-dependent, predominantly tribal communities in Bihar and Orissa" to be achieved "through the development of forest and agricultural resources and income-generating activities." The specifying of agricultural development and the proposals for inclusion of income-generating activities for women who also would participate in decisions concerning village resources were considered innovative.
9. The last project to be appraised (May 1996) was a proposal (not yet scheduled for approval by the Executive Board) for combining the M.P. and U.P. projects, building on the Bihar and Orissa model. The immediate objective of "enhancing community participation in forest management and community development through JFM, with special emphasis on the participation of women" was added, to further encourage government policies in regard to women as well as tribal people in general, particularly the forest dwellers, and to support the innovative changes in government policy related to forest management.
10. The forest-based projects now have a well-focused long-term objective: sustainable food security for the poorest, scheduled caste and tribal communities. The immediate objectives focus on community-orientated forest and agricultural development, special opportunities for women and participation of local communities in JFM. These objectives are in line with WFP's mandate and with government policies.

MAJOR FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Appropriateness of the approach and strategy of the projects

11. The overall approach of all the projects was designed to assist the Government of India in developing its participatory approaches in the management of state forest resources while meeting WFP's Mission Statement. The fundamental rationale of the programme, known as Joint Forest Management, is the concept of partnership between the local, tribal and village communities and the authorities of the state forest departments. The approach is village-centred and participatory-orientated. It is targeted to remote areas of food insecurity and high incidences of poverty. The projects were designed to provide food resources as a direct income transfer to project participants engaged in ongoing state forestry works, and through the sale of food commodities to participants, to generate funds to be used for the creation of village assets.
12. India, like many other countries, has a history of at least a century of sometimes unsuccessful forest policies. Hence, some questions are raised concerning the appropriateness of WFP supporting such unproven government forestry policies. Other doubts relate to the use of food as a direct income transfer to the people employed in



forestry works. It is noted that given the high rates of unemployment throughout the project areas, the food does not have an incentive role. But also, it is not clear that food is an appropriate input into what is supposed to be an iterative, participatory process. But such doubts may be out of place and irrelevant: WFP has gained the respect of forest departments for its support to pioneer approaches and strategies.

13. The strategies of the five projects were similar: to provide support to ongoing state forest department programmes that are in line with the approach set out in the JFM promulgations. The short-term food security for those who participated in the food-for-work (FFW) activities of the project, in particular women, improved, although no additional employment or assets have been created through the initial FFW forestry activities. For the use of generated funds, broad categories of activities to be supported were identified and described in the projects' plans of operation, in which detailed specifications are necessarily absent. The strategy relies on village-level participatory needs assessment and micro-planning, and hence on in-built flexibility concerning the type and mix of activities.
14. During project implementation no significant changes were made to the strategy as originally planned. The national and state governments appreciate WFP assistance and have ensured that the food commodities reached the beneficiaries in a quite timely and efficient manner. Physical targets of the initial plantation works are being reached in all projects, and good progress has been made in the reconstruction of the relationships between the officials of the forest departments and the local people. These improvements are notable: decades of mutual mistrust are being overcome.
15. There was a slow start to the utilization of generated funds in the projects, often because of bottlenecks in identifying, selecting and approving suitable schemes. According to the latest available data, funds are being disbursed at an acceptable rate. To attempt to accelerate the utilization of funds at this stage is probably not advisable: the participatory quality of the process would almost certainly suffer, as well as notions of partnership and integrated approach. The establishment of State-Level Coordination Committees (SLCC), which comprise representatives of different government agencies, has improved forest department cooperation with other line departments at the policy level. But at the field level there is a tendency for forest departments to take on everything. There is a need for forest department staff to involve other agencies specialized in fields such as agriculture and irrigation, and in the social sectors, e.g., health and education.
16. Prior to the new project design based on JFM, the selection of activities to be supported by the generated funds was undertaken by the forest departments; no discussions with local people took place. In the Bihar, Orissa, Rajasthan and M.P. projects most of the funds were used for developing more forest plantations, while in U.P. the priorities were soil conservation, water supplies and labour sheds, as selected by the forestry authorities. The approach now is to use the funds in a more participatory way. Beneficiaries are expected to establish their own priorities through village forest committees and microplanning processes. The strategy for allocating funds in Rajasthan involves concentrating the use of funds in remote tribal pockets of greatest need, focusing on collective community participation in planning and implementing village-level plans, and supporting a narrow set of activities aimed at improving food security.
17. There is still room for more involvement of NGOs. Although the forest departments have accepted that the NGOs do have a role to play, in particular in village-level needs assessments, non-forestry income-generating activities and training, in particular for women, there is a rather serious lack of suitable NGOs working in the remoter tribal areas.



To facilitate appropriate NGOs, WFP has recently drawn up guidelines and drafted preliminary agreements for the larger, nodal NGOs, which will operate at the village level through their own networks of local NGOs.

18. To the extent that, through the provision of food aid for immediate relief, the projects have addressed India's "silent emergency", i.e., the extremely precarious situation of the marginalized tribal forest people, the approach has been judged successful by various studies. The projects also have been found to have encouraged people's participation in building assets essential for their own sustained development, while strengthening village institutions' capacities for self-reliance. Encouraging JFM accords very well with WFP's mandate to "promote the self-reliance of people and communities" and responds directly to central and state government directives and policies concerning people's participation. To the extent possible, NGOs were encouraged to participate in project implementation, and in particular to act as intermediaries between the tribal people and the state forest departments. However, this was not very successful in any of the projects.

Reaching the targeted beneficiaries through food-for-work activities

19. WFP's target groups in India, as elsewhere, are the poorest and most food-insecure, specifically women. Precise data on the number and gender of people engaged in FFW activities or on the average number of days worked were not always available. The projects' monitoring systems are currently being remodelled to provide data on the beneficiaries and their socio-economic situation, and on the effects of the project on the incomes and food security of men and women, and of their villages.
20. Each of the projects intends to target beneficiaries with food-for-work activities through the selection of those districts in which greater concentrations of the poorest tribal peoples are to be found. But the state forest departments have tended to favour a wider coverage of food aid (and use of generated funds), claiming that every district has its needy; WFP does not consider this to be the best use of scarce resources. Tighter targeting has already been brought into the Rajasthan project and is to be incorporated into the recently appraised projects. Forest departments are sometimes concerned that any cutting back of food assistance will damage their newly found credibility with the local people. However, given the limited availability of WFP-supplied resources, some retrenchment is inevitable. The missions have proposed the following criteria for selecting districts:
- a) a predominance of tribal and scheduled caste people;
 - b) a high proportion of forest cover and forest lands (this criterion tends to be closely linked with the concentration of tribal people);
 - c) strong indicators of food insecurity, such as low per capita food production, land ownership and income; and
 - d) significant quantity of forest department work planned, indicating the potential volume of food that could be distributed.
21. Given the lack of detailed data, the various missions could assess the average profile of the FFW participants only through informal interviews. The forest departments are not usually selective about whom they recruit for labour, with or without food rations, although for practical reasons they prefer to recruit locally. Targeting to remote forest lands more or less guarantees that most food recipients are WFP's target groups; women are reported to constitute up to 65 percent of this labour force. But FFW beneficiaries are not always local and hence are not necessarily of the immediate target group. In the U.P. hills, for example, migrants come for seasonal work from more than 50 kilometers away.



22. Despite the obvious difficulties of identifying typical profiles of food beneficiaries - and hence of assessing the effects of food aid - the missions report that most participants represented the original target group and were deserving of the food rations and income transfer. There is need for better tracking of the beneficiaries.

Effects of the food-for-work component of the projects on beneficiaries

23. Some of the evaluations have asserted that since the forestry activities would have been carried out even in the absence of food aid, then the WFP project adds nothing to what the forest departments would have anyway achieved. It is however also argued that the effect of the WFP projects is considerable. For example, in the more recent projects WFP has been able to influence the forest departments' choice of sites, leading to better focusing on the more remote and poorer areas. And it is suggested that the project could be considerably more influential on the forest department activities, for example on the type of silvicultural practices, and grass and fodder production.
24. During informal interviews beneficiaries reported that working for the forest departments guaranteed them at least minimum wages, which they did not get from other employers. Almost all workers opted to take food rations, in exchange for a wage deduction, rather than full cash wages. They were aware of the value of the income transfer, and appreciated the rations as an alternative to what they might find at the PDS shops. In fact, most found the WFP-supplied food better quality, less expensive and more accessible than PDS food. They also appreciated the mix of grain and protein, which was not always available elsewhere. A study carried out in U.P. by the State Planning Institute between 1987 and 1991 suggested that in the WFP project areas: consumption of food grains increased by 77 percent among food recipients; pulses were provided to many families who would not otherwise have eaten them; and food aid reduced the level of borrowing because workers spent less of their income on buying food. Most villagers interviewed in M.P. reported that they were under-employed and did not have the capacity to produce all their own basic food. People usually migrated to seek jobs elsewhere, leaving small children and older people in the villages. WFP food aid did not eliminate the need to emigrate, but it did in many cases reduce the time spent away from home.
25. Project food requirements were originally estimated on the basis of an assumed average employment of 200 days annually. This proved to be greatly over-stated. The work is highly seasonal and on average provides between 25 and 100 days over a three- to four-month period. Only one working member of a family is allowed to receive rations on a given day. Most missions considered this rule to be unduly restrictive and to greatly dilute the impact of food aid. The main factor limiting the impact of food aid in this sense is the inadequate availability of work.
26. The food assistance is increasingly leading to more focused targeting to the poorer tribal people. Clearly, food aid provides some immediate relief and reduces the need for emigration, but it does not significantly change the basic food insecurity of tribal people.

Reaching the targeted beneficiaries through activities supported by generated funds

27. In regard to the activities supported by generated funds, the geographical coverage is now intended to be concentrated on far smaller areas than the food-for-work components. Some demographic, economic and forest cover data are available at the block level, facilitating selection at this level. In Rajasthan the initial food-for-work activities are now being carried out within 13 districts, while the use of generated funds is confined to the four



poorest districts. Within the four districts of Rajasthan the forest department has developed the following criteria for screening potential villages:

- a) high food insecurity and concentration of tribal groups;
- b) high concentration of landless or functionally landless people;
- c) willingness of the community to contribute to activities and to the creation of assets;
- d) high level of out-migration; and
- e) remoteness of forest-dependent communities and lack of past opportunity for developmental activities.

The final selection of villages involves several steps of screening before final approval. This process, which is being adopted in other states, has been found to work effectively.

Effects of generated fund-supported activities on beneficiaries

28. The microplanning process was designed to address problems of community participation, coherence of activities and equitable sharing of benefits. To date, good progress has been made in enhancing the alliance between the forestry officials and the tribal people. The very positive role of the forestry staff in this process has justifiably been given credit by the evaluations and reviews. However, while recognizing that changing attitudes is a slow venture, the level of participation, authority and responsibility of village community members vis-à-vis forestry officials remains an issue. The forest departments have been willing to introduce contemporary methods of participatory rural appraisal, but there is still room for improvement in assessing the people's needs. The five states are at different stages in respect of progress in introducing concepts and practices of JFM. Rajasthan is the most advanced; the project has well prepared microplanning guidelines and some 44 microplans have already been prepared and approved. In U.P. however, traditional approaches are quite well entrenched and it will probably be some years before JFM is an effective reality there.
29. The technical quality of many of the activities has been generally good, but in some villages the microplans being executed seem to represent lists of rather uncoordinated activities. Irrigation schemes are reported to have greatly improved the food security of some families by enabling them to grow two or three crops a year, instead of one, but some seem likely to benefit only the better-off villagers, for example those with larger landholdings near the irrigation installations. The lack of income-generating or employment schemes has been and remains a long-standing issue.
30. Lack of relevant monitoring data has hindered the assessment of project effects. However, income and food security are the primary concerns of the target groups. These are linked to each other, and directly or indirectly to the availability of forest resources, water resources and to agricultural productivity, employment, health and education. Many of the activities were related to these issues and the overall conclusion was that the use of generated funds had had a positive effect on food security.

Effect of the projects on women and women's participation

31. Since data on the gender of project participants and beneficiaries are not readily available, the various assessments cannot provide more than informed opinion or estimates. Some of the projects have an overall target for the participation of women in food-for-work activities. In Rajasthan, for example the target was 50 percent; but in fact on average



women constitute about 65 percent of the workforce. Women interviewed reported that the work was convenient, primarily because it was close to their homes. They also reported that they appreciated that the additional forestry activities had made it possible for their husbands to remain longer with their families, rather than travelling to urban areas to seek employment. Although the community infrastructures such as hand pumps, pre-school centres and road improvements that have been created through the generated funds have benefited the entire community, some women have expressed particular appreciation. The evaluations have found that the projects have not yet created viable income-generating schemes and employment opportunities for women.

32. The involvement of women in management is minimal in some villages, while in others greater progress has been made. WFP and the forest departments have tried to improve the situation; and there is a real will to improve women's participation in JFM and microplanning activities. There are of course strong cultural barriers to women's visible participation in public fora; and women, as the key to household food security, have an extremely heavy burden of work and family responsibility. However, overall and considering historical and current conditions, the evaluations conclude that progress towards women's participation, in all but the U.P. project, has been quite significant.

Benefit sharing

33. The JFM agreements should spell out how benefits from the forests will be shared between the forest departments and the communities. Most issues concerning the collection of some specified minor forest products, such as *bona fide* domestic fuelwood needs and non-wood products, have been resolved. However, various arrangements exist or are being considered for sharing the final forest crop products. Areas of possible conflict identified included the equitable sharing between forest departments and communities, in particular of the high-value timbers from the sal and teak forests of M.P., and the exclusion of bamboo from benefit-sharing agreements. Another issue is that of conflicting interests within the communities, in particular as regards the use of forests and of generated funds. Different groups, e.g., men and women, may have different priorities. It is important that processes for conflict resolution be developed.

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E)

34. The evaluations noted that the present monitoring systems facilitate the accounting of resources and tracking of physical and financial progress, work done, funds generated and types of activities carried out with the funds. However, none of the data are gender-targeted and the systems give little attention to the effects or impact of the project. WFP has tried to address these concerns by hiring a monitoring and evaluation specialist in mid-1996. His recommendations are expected to lead to a methodology for monitoring, placing particular emphasis on the participatory nature of the projects.

Role and effectiveness of partner institutions

35. Forest departments have been found to be the most appropriate agencies to implement the projects, since they are the only agencies with a continued presence in remote tribal areas capable of generating enough workdays and distributing the large quantities of food required. The departments had early difficulties organizing the logistics of the food management and also in managing the generated funds. But most of the problems have been resolved. The department staff are technically competent and are well motivated,



having taken the opportunity to change their methods of work and to develop sound relationships with the local communities.

36. In the planning and implementation of village development the forest departments need to liaise better with other line agencies, in particular at the field level. The involvement of NGOs in the projects has been disappointing to date. There have been problems of appropriate skills, as well as of mutual trust and orientation. WFP is starting to play a proactive role in recruiting larger, professional NGOs to act as nodal units; and WFP has drawn up guidelines for screening NGOs and for preparing contracts.

Major recommendations of the evaluations and reviews

37. The most significant key issues identified by the missions relate to targeting of participants in food-for-work activities as well as in the management and use of generated funds, benefit sharing, alternative income-generating activities/employment activities, and the involvement of NGOs. Progress in the implementation of the recommendations has been significant. Improvements in targeting and participation have been noted in all projects, in particular in Rajasthan. The forest departments' recently gained credibility with local people may be at risk, while the issues of sharing the final crop forest products remain unresolved. Similarly, unless problems surrounding grazing rights, fodder and grass production are resolved, the sustainability of the forests remains uncertain. The continued lack of alternative employment and income-generating activities also places the sustainability of the projects in jeopardy.

LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

38. The various evaluations and reviews make clear several issues: firstly, that the projects' target population corresponds to that stipulated by WFP's mandate and almost by definition this corresponds with the population most dependent on the forests for their income and food security, i.e., those for whom both food aid and rehabilitation of forests are of most significance. The target population, in particular the women, have a considerable vested interest in working for food aid in order to improve the productivity and sustainability of their forests. However, it is becoming increasingly evident that even improved, rehabilitated forests will not be capable of meeting all the food and economic needs of the present population. Hence, alternative employment opportunities need to be identified.
39. Secondly, it has become apparent that a critical constraint to fully successful implementation relates to the participatory nature of the project and to issues of equity. In this context it is important that participatory rural appraisal/rapid rural appraisal (PRA/RRA) and micro-planning exercises are conducted in such a way that the real needs of all the villagers are revealed, and to the extent feasible, addressed. It is not yet apparent that there is an equitable sharing of project benefits and assets between the forest departments and villagers or among the villagers.
40. The tribal people who have benefited from WFP's assistance are living at the margin of a relief/emergency situation; they are part of India's "silent emergency". The projects have undoubtedly contributed to improved forest management programmes, and to participatory village development and food aid reaching poorer people living in more remote areas than would otherwise have been the case. Continued food aid support to tribal people through this type of activities is therefore justified.



