

## CASE STUDY

Koraput, India

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## District-wide movement achieves recognition of community forest rights

The struggle of 125 Adivasi and Dalit families of the Doliambo village in Odisha, led to the legal recognition of their entitlement to their ancestral land and forests, denied to them since colonial times. Historically, marginalised and poor forest dependent peoples were stigmatized as 'encroachers'. The District Forest Network (DFN) supported a district-wide movement for land justice and the rights of indigenous peoples. Since the Forest Rights Act was passed in 2006, Trócaire and local organisations increased their awareness raising efforts and provided technical support to communities for submitting their claims.

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### PRINCIPAL ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

Trócaire  
Pragati Koraput  
District Forest Network (DFN)

### LOCATION

Doliambo village, Koraput District, Odisha, India

### TIMELINE

2011-2015

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### TARGET AUDIENCE

Civil society, policy makers, community-based organizations

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### KEYWORDS

Land rights, legal recognition, awareness raising, local knowledge

## GOOD PRACTICES

Towards making land governance more people-centred

This case study is part of the ILC's Database of Good Practices, an initiative that documents and systematises ILC members and partners' experience in promoting **people-centred land governance**, as defined in the Antigua Declaration of the ILC Assembly of Members. Further information at [www.landcoalition.org/what-we-do](http://www.landcoalition.org/what-we-do)

This case study supports people-centred land governance as it contributes to:

- Commitment 3** Recognize and protect the diverse tenure and production systems upon which people's livelihoods depend
- Commitment 4** Ensure gender justice in relation to land
- Commitment 5** Respect and protect the inherent land and territorial rights of indigenous peoples
- Commitment 7** Ensure that processes of decision-making over land are inclusive
- Commitment 9** Prevent and remedy land grabbing

# Case description

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## Background issues

In India, 375 million people live either in forests or in their fringes and are entirely or partially dependent on them for their livelihood. Most of these poor and forest dependent peoples are marginalised social groups such as Adivasi (tribal) and Dalit (untouchable). Historically, forest dwelling indigenous people were branded as 'encroachers', first by the British colony and then by the Government of India. Their rights to forest lands and products were not recognised and they were persecuted by the State.

The Southern part of Odisha is endowed with rich natural resources, yet 70% of households live below the poverty line. In 2007, the Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA), came into force. The FRA recognises the right of individual forest-dwellers to live in and cultivate the forest land, and grants rights to communities to manage, protect, and regenerate the forests. This turned to be a key opportunity to secure tenure and access to resources for the Adivasi and Dalit. However, the process of accessing individual and community forest rights is highly technical for these marginalised communities and the Forest Department and other government agencies mandated to assist the process have not been sufficiently pro-active.

Of the 125 households in Doliambo Village of Koraput District, in southern Odisha, 105 are Adivasi and 18 are Dalit. The villagers are primarily dependent on the forests and on agriculture for their livelihood. Local authorities have shown little interest in assisting the

villagers of Doliambo in securing individual and community tenure and access to lands. As their rights were not recognised by the State, they sometimes had to pay bribes to Forest Department officials to access their forest lands.

## Solution

Trócaire engaged with local organisations to work across four districts of South Odisha and promoted a District Forest Network (DFN) of 25 NGOs and Community-Based Organisations (CBO) in Koraput District, Odisha. The DFN was created as a peoples' organization, with the support of community volunteers representing 1274 villages. Its primary objectives were to raise awareness on entitlements under FRA and to work as a pressure group at district level. Trócaire recognised the importance of ensuring the actual implementation of policy changes such as the FRA, where knowledge and capacities for implementing such legislation were insufficient among both community members and local authorities, and where commitment from government institutions was weak.

The DFN formed an alliance that generated increased knowledge at local level, and provided direct support to communities to apply for formal land titles. The DFN helped secured land rights for numerous tribal families that had hitherto experienced profound marginalisation and were unable to make claims to land that had previously been inhabited and utilised by their ancestors. In order to ensure that gender-related inequalities were not perpetuated, the titles were issued jointly in the name of husband and wife. The DFN has generated a district-wide movement for land justice, opening the space for the unprecedented recognition and granting of community forest land claims.

## Activities

### 2007

The Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA), came into force. The FRA recognised the right of individual forest-dwellers to live in and cultivate forest lands and granted rights to communities to manage, protect, and regenerate the forests.

### 2009

Trócaire partnered with ten local NGOs to work on effective implementation of the FRA across four districts in South Odisha. Trócaire was supporting the organisations for livelihood promotion. Since the livelihood of the people in these areas are also dependent on forests and forest lands, Trócaire supported the initiative of its partners as part of its Livelihood Programme to help communities exercise their land and resource rights.

### 2011

In Koraput district, Trócaire and its field partner Pragati Koraput created a District Forest Network (DFN) bringing together 25 NGOs and Community Based Organisations (CBO). The DFN was a peoples' organization composed of mostly volunteer community members. Their objective was to raise awareness of the FRA and put pressure on local authorities to fulfil their duties under the Act. The DFN provided strong and systematic support to strengthen the Forest Rights Committees (FRC) so that they facilitate the

claim submission process to the Forest & Revenue Department for the quick settlement of claims.

The Forest Network took up a study in the district and identified that 75,962 families are dependent on forest lands for their livelihood and also that the community are protecting their forests in 1274 villages. Awareness generation amongst important stakeholder was taken up through village and federation meetings, public campaigns, rallies and submission of memorandums. Trainings and orientations were organised for Forest Rights Committee leaders, Panchayati Raj<sup>1</sup> representatives and federation leaders. Claim forms were made available in the most remote and unreachable areas to enable people to submit their claims.

### 2011-2014

Trócaire and Pragati Koraput worked in the village of Doliambo, inhabited by marginalized Adivasi and Dalit families. Pragati Koraput played a vital role in coordination and capacity building of the people of Koraput district through strengthening of the DFN, which became the reference point for the people of Doliambo in this process. They conducted trainings and awareness raising programmes for the FRC members and villagers regarding resource mapping and lodging claims for individual and community forest rights. With the support and participation of the community, the FRC was able to handle the lengthy and bureaucratic process of negotiating with District administration, forest and revenue departments.

### 2013-2015

After two years of intensive work, 59 tribal families from Doliambo secured titles on their land. Importantly, the DFN managed to ensure that all titles were issued jointly in the name of husband and wife. A number of households began cultivating different millets used for consumption, planted fruit bearing trees and land bindings to reduce soil erosion. More recently, the District Administration has begun to recognize and grant community rights over forest lands.

## Importance of the case for people-centred land governance

The District Forest Network (DFN) created by Trócaire and Pragati Koraput has enabled a district-wide movement for land justice and rights of forest dwellers in the Koraput district. By counting on the support of 250 volunteers from the villages and communities, the DFN was also a tool for empowerment, grassroots activism and inclusiveness.

Through their ability to lay claims to land, many families have now begun to engage in agricultural activities, which provide them with the necessary food and income. The momentum that was generated has also contributed to the recognition of community rights on forest land and resources, which had never been the case before.

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<sup>1</sup> The word *raj* means "rule" and *panchayat* means "assembly" (*ayat*) of five (*panch*). It is the oldest known system of local government in South Asia, found mainly in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal.

Four women headed-households from Doliambo submitted claims under the FRA. Previously, women did not submit claims as the community did not recognize their rights to land. The work of DFN has provided an unprecedented level of security and opportunity for these vulnerable women.

# Changes

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## Baseline

Historically, forest dwelling indigenous peoples have been denied any rights to land and forest products, which caused a high level of poverty and vulnerability in India. In Doliambo village, none of the 125 families had any legal recognition of their ancestral land rights before the FRA was passed. Before the intervention of Trócaire and Pragati Koraput, the concept of community forest claims was not understood nor applied.

According to the FRA, the village Forest Rights Committee (FRC) is the primary community institution tasked with determining the extent of forest rights of individuals and the community. In Doliambo, this committee was set up by the Forest Department in 2009, but it was not equipped with the know-how and skills necessary to fulfil its responsibilities towards claim submission and follow up of the relevant bureaucratic process.

## Achievements

Between 2011-2015 the DFN has reached out to 1274 villages and facilitated the settlement of over 26000 individual forest claims. Although there is a strong cultural opposition to women owning land, the DFN has managed to ensure that 70% of the titles were issued jointly in the name of husband and wife, thereby making great strides in breaking down barriers towards greater gender equality and women's rights.

In the village of Doliambo, 59 tribal families secured titles to their lands. The DFN managed to ensure that all these titles were issued jointly in the name of husband and wife. After successfully acquiring land titles, 20 families have begun regular agriculture activities. They are growing upland rice, millets, pulses and vegetables, which provides them with a steady source of food and income for their families.

The DFN also secured assistance for 47 title-holding families to raise cashew orchards in their forest lands by linking them with the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREG). This has allowed the families to receive a wage for their labour and contribute to increased productivity of the land. It is expected that families can earn an additional income for harvesting cashews. They are also growing crops in the cashew plots by intercropping.

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"I had no land of my own. At last, I have got a title over land. I can say that I own land and my children will not be treated as landless." -  
**Gopinath Muduli,**  
Doliambo Village,  
Koraput district,  
Odisha

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"Never in my life [did] I dream of having a land record in my name- thanks to the Forest Rights Committee members of my village for their support."  
**Samari Oyal, landless widow, Doliambo Village, Koraput district, Odisha**

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## Evidence

Thanks to the DFN, the District Administration has become pro-active in executing its FRA duties. The Administration's granted over 26000 individual claims and accepted submissions for community forest rights claims, whereas previously community submissions were not considered at all. The District Administration recommended that individual forest title holders gain access to other government programmes that will help them use their forest land more productively. The District Administration even requested the DFN to restructure and train non-functional village FRC and the DFN supported this process.

# Lessons learned

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## Lessons for civil society

Sometimes, good policies and laws do not get implemented because of lack of awareness or capacities at local level. The first step for a successful application is to generate the necessary responsiveness among affected individuals and communities.

Putting pressure on local authorities for the fulfilment of their official duties is a necessary complementary step to building community awareness of government officials obligations. The central government must be also pressured to make available the knowledge and resources necessary for implementing its policies and laws.

The involvement of stakeholders cooperating towards the same objective is important. Pragati Koraput developed the capacity of the DFN, which in turn developed the capacity of village FRCs. The FRCs ensured the participation of all community stakeholders, including women. With the communities' support the FRC effectively led the difficult process of identifying and submitting individual forest claims.

Obtaining the support of government development schemes was also key in this process. It was only possible because the community was empowered and FRCs were well informed.

## Lessons for policy makers

People that perceive greater security in their ability to access and manage land and natural resources engage in more productive activities and investments. Policy makers should consider this to increase the impact of initiatives on poverty and wellbeing at the local and national levels.

Investing in pro-people institutions to enable forest dwellers to access their rights under FRA is an effective strategy. This is illustrated by the high number of claims settled in this area in the past three years. The FRC is a key community institution for driving this process.

The project adopted a strategy of engaging constructively with the Government to share successful models of claim submission after learning from various pilot initiatives. This collaborative engagement has helped significantly in the issuance of many supportive government orders to district administration on FRA, particularly around speeding up the process for community forest claims and prioritizing women headed families in the settlement of individual claims.

## Challenges

Trócaire and its partners faced many challenges in their efforts to assist the forest dependent peoples of South Odisha and to make the promises of FRA a reality. Raising the awareness of communities on their rights under FRA and the process of accessing them was wrought with difficulties. This was mainly due to the complex nature of the FRA claims procedures and the depth of economic, social and political marginalization experienced by forest dependent communities. This work remains partial and still there are many CBOs and eligible communities who are uninformed and un-mobilized. Many claimants did not have any proof of identity, and this also had to be tackled.

Although it is the duty of the local administration to establish the FRCs and make eligible people aware of the process for claiming tenure over their forest land, they have performed this duty very poorly. Many FRCs were not formed and many of those that were officially formed are not functional. The existing FRC also did not have proper representation of all the sections of a community. Therefore, building the community's trust in the FRC was a real struggle.

## Follow-up

The experience in Doliambo suggests that more work is needed on issues involving the settlement of Community Forest Rights, forest rights of Dalits, rejected and pending claims, and rights of women-headed households in the 1274 villages where the District Forest Network currently operates. Trócaire will continue to work on making forest lands a source of sustainable livelihood for the title-holders by practicing regular agriculture activities, as has been already successfully demonstrated in Doliambo.

Trócaire has initiated a systematic research about the key constraints in implementing FRA in the Koraput district. Based on the research findings, several recommendations have been made to the district administration to make the FRA process more efficient. The project has also established linkages with concerned development departments and research institutes at State level to bring improvements in practice.

The DFN has piloted the concept of convergence with other government programmes for developing the resource base of individuals who received lands under FRA and successfully applied this model in 30 villages. The DFN has also demonstrated the effectiveness of a community-led process for claim submission, verification and settlement with the help of *Gram Panchayats*<sup>2</sup> and FRCs across ten villages.

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<sup>2</sup> Local self-government organisation in India; there are about 250,000 *gram panchayats* in the country.

# Supporting material

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## References and further reading

FAO (2014), *Deep Roots. Making the law real for local land users* <http://digital.tudor-rose.co.uk/deep-roots/>

Trócaire (2015) *Engaging with Forest Dependent People's Network for Voice for Land: a case of Koraput District* <https://www.trocaire.org/sites/default/files/resources/policy/forest-dependent-peoples-network-koraput.pdf>

## Photos, videos

Pragati Koraput is a voluntary organisation established in 1992, working to improve the quality of life of the rural poor in Koraput District of Odisha, India.

<http://pragatikoraput.org/photo-gallery.php>

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