

JOINT FOREST PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT IN THE EASTERN PLAINS REGION OF KARNATAKA:

A Rapid Assessment

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background and study objectives

Over the past decade or so, “joint” forest management has emerged as the key concept through which afforestation and forest regeneration activities are being implemented in most parts of India. In Karnataka, Joint Forest Planning and Management (JFPM) was launched in 1993 and has been implemented with major financial support (grants or loans) from bilateral agencies. During 1997-2002, the Karnataka Forest Department (KFD) took up the implementation of JFPM in the non-Western Ghats region of Karnataka under the Eastern Plains Forestry and Environment Project (EPFEP) with a budget of Rs.598 crores. The bulk of this budget was a loan from the Japanese Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC). We conducted an independent rapid assessment of the JFPM activities carried out under this project in the northern and southern maidan region, which comprises the major portion of the project implementation area, during 2002. The objectives of the assessment were:

1. To rapidly assess the *quality of JFPM activities* in the northern and southern *maidan* (plains) region that contains about 70% of the JFPM villages covered by EPFEP;
2. To understand the factors determining the observed quality, including *policy-level factors, implementational factors* and *the socio-ecological context*;
3. To suggest ways in which JFPM policy and implementation could be modified to improve the quality of JFPM process and hence the outcomes.

Our assessment does not cover the transition zone (a distinct eco-climatic zone within the EPFEP implementation area characterised by higher rainfall and forest areas). The assessment also does not examine the cost-effectiveness of the JFPM activity. It also does not purport to be an assessment of the EPFEP as a whole, although the centrality of JFPM to

the EPFEP activities means that our findings are crucial to any assessment of the EPFEP.

Conceptual framework

The basic objectives of the National Forest Policy of 1988 include “maintaining environmental stability and restoring ecological balance” and “meeting the requirements of the rural and tribal populations”. These objectives have been adopted by the Government of Karnataka as well. They are elaborated in the EPFEP proposal as “ensuring sustained supply of biomass to the local communities and reducing poverty while managing forest and other common lands in an environmentally sustainable manner”. Participatory management is officially seen as the “fundamental instrument” through which such sustainable management will occur in areas used by local communities. JFPM is the particular form of participatory management that has been officially adopted in Karnataka, and its essential elements are spelt out in various Government Orders and official guidelines.

Most studies of participatory management programmes use a mixture of process and outcome indicators. In our framework, however, since JFPM is a process, assessing the quality of JFPM primarily means assessing the extent to which the *participatory process* has occurred in the manner it is supposed to. Assessing *outcomes*, i.e., progress towards the objectives of JFPM, is meaningful only where the process has been reasonably followed. We therefore adopt three levels of assessment criteria, two pertaining to process and one related to likely outcomes:

- a) Zero-th level: All activities in a potential JFPM area must be initiated through the JFPM process.
- b) Regular functioning:
 - Planning of forest management must be joint and thorough, i.e., involve all forest-dependent villagers and the KFD;

- Protection of forests must be joint and effective, with adequate support from the KFD;
 - VFC functioning must be representative, transparent, and democratic, with adequate voice for marginal communities;
 - VFC-KFD relationship must be somewhat equal.
- c) Likely future outcome: Where a reasonable JFPM process is under way, the silvicultural models and economic arrangements must be people-oriented, particularly benefiting the marginal communities, and must be ecologically sustainable.

Theoretically, the potential factors responsible for variations or shortcomings in the quality of JFPM could be broadly categorised into implementational, policy-level, and contextual factors. Implementational factors are the decisions taken and methods adopted by the implementing agency, including the manner of initiation and operation on the ground, the strategic decisions regarding choice of villages, choice of implementation partners, training of staff, and flexible interpretation of rules, as well as overall support to the JFPM process. Policy-level factors are the decisions regarding the framework for JFPM, including the extent and nature of produce sharing, the kinds of lands permitted to be brought under JFPM, the unit for identifying the local community, the clarity in the assignment of rights and responsibilities, the level of autonomy for the village-level committee, and the mechanisms used to monitor and enforce the jointly agreed upon activities. The socio-ecological context, such as the extent of dependence on the resource, the level of heterogeneity in the community and the presence of leadership, and the ecological conditions in the region would also affect the quality of JFPM, as they would influence the villagers' interest and capacity to participate. These three sets of factors would not act entirely independently, but in an inter-dependent manner.

To limit the enquiry, we note that the influence of policy-level decisions regarding the structure of JFPM and so on cannot be tested statistically, since the decisions apply to all areas where JFPM is implemented. We examined the policy-level factors on the basis of prior studies and analyses to see whether

policies currently in place would seriously cripple the JFPM process *at the outset*. We found that there definitely are serious lacunae in the JFPM policy that could potentially limit the quality of JFPM processes or the response from villagers to JFPM. But one major lacuna, viz., the restriction of JFPM to only "degraded" areas does not matter in the maidan region where virtually all forest lands qualify under this criterion. And the other lacunae, such as absence of mechanisms for ensuring KFD accountability, village-level autonomy, transparency or clarity on NTFP rights, are one-sided. That is, they do not prevent the implementing agency from addressing these problems if it so wishes. We also note that the contextual factors would come into play only where serious efforts at implementation have been made. In those situations, we focus on the effect of changing social hierarchy and varying economic dependence on the commons within the local community.

Study region and JFPM spread

The study region consists of the semi-arid northern maidan region comprising Bellary, Raichur, Gulbarga, Bidar and Bijapur districts (pre-reorganisation), and the dry southern maidan region comprising Bangalore rural and urban districts, Mandya, Tumkur, Kolar, Chitradurga, and the eastern part of Mysore district. Within these regions there is significant heterogeneity of rainfall, topography and the extent of forest and other common lands. On the whole, villages in the southern maidan region have significantly higher percentages of forest and other common lands compared to those in the northern maidan. The economies are primarily agrarian, with rainfed cropping being the traditional mode in the upland areas (where most of the common lands are located). But the spread of canal-based irrigation in the northern maidan and groundwater irrigation in the southern maidan has created pockets of highly irrigated agriculture. The level of socio-economic stratification is generally high, with only small pockets with large numbers of Scheduled Tribe households.

JFPM under the EPFEP started slowly, with the bulk of the VFCs initially being formed in the transition zone rather than the maidan region. From 1999 onwards, however, the pace of formation of VFCs picked up, and by December 2001, the KFD records showed 1722 VFCs in

the EPFEP region, of which 1139 were in the maidan region. As we write this report, this number has further increased to 3068, with 2123 of these being in the northern and southern maidan region. There is a higher concentration of VFCs in the southern maidan region, although the absolute number of VFCs in the northern maidan is also quite high.

Methodology

Given limited resources and time, we first conducted a rapid assessment to get a picture of the overall trend in JFPM quality in the region. We then chose a few villages where the JFPM process appeared to have progressed significantly and we conducted detailed case studies for understanding the interaction between implementational, policy-level and contextual factors. The sources of data we used were:

- a) A macro-level dataset provided by the KFD covering 1036 VFCs located in the maidan region. This contained information on the location of each VFC, date of its registration, name of VFC President, and so on. Of these, 659 VFCs could be identified and linked to revenue villages listed in the Census 1991 population and land-use database.
- b) Anecdotal information gathered from 10 regional and one state-level convention of VFC representatives, NGOs and KFD officials organised by some NGOs during late 2001, and also from unstructured interviews conducted by us with KFD officials at various levels.
- c) Data from mail-in questionnaires sent to NGOs working in the region. These resulted in responses covering 60 villages, including 27 from the maidan region.
- d) Information gathered from rapid field visits to 28 villages, consisting of 17 in the northern maidan and 11 in the southern maidan.
- e) Case studies of two VFCs (one each in the southern and northern maidan) considered to be "successful VFCs" by the KFD, and two other villages where JFPM had received an enthusiastic response from the local community. The case studies used focus-group discussions, key informant interviews, field traverses, and data from VFC records.

Quality of JFPM in the maidan region

Overall, the quality of the JFPM process leaves much to be desired.

- 1) The basic criterion that all afforestation activities in the JFPM zone must be preceded by the setting up of a VFC and must be guided by the JFPM process has been violated in a large number of villages. Very often the VFCs have been set up *after* plantation activities have been completed. In Kolar forest division, for instance, records for 37 out of 47 VFCs show the date of the Memorandum of Understanding (and often the date of VFC registration also) to be later than the date of plantation. In the northern maidan, there villages with so-called JFPM plantations but no VFCs at all. In Gulbarga territorial division, of the 93 villages where some plantation activities had been carried out under the EPFEP, only 37 villages had VFCs as of March 2002.
- 2) The majority of the VFCs in the study region are either dysfunctional or functioning only nominally, i.e., not meeting most of the criteria for a properly functioning VFC. In particular,
 - a) The quality of micro-planning in terms of villager participation and content is generally very poor. Villagers are not involved in the planning process, are not aware of contents of the micro-plan and do not have copies of the micro-plan and Memorandum of Understanding with them. (Of 54 villages covered by our mail-in questionnaire and rapid visits, 21 had not signed MoUs in spite of being more than a year old, and 26 of the remaining 33 did not have copies of the micro-plan or MoU. In 13 of 28 villages covered in rapid visits, villagers report not being involved in micro-planning at all.) There were many cases, especially in Gulbarga forest division, of this entire exercise being conducted in a cursory manner by NGOs from outside the region. These NGOs were contracted by the KFD only for this purpose. The tendency to impose pre-determined silvicultural models rather than to allow these models to emerge from the villagers was clearly visible. In many cases, the KFD effectively pre-empted the micro-planning process by assigning existing eucalyptus plantations (raised

under the Social Forestry project) to the VFC.

- b) Joint protection generally occurs only for parts of the resource use area, if at all, with passive support (not active involvement) of the villagers. KFD support oscillates between total subsidy for protection of *plantations* for the initial three years to very little support for villages that are actively protecting *natural forests*.
 - Secondary data indicate that in more than half of the villages, JFPM area amounts to less than half of the total available forest and other common lands. In practice, the areas actually under the control of the VFC are even less. In a large number of cases, even when Reserve Forest (RF) area is available in the village, it has not been assigned to the VFC.
 - In terms of people's involvement, of 54 villages covered by either the mail-in questionnaire or a field visit, 26 villages reported no JFPM activity, six reported active conflict between the VFC and the KFD, 19 reported passive support to KFD's protection efforts, and only three reported active villager involvement in day-to-day protection efforts.
- c) While VFCs cover a significant fraction of the village population on paper, their actual functioning is hardly democratic or transparent. Member enrollment is often reported to be contrived (with the village elite paying the fees on behalf of the rest) and is tied to the undemocratic method of constituting Managing Committees (MCs) through an understanding rather than a well-publicised, well-prepared, open election process. MC meetings either do not occur regularly or, in villages where JFPM is facilitated by NGOs, are held frequently but often not attended by KFD staff. MC decisions in any case tend to be controlled by VFC Presidents or members of the elite. At the same time, in several villages, members alleged that forest officials have taken signatures on so-called minutes of MC meetings that were never held.
- d) The VFC-KFD relationship is greatly lopsided in virtually all cases. Apart from the

fact that the JFPM structure and the limited approach to micro-planning seriously limit the autonomy of the VFC, KFD staff generally made no effort to comply with basic notions of partnership. Records and accounts are entirely controlled by the KFD. Registration and MoU signing proceeds at the KFD's own pace, and promises made even in registered micro-plans regarding lands to be assigned are not necessarily kept. Ambiguities about the share from pre-existing plantations have persisted on the ground even after being clarified at the policy-level. There is little response to requests for help in forest protection or in arresting outsiders engaged in extraction from JFPM areas. Where some officials have been supportive, the support evaporates after the official is transferred.

This overall trend is fully corroborated by several VFC representatives, NGOs and even frontline KFD staff.

- 3) In the four case study villages where the JFPM process has proceeded significantly, the outcomes observed or likely to occur are quite mixed, and relate to the way the JFPM process has evolved in each.
 - a) In Thondala, although the entire forest area is being strictly protected (and hence the VFC is considered a major success story by the KFD), only the village elite (particularly the VFC President) are actively involved, and the functioning of the VFC is not at all democratic. The main incentive to get involved seems to be the cash return from the eucalyptus plantation that covers most of the forest area. As a result, there has actually been a significant decline in access to the forest for fuelwood and fodder/grazing across all households and a steep decline in forest-based income for the marginal communities, forcing several landless households to emigrate from the village. Thus, sustainability of commercially valuable plantations has come at the cost of subsistence needs and incomes of the poorest.
 - b) In Kakkuppi, another case of successful JFPM according to KFD staff, there has been limited support amongst the villagers for JFPM—only about 25% of

- the households have become members, and the functioning of the MC is dominated by upper caste farmers. There is no active villager involvement in forest protection. A 100 ha mixed plantation has been raised, protected by a KFD-paid watchman. Fuelwood and grazing in the larger forest area continue in the same unsustainable manner as before. The VFC's main achievement is that it has managed to get a share in the royalties from auctioning of rights to NTFP collection. But this is in fact a regressive outcome, because the poor NTFP collecting households within the village get no preferential treatment in the auctions and see almost no increase in their incomes. On the other hand, the non-collecting members get a share in the royalties without putting in any effort.
- c) In Kanvihalli, in spite of a promising start and an enthusiastic response from the local community, channelled by NGOs already working in the village, JFPM has made little impact. The KFD has in practice only assigned a tiny 22 ha tamarind plantation to the VFC, leaving the vast (and degraded) forest area in the village out of the purview of JFPM. Thus, there has been no enhancement in the availability of fuelwood and fodder/grazing, or improvement in resource sustainability. In terms of income, as in Kakkuppi, rights for harvest of tamarind were auctioned by the KFD rather than being given free to the VFC. Due to community mobilisation by the NGO, however, the auction was won by a women's Self-Help Group within the village. This generated some income for a few households. But here again, the VFC's share in the royalty has remained in the control of the President, who is the richest person in the village (actually a non-resident) and who dominates the MC.
- d) In Adavimallapura, the entire community is actively involved in protecting the entire forest area used by them and the VFC functions in a democratic manner, with a rotating President. The forest is regenerating and incomes from NTFP collection have gone up due to a combination of limiting access to VFC members only, increasing the community's bargaining power vis-à-vis the wholesale traders, and keeping the NTFP collection process *outside* the formal records of the VFC! But the villagers have had to pay a significant cost in terms of conflict with neighbouring villages and outsiders who are extracting wood or grazing their livestock in the VFC's forest area. Unfortunately, the KFD has neither penalised the offenders caught by the VFC nor attempted to resolve the inter-village conflict that erupted as a result.
- In short, where subsistence and income needs are being met while ensuring resource sustainability, KFD support has been missing. The KFD appears to see success in situations in which the (non-forest dependent) village elite are co-opted into cooperating with the agenda of protecting pre-existing or new plantations by giving or promising them shares in profits, royalties or recognition. This results in regressive impacts on subsistence and livelihood needs, especially of the forest-dependent poor, and sustainability only of the commercially valuable resources, if at all, rather than the forest as a whole. Sustainable resource management acquires a very narrow form, viz., planting and protecting trees with large subsidies from KFD in the short-term, rather than ensuring overall regeneration of trees, grass and soils in ways compatible with local needs and with capacities to sustain the effort in the long run.

Causes of overall poor quality of the JFPM process

The overall trend of poor quality in the JFPM process is directly related to the implementational choices and approaches of the KFD. At the operational level, these include lack of groundwork in the villages (such as not forming promoters committees and little attention to awareness building), non-involvement of local *committed* NGOs in the process as long-term partners, and poor (or improper) training and directions to the frontline staff. Instead of having a clear understanding of the core concept of *joint* planning and management, the frontline staff generally see JFPM as an additional chore or a

hoop to be jumped in order to implement their basic work of creating plantations.

At the strategic level, the choice of villages was rather haphazard, and not focused on villages more likely to be forest-dependent and socially homogeneous. There was no systematic effort to implement JFPM in clusters so as to resolve the problem of overlapping rights of and hence conflicts with neighbouring villages (some efforts on these lines were reported in parts of Tumkur district). And the process of implementation was clearly driven by the unrealistic target set in the proposal to JBIC.

Organisationally, the KFD's delay in initiating JFPM in the initial years of the EPFEP increased the difficulty in meeting the promised numerical targets, resulting in further pressure to give core participatory processes the go-by. Internal policies and procedures for ratifying MoUs and micro-plans were also not streamlined. More importantly, the KFD failed to integrate JFPM into its regular mode of functioning, i.e., the operations of the territorial wing. Although the territorial wing implemented JFPM in forest lands while the Social Forestry wing did so in revenue lands, the concept of JFPM as a core process did not penetrate the mindset and functioning of the territorial wing or even, for that matter, of the Social Forestry wing.

Finally, the very act of taking a loan from a bank at 12% interest in order to implement the EPFEP has imposed very serious constraints and burdens on the JFPM process. The shift from conventional management to participatory management requires a sea change in the attitudes of local communities as well as KFD staff towards rights and responsibilities in managing forest and other common lands. This process of change is inherently slow and difficult and does not actually require large funds. Taking funds, and that too as a loan, imposed targets and narrowed down the silvicultural options at the outset. Senior KFD officials worried that if the JFPM process were followed painstakingly, the physical (plantation) targets could not be met. And they also believed that if the huge loan had to be repaid, planting commercially valuable species and getting a share in them was essential.

These lacunae in implementation suggest some fundamental divergence between the goals and processes of JFPM as articulated in official documents and the actual perceptions of the

KFD. Officially, JFPM is the fundamental process through which sustainable resource management is to be achieved, *instead of* the conventional approach of planting and policing. This includes allowing the community to set forest management goals within resource sustainability norms and with some assurance of larger ecological balance. In practice, however, KFD officials either believe that they know what is good for the community and hence can plant first and involve people afterwards, or that JFPM is simply a tool for implementing the KFD's forest management goals more effectively, or that JFPM is not really necessary at all. There is absolutely no long-term commitment to internalising the essence of participatory forest management. Even the shifts in attitudes and processes made during the course of the earlier Western Ghats Forestry Project do not appear to have been sustained nor the learning incorporated into the EPFEP.

Interplay between implementational, policy-level and contextual factors

In cases where the JFPM process has progressed to some extent, the influence of contextual and policy-level factors, even if mediated by implementational strategies, is visible. First, the inter-village conflicts point to the existence of overlapping *de jure* and *de facto* rights in forest areas. These situations are common on the ground but not recognised and addressed in JFPM policy.

Second, the non-assignment of eligible lands to the VFC, the lack of KFD support in protection of assigned lands and the control exerted by the KFD over VFC functioning point to the highly lop-sided distribution of rights and responsibilities between the KFD and the VFC. While VFCs are entirely at the mercy of the KFD, there is no mechanism that would enable VFCs to hold the KFD accountable, undermining the notion of joint management.

Third, the adverse impacts of "successful" JFPM on marginal communities point to significant intra-village differences in forest dependence and the simultaneous problem of intra-village hierarchies of power that preclude pro-poor decisions. The implementing agency is clearly not trained to or even interested in addressing this problem, as a hierarchical social setting often suits their goal of somehow getting people to "cooperate" in protecting plantations. At the policy-level, it is simply assumed that

all villagers are forest-dependent. An attempt is made to provide a voice to the marginalised communities by specifying the composition of the MC. But this attempt is inadequate. A mechanism for separating forest-dependent communities from others, and for ensuring that the benefits from JFPM flow to only those who put in efforts in protection and harvest and/or bear the opportunity costs of protection is urgently required. Simultaneously, the pressure on the KFD to generate revenues from JFPM and other forest lands, whether in the form of royalties for NTFP collection or from harvest of timber and softwood, must be removed.

Finally, the relative success of JFPM in villages with more homogeneous and ST-dominated communities, large forest areas and unirrigated agriculture suggests that JFPM implementation would have to be more carefully targeted.

Recommendations for policy and implementation

Our findings call into serious question the current approach towards participatory forest management being adopted not just in Karnataka but in many other states in India. This approach is based upon narrow notions of participation, little re-thinking of basic premises within the forest bureaucracy, large flows of bilateral and multi-lateral funds (usually loans) resulting in target rather than process orientation. Our findings also highlight the need to significantly restructure institutions of community management so as to avoid the imposition of elite preferences in the name of forest regeneration, given the differentiated and changing relationship between local communities and common lands.

Our specific recommendations for changes in JFPM policy are as follows.

- a) There must be clear, statutory provisions for ensuring that all lands used by the village or hamlet community are brought under the management of the VFC, and that this is done by properly resolving or pre-existing and overlapping *de jure* and *de facto* rights.
- b) The planning for management of these lands must be by the villagers, with the KFD's role being strictly limited to providing information on the sustainable-use norms for different ways of managing the lands.

- c) There must be clear, statutory provisions for ensuring that the partnership in JFPM is enforceable both ways. Villagers must be able to demand JFPM as a right if they demonstrate willingness to manage their forests, and VFCs must be able to force the KFD to meet its commitments towards joint protection, sharing of returns, and so on.
- d) VFC membership and/or benefits must be restricted to only those who are today willing to put their own physical labour into planting, protection, regeneration and harvesting of forest produce. VFCs must not have the right to extract royalties or otherwise make profits that can be distributed to all villagers just because they happen to live in that village.
- e) While giving all communities the option to take up the JFPM arrangement, there must be clear assessment at the policy level of the areas that are conducive for such arrangements and a time-bound process to shift to JFPM in such areas. Creating VFCs at the hamlet-level by default will also enable interested communities within villages to take up JFPM.
- f) The state government must clearly recognise that JFPM lands cannot be sources of revenue to the state, and hence must let go of all shares in forest produces generated from these lands. At the same time, the subsidies to be given in the form of free seedlings and planting support must be limited and targetted. Concomitantly, the practice of taking large loans for JFPM-based activities must be discontinued.
- g) Funding agencies must recognise that JFPM is a process of social and institutional change that does not in itself require large funds, and that setting numerical targets for VFCs and physical plantation targets for such a process is counter-productive and inappropriate.

In other words, there is a need for the political system and the bureaucracy to take the concept and process of participatory management seriously. Otherwise, JFPM will remain a buzzword to be adopted when writing proposals to get external loans for meeting state revenue deficits, and might even generate socially perverse and environmentally marginal outcomes in many areas.