Emerging collective actions mechanisms as a response to contemporary decentralization reforms in the forest commons of India: Case of NTFP trade in central India

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Collective action can help improve the welfare of forest-dwelling communities and assist them in getting out of poverty in several ways: provide local goods and services they would not be able to provide as single individuals, substitute for missing markets or help overcome barriers to participation in markets, and increase their bargaining power to request services from higher level institutions. In India, Community Forest Resource Rights (CFR rights) under the Forest Rights Act, 2006 provide forest-dwelling communities with a unique opportunity to have both access to and substantive control over their forestlands. After the recognition of CFRs, many gram sabhas (village councils) have started asserting rights over the most important forest resources, i.e. Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFPs). The question now is how these communities are going to actually organize themselves to fully use their rights to achieve the goal of livelihood enhancement and sustainable resource management. In most cases, these gram sabhas are coming together and forming coalitions for developing strategies for sustainable harvest of non-timber forest produce and its trade. In this study, we take stock of such emerging coalitions in Maharashtra, India to illustrate different ways in which they are organizing themselves in collective action to facilitate NTFP trade and sustainable resource management. Through our results, we demonstrate that newly claimed rights over-harvesting and trade of NTFP creates uncertainties, which acts as an impetus for communities to form coalitions. These coalitions then serve as a platform for sharing experiences, solving problems together and gaining strength from each other. We share our observations about ways such coalitions are developing plans for maintaining a steady flow of products, preserving an existing market, creating new marketing opportunities, gaining access to knowledge and professional expertise, and increasing bargaining power. However, this process is beset with some challenges that emerge as these arrangements are operating at the nexus of political pressure, armed conflict, gender and caste discrimination, and ecosystem degradation. In the end, we share how such coalitions are functioning in spite of those challenges.