

Community Forest Rights — From Title to Livelihood

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Before you can support a gram sabha to use its CFR rights, everyone involved needs to understand what those rights actually include. In practice, many FRC (Forest Rights Committee) members and gram sabha members receive their title without clearly understanding its contents — partly because the language is complex, partly because distribution events are often rushed, partly because nobody follows up.

What a CFR title grants

Under Section 3(1)(i) of the Forest Rights Act 2006, a CFR title gives the gram sabha:

The right to use and manage the Community Forest Resource area — defined as the forest land that the community has traditionally used and protected within the customary boundary of the village

The right to protect, conserve, and manage the community forest resource area, including the right to stop activities by outsiders that would damage the forest

The right to collect and use all Minor Forest Produce (MFP) within the CFR area — including tendu (kendu) leaves, mahua flowers and seeds, bamboo, honey, fruit, roots, tubers, herbs, and medicinal plants

The right to determine and enforce local rules for forest use — who can enter, what can be harvested and when, what penalties apply for violations

The right to be consulted before any development project, mining lease, or forest diversion affecting the CFR area is approved — and the right to give or withhold

consent

What the title does not automatically give: bank account, working capital, market access, institutional recognition from government departments, or the knowledge to manage a complex natural resource sustainably. These all require post-title work.

The key institution: the Community Forest Resource Management Committee (CFMRC)

The gram sabha exercises its CFR rights through a CFMRC — a committee of at least one-third women members, accountable to the gram sabha, responsible for day-to-day management of the CFR area. In Odisha, this body is sometimes called the Community Forest Management Committee (CFMC) or the Forest Rights Committee.

If no CFMRC has been formed or if it is dormant, the title is effectively unexercised. Forming and activating this committee is the first practical step after title receipt.

Phase 1: Institutional Activation (Months 1-3 After Title Receipt)

Step 1: Conduct a title orientation for the entire gram sabha

Not just the CFMRC members — the entire gram sabha. Most people do not know what the title says, what their rights are, or what responsibilities come with those rights. A half-day community meeting, conducted in the local language, covering:

- What the title document says (read it aloud, section by section, in the tribal language)
- What the CFR boundary is (walk the boundary if possible, or review the map with the community)
- What the gram sabha can and cannot do under the title
- What responsibilities the community takes on — conservation, sustainable harvesting, record-keeping

This meeting should be documented with attendance. Attendance and proceedings of gram sabha meetings on FRA matters are legal records and can be important if rights are later challenged.

Step 2: Form or reconstitute the CFMRC

If no CFMRC exists: facilitate an election at the gram sabha meeting. The committee needs:

- Minimum one-third women members (this is mandatory under the FRA)
- A chairperson, secretary, and treasurer
- Clear roles and responsibilities agreed by the gram sabha
- A meeting schedule (monthly is standard; fortnightly for the first six months is better)

If a CFMRC exists but is dormant: reconstitute it. Dormant committees often exist because nobody trained members on what the committee is supposed to do, or because early meetings produced no results and members stopped attending. Fresh elections or confirmation of existing members, combined with clear role clarity, usually restart the process.

Common issue: In some Odisha villages, FRCs were constituted by government officials without community knowledge. Members may not know they were appointed. Check: do the current CFMRC members actually know they are on the committee, understand their role, and attend meetings? If not, reconstitute.

Step 3: Open a bank account in the gram sabha's name

The gram sabha is a legal body with the capacity to hold a bank account in its name. This is the mechanism through which MFP sales proceeds, MGNREGS convergence funds, and other revenues flow to the community rather than to intermediaries.

The process in Odisha:

1. Pass a gram sabha resolution authorising the opening of the bank account and designating signatories (typically chairperson + secretary, or chairperson + two other members, with at least one woman among signatories)
2. Take the resolution, the CFR title, and identity documents for the signatories to the nearest bank branch (Bank of India, State Bank of India, and cooperative banks in tribal districts typically handle this)
3. Open the account as a gram sabha account — not a personal account, not an NGO account held on the community's behalf

Why this matters: The Mendha-Lekha gram sabha in Gadchiroli — the first village in India to receive CFR rights — obtained a PAN number and opened an account through which it received bamboo sale proceeds directly. This single institutional step transformed their economic position. Without the account, sales revenue goes to traders who report whatever they choose. With the account, the gram sabha controls the revenue.

Step 4: Boundary demarcation and internal rules

Walk the entire CFR boundary with community members, CFMRC members, and if possible a representative of the local forest department. Mark boundaries with physical markers (painted stones, notches on trees, GPS coordinates). Document the boundary clearly and store copies with the gram sabha, the local NGO, and the District Tribal Welfare Department.

Hold a gram sabha meeting to pass local forest management rules — customary rules that the community already observes, now formally codified:

- What can be harvested, by whom, in which season
- Which areas are off-limits or restricted (sacred groves, regeneration areas, water sources)
- What happens when outsiders enter without permission
- What happens when community members violate the rules

- How disputes between neighbouring villages over boundary areas are resolved

These rules should reflect existing customary practice, not be invented from scratch.

The NGO's role here is facilitation, not design. Ask: "What rules does this community already follow about the forest? What has been the practice for generations?"

Document what you hear. Circulate the draft back to the gram sabha for modification and formal adoption.

Phase 2: Forest Management and Conservation (Months 3-12)

Mapping the CFR area

Before any harvesting or management planning, the gram sabha needs a clear map of its CFR area showing:

- Total area under CFR (in hectares)
- Forest types within the area (dense forest, degraded forest, bamboo areas, mahua groves, etc.)
- Major NTFP resources and their approximate distribution
- Water bodies, sacred sites, and restricted areas
- Neighbouring villages' territories and any boundary agreements

Vasundhara, Odisha's specialist organisation for this work, has trained local facilitators in participatory resource mapping. The process involves community members (including women and elders who have detailed knowledge of the forest) in walking and documenting the landscape. The resulting map is a community asset — not a government document.

Budget roughly: Participatory resource mapping for a 200-hectare CFR area typically requires two to three field days with a trained facilitator, GPS equipment (often available with district-level NGOs or forest rights cells), and materials for map drawing.

Total cost is modest — under ₹10,000 — but the map it produces is the foundation for everything else.

Developing a Community Forest Management Plan

The FRA requires CFR gram sabhas to prepare a Community Forest Management Plan. The Dharti Aaba Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyan (2024) provides funds for gram sabhas to implement CFR management plans — up to ₹15 lakh for 100 hectares.

A management plan does not need to be a long technical document. It needs to include:

- Description of the forest area and its resources
- The gram sabha's objectives for the area (conservation, livelihood, both)
- Annual harvesting plan — what will be harvested, how much, when, by whom
- Protection plan — how will the forest be patrolled, by whom, on what schedule
- Regeneration plan — which degraded areas will be restored, using which methods
- Financial plan — expected revenues from MFP sales, planned expenditures

One caution from 2024 policy: A central advisory from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs in early 2024 suggested involving forest department officials in preparing CFR management plans. Civil society organisations including Vasundhara and Foundation for Ecological Security pushed back strongly — gram sabhas have the authority to prepare their own plans, and involving forest department officials who have historically resisted CFR tends to dilute community authority. Support gram sabhas to prepare their own plans, with NGO facilitation but not forest department control.

Community patrolling

Forest protection under CFR is the gram sabha's responsibility. This is not a burden — it is an authority. Communities that organise systematic patrolling consistently report reduced illegal timber felling, improved NTFP density, and stronger community cohesion.

Practical patrolling models from Odisha:

- **Rotation model (thengapalli):** Each household takes a turn patrolling a designated route on a fixed schedule, for one day per rotation cycle. The stick (thenga) that rotates between households is the signal of whose turn it is. Kodalpalli village in Nayagarh has used this model for forty years.
- **Dedicated patrol group:** A small group of volunteers — four to eight people, with women included — patrols on fixed days each week. Paid a nominal honorarium from MFP revenues once the gram sabha has income.
- **Youth patrol with elder oversight:** Young community members with elder guidance — works well in villages where youth are present (migration is not universal).

The key is documentation: patrol logs that record date, time, route, observations, and any incidents. These records serve two purposes — they build the gram sabha's own understanding of the forest, and they provide documented evidence of community stewardship if rights are ever challenged.

Phase 3: NTFP Harvesting and Market Linkage (Months 6-18)

This is the phase where the CFR title begins to produce economic impact. It is also the phase most likely to be captured by intermediaries if not carefully designed.

Understanding the NTFP landscape in Odisha

Odisha's primary tradeable NTFPs from tribal forest areas include:

Kendu (tendu) leaves: Major commercial NTFP, used for beedi making. The Odisha government procures kendu leaves through an official system involving cooperative societies. CFR gram sabhas with kendu in their area have the right to manage and sell their kendu production. In Kalahandi, the Gram Sabha Mahasangha's collectivised kendu trade generated ₹15 crore across 78 villages in 2023-24 — eliminating

middlemen and establishing direct payment to gram sabhas.

Mahua: Flowers used for liquor distillation and as food; seeds for oil extraction. High commercial value. Historically exploited by middlemen who paid a fraction of market price. A CFR gram sabha with mahua groves has the right to harvest, process, and sell without intermediary involvement.

Bamboo: Major livelihood material for artisans and construction. Historically, forest department maintained a monopoly on bamboo sale. CFR removes this monopoly for bamboo within the CFR area — gram sabhas can sell directly to buyers.

Sal leaves and siali leaves: Used for leaf plate and leaf cup making. Labour-intensive to harvest and process, but a viable livelihood for women in particular.

Honey: Wild honey from tribal forest areas commands significant premium prices in urban markets. Quality certification (organic, wild-harvested) opens export markets.

Medicinal plants: Many tribal communities have traditional knowledge of medicinal plant identification and use. Sustainable harvesting and value addition is possible but requires careful conservation management.

The NTFP market linkage pathway

Getting from "the gram sabha has the right to harvest" to "the gram sabha is receiving fair prices for what it harvests" requires several steps:

Step 1 — Quantity and quality baseline Before approaching any buyer, establish: how much of each NTFP does the CFR area produce annually? What is the quality? In which season? Without this basic production data, you are negotiating blind.

Facilitate a community resource assessment — typically done through walking surveys with knowledgeable community members. Produce a rough production estimate for each major NTFP species.

Step 2 — Market price research Find out what the same NTFP is selling for at different points in the value chain:

- The price middlemen currently pay at the village
- The price at the weekly haat in the nearest market town
- The price at the district headquarters market or mandi
- The price that traders receive from processors or manufacturers

This price information is often known to some community members — particularly those who have sold in markets, or who have relatives in trade. It is also available from TDCCOL (Tribal Development Cooperative Corporation of Odisha) for MSP-eligible NTFPs.

Step 3 — Identify buyers willing to buy directly The options in Odisha's context:

- **TDCCOL:** Procures mahua, kendu, tamarind, and other NTFPs at Minimum Support Price. The gram sabha needs to register as a seller. The process is administrative but straightforward with guidance.
- **Pravathi Van Dhan Vikas Kendra (PMVDVK):** Government programme that provides processing equipment and market linkage to tribal producers. In Pajilibandha, Rayagada, 54 families accessed PMVDVK support to produce leaf plates and tamarind products — monthly income rose to ₹5,000–6,000 per member.
- **FPOs (Farmer Producer Organisations):** Existing FPOs in the district may aggregate NTFP alongside agricultural produce. Some FPOs specifically focus on NTFP.
- **Direct sale to processors:** For premium products (honey, medicinal plants), direct buyer relationships with urban processors, health food companies, or exporters can produce significantly better prices. Requires more work to establish but creates sustainable premium market access.

Step 4 — Collective harvesting and aggregation The economic case for CFR-based NTFP marketing depends on aggregation — bringing enough volume together to negotiate effectively. An individual household selling 50 kg of mahua flowers to a village trader has no power. The same 50 kg, pooled with 500 kg from fifty other

households and sold collectively through the gram sabha, produces significantly better terms.

The CFMRC manages the aggregation process: establishing a collection schedule, providing collection points, weighing and recording each household's contribution, and maintaining transparent records of what was collected and what each household is owed from the eventual sale.

****Step 5 — Revenue distribution **** How does the gram sabha distribute NTFP revenue? This needs to be decided by the gram sabha before any sales happen — not after. Common models:

- **Per-household payment:** Revenue divided equally by household. Simple, clear, but does not reward households that contributed more labour to harvesting
- **Per-weight payment:** Revenue distributed in proportion to each household's harvesting contribution. More equitable but requires accurate record-keeping
- **Split model:** A portion distributed per-household (social equity); a portion retained in the gram sabha account (community investment fund)

The Mendha-Lekha model keeps a significant portion of revenue in the village development fund — used for community infrastructure, emergency support, and forest management expenses. This model has made the gram sabha financially autonomous and able to fund its own conservation activities.

Phase 4: Convergence with Government Schemes

CFR gram sabhas in Odisha are legally entitled to access government schemes for forest management and livelihood support. In practice, this convergence rarely happens without active NGO facilitation.

MGNREGS convergence

MGNREGS works can be planned and implemented within CFR areas — plantation, soil and water conservation, check dam construction, bunding for degraded forest regeneration. In states where gram sabhas have been declared MGNREGA nodal agencies (as in Maharashtra after the Mendha-Lekha model), the gram sabha controls worksite selection and implementation. In Odisha, the process requires working with the gram panchayat and the block MGNREGS office, but the principle is the same: CFR gram sabhas have legitimate claim to MGNREGS support for their forest management activities.

Practical step: Prepare a written proposal from the gram sabha to the gram panchayat requesting MGNREGS convergence for specific activities in the CFR area. Include the CFR title as the legal basis, the community forest management plan as the activity framework, and a specific list of proposed works.

CAMPA funds

Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) funds are used for forest restoration. CFR gram sabhas can potentially access CAMPA funds for degraded forest restoration in their area. The pathway runs through the District Forest Officer and the State CAMPA authority — a bureaucratic process that requires NGO support and persistence.

Dharti Aaba Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyan (2024)

The October 2024 scheme provides up to ₹15 lakh for implementing CFR management plans for 100 hectares of land. This is real money for community-level forest management activities. The caveat: the scheme's provisions for involving "technical partners" in plan preparation need to be navigated carefully to ensure that gram sabha authority is maintained (see Phase 2 caution above).

Common Failure Modes — And How to Prevent Them

Failure mode 1: The title is distributed and nothing happens afterward

Prevention: Build Phase 1 (institutional activation) into your programme design from the start. The title distribution event is the beginning, not the endpoint.

Failure mode 2: The CFMRC meets once, produces a resolution, and never meets again

Prevention: Build a regular meeting schedule with an external accountability mechanism — the NGO reviews meeting records monthly. Meetings without quorum are documented and discussed. Patterns of non-attendance are addressed directly.

Failure mode 3: NTFP sales resume through the same intermediaries as before the title

Prevention: Market linkage work must happen before the harvest season. If you wait until community members are harvesting and need cash immediately, they will sell to whoever is present — and the familiar trader is always present. Establish the direct sales channel before it is urgently needed.

Failure mode 4: Revenue is distributed once and the account empties

Prevention: Gram sabha resolution on revenue distribution model before any sales. The meeting where this is decided is more important than many that follow.

Failure mode 5: The forest department continues to restrict harvesting despite the title

Prevention: Carry copies of the CFR title at all times. Know the relevant sections of the FRA. Document every instance of restriction. The district-level FRA cell (now operational in most Odisha districts under Mo Jungle Jami Yojana) is the first escalation point; the SDLC is the second. Vasundhara and Agramee have experience navigating these confrontations and can provide guidance.

The Two Questions That Determine Success

After eighteen months of working with a CFR gram sabha, ask these two questions:

1. Does the gram sabha know what is in its forest? If members can tell you how many mahua trees are in the area, where the kendu patches are, which areas are regenerating, and which streams are still clean — the community is managing its forest. If nobody knows, the title is decorative.

2. Is the gram sabha receiving money that did not flow to it before the title? If yes — if the gram sabha bank account has income from NTFP sales that previously went to traders, or from MGNREGS works that now happen in the CFR area — the title is producing economic change. If no — if the income flow is identical to pre-title times — the rights have not been operationalised.

Both questions should have "yes" answers by eighteen months. If they do not, the work is not complete.

Resources and Contact

For claims support and FRA rights training: Vasundhara (vasundhara.org) — the most experienced organisation for forest rights work in Odisha

For market linkage and NTFP value chains: Foundation for Ecological Security (fes.org.in) and TDCCOL (tdccodisha.org)

For legal guidance on FRA: Human Rights Law Network (hrln.org), which handles FRA-related litigation

For MGNREGS convergence: Block Programme Officer in the relevant block; district MGNREGS Programme Coordinator

For Mo Jungle Jami Yojana and district FRA cells: Tribal Research Institute, Bhubaneswar (scstrti.in)

Related Knowledge Commons content: Social Justice & Tribal Welfare Sector Primer (Sector 03) · Practice Note: PESA Implementation — What Gram Sabhas Can Actually Do · Agriculture & Markets Sector Primer (Sector 09) — NTFP market development

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