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Advocating for change? How a civil society-led coalition influences the implementation of the Forest Rights Act in India

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Forest policy implementation is a political endeavor involving both state and non-state actors. We observe that civil society organizations (CSOs) often federate into civil society-led coalitions (CSCs) in order to shape forest policies in their favor. They appear to be successful in doing this during the policy design phase but we know little about whether they are able to see through to implementation the changes they have put in motion. This influences how forest policies are being implemented. This paper analyzes the strategy choices and potential impact during policy implementation of a loose CSC comprised of CSOs, activists, people’s movements, researchers, and lawyers that advocates for the full implementation of the Forest Rights Act in India. Drawing from the Advocacy Coalition Framework’s focus on belief systems, complemented by insights from political ecology and civil society/social movements literature, we develop a framework to analyze CSC strategy choices. Our analysis is conducted at the national level and in two states, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha. We employ qualitative research methods, including 38 interviews with CSC and non-CSC members, and a comprehensive analysis of the main CSC listserv and 1000 relevant English language newspaper articles. Our study reveals that the CSC employs a range of conflictive and collaborative strategies at both national and state levels. It draws on a loose, heterogeneous network with ability to connect internally and a clear moral justification of its involvement in FRA implementation. However the diverse range of views on the implementation issues held by CSC members, lack of dedicated funding for coordination, limited legitimacy in the eyes of some state actors and a constricting wider institutional setting, impedes the CSC’s ability to make coalition-level strategy decisions. Their impact on the policy implementation process is therefore limited.