

CAMPAIGN FOR SURVIVAL AND DIGNITY

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Problems with Joint Forest Management

Need to Replace Scheme by an Approach Compatible With the Law

Initiated by a Central Environment Ministry guideline in 1990¹, Joint Forest Management is the main scheme under which the Forest Department claims to be engaging in “participatory forestry.” Despite many claims about its “success” and “people-friendly” nature, **in practice JFM has proven to be a dangerous scheme that has been used mainly to deprive people of their rights.**

Basic Elements of JFM

- A JFM Committee is constituted at the village level. In most States this is to be done in a village meeting convened by the range forest officer or forester; a resolution is passed to create the Committee. In practice even this consultation often does not take place, and JFM Committees are constituted forest officials without holding a gram sabha meeting at all.
- Under the National Afforestation Programme guidelines, the forest guard has to be the secretary and joint account holder of the JFM Committee in all states of the country, and thus controls both its funds and its meetings.
- A unilateral agreement is drawn up by the Forest Department to be signed by the JFM Committee in which the Committee members agree to participate in various forest protection activities specified by the Forest Department (such as preventing grazing and cultivation, stopping tree felling, protecting wildlife, stopping MFP collection which is considered harmful to trees etc.), in exchange for a share of the revenue earned by the Department from sales of minor forest produce and timber.
- JFM Committees are also supposed to prepare “JFM micro plans”, but these have to fit into the Forest Department's working plans. In practice, these micro plans are often not made or are prepared by forest guards for the purpose of planting trees in the JFM areas.
- Under the National Afforestation Programme, JFM Committees are also federated into “Forest Development Agencies” (FDAs) in each forest division. However, the FDAs are totally controlled by the Forest Department, with the Conservator of Forests as the Chairman, the DFO as the member secretary and the forest guard the secretary-cum-joint account holder of every JFMC. Presidents of selected JFM Committees are made members of these agencies, together with the representatives of some government departments, but clearly have little say in their functioning.

JFM in most states is restricted to “degraded” forest areas and cannot be extended to protected areas (wildlife sanctuaries and national parks), for which Eco-Development Committees (EDCs) are formed, with the supposed purpose of reducing villagers' “dependence” on forests.

1 Letter NO.6.21/89-PP dated 1st June, 1990, of the Ministry of Environment and Forests.

Problems with JFM

There are a range of problems with JFM. Some of the key ones are as follows:

Problems in Principle

- Under the Forest Rights Act, the gram sabha is now a statutory decision making authority with powers to protect and manage community forest resources for sustainable use. There is no need for or question of “joint” management with the Forest Department, which now, as a government agency, is bound by the decisions of the statutory authority concerned (i.e. the gram sabha).
- In contrast, forest officers occupy all key positions throughout the JFM structure, which ensures that there is no actual “participation”. Under the unilateral JFM agreement, if signed at all, the FD can disband the JFM committee if it considers that the villagers have not undertaken their responsibilities; but the villagers can do nothing to hold the FD to its commitments, exposing the nature of this “joint” arrangement.
- JFM essentially converts the community into unpaid labourers in exchange for giving them revenue and forest produce which also hasn’t been done in most states. In Gujarat, after 20 years of JFM, some bamboo has been shared with only 3 villages.
- Specifically, minor forest produce is now owned by forest dwellers under the Forest Rights Act, so “revenue sharing” with the Forest Department is no longer legal.
- JFM is based on non-legally enforceable administrative JFM orders which clearly state that JFM does not vest any rights.

At heart, the problem with JFM is that it arises from a conception of the Forest Department as the owner of the forests, from whom communities receive concessions in exchange for provision of services. This view is not even valid under the Constitution, and is a colonial relic that belongs to the British era.

Consequences of JFM and Impact on Forest Dwellers

- **Committees have functioned as Forest Department proxies and are used to prevent people exercising their rights:** The JFM Committees have been used by the Forest Department as its proxies, engaging in plantations on people's cultivated lands, evicting so called ‘encroachers’, preventing women or more marginalised communities from accessing forests for fuelwood and minor forest produce, and otherwise preventing people from exercising their rights.
- **Committees are controlled by village elites, contractors and traders:** Since the Committees are effectively appointed by the Forest Department in many cases, only those close to the Department are permitted to become JFMC office bearers. This has become a convenient arrangement for forestry staff to siphon huge JFM funds, including community funds, in connivance with the village elite.
- **Rather than being participatory, JFM Committees prevent genuine community management:** Where the village has its own institutions for protection and management of forests, these are sidelined by the JFM Committees, who function with Forest Department support and override the local decisions.
- **Huge amounts of money, on the order of thousands of crores, are being poured into JFM for plantation and afforestation purposes.** This money comes from compensatory afforestation funds and from international loans. Much of this money is siphoned off or is often used to plant trees on people's lands as a way of taking over these lands. This is being done despite the fact that rights in these areas have still not been recognised under the Forest Rights

Act.

It needs to be remembered that JFM is based on administrative guidelines – it has no legal sanctity. In contrast, the Forest Rights Act of 2006 is a law, and the provisions for community management within the law override JFM.

**Joint Forest Management is thus now illegal and needs to be brought under community control.
The Forest Department should shift from seeing itself as lord and master of the forests and instead function as a facilitator and implementer of community decisions.**