

Mendha Lekha case: Marketing of the Minor Forest Produce by the gram sabha

Introduction

Under Minimum Support Price (MSP) for Minor Forest Produce (MFP) scheme, powers for trading of the MFPs are not vested with the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) gram sabhas in the V Schedule Areas. In scheduled areas under Schedule V of the Constitution of India, the gram sabhas should be involved in Non Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) related activities, in accordance with the provisions of the PESA Act. However, as reported during state KIIs, gram sabha in scheduled areas and gram panchayat do not get the opportunity to work in close liaison with the forest and other line departments. There has been very little involvement of gram sabha in the marketing of MFPs across Scheduled V states.

Intervention

Previously, bamboo was treated as timber and hence, forest department had full control on trade in bamboo. The villagers were not allowed to sell bamboo to outsiders, since the forest department did not issue transit passes. Mendha Lekha villagers successfully fought with the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change to consider bamboo as a minor forest produce in March 2011. And in April 2011, tribals received the license to harvest and trade bamboo as an MFP. Hence, Mendha Lekha village in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra has done exceptional work by taking control over MFPs under gram sabha. It is the key decision-making institution for self-governance and management of surrounding forests.

Tribals of this village received transit pass books to harvest and transport bamboo and it was greatly emphasized that the power to issue transit passes for bamboo must be retained by gram sabha only. Hence, the transit permit passbook was handed over by the forest department to the local community leader, Shri Devaji Tofa.

Impact

The village became the first village in the country to earn a massive Rs. 1 crore revenue from bamboo sales. The villagers credited the success to the transparent and independent tendering process initiated by gram sabha. There was no involvement of the forest department in the process at any stage. The revenue was nearly 250 per cent more than what the forest department raised in the neighboring villages. This initiative improved the capacity of the villagers to earn their livelihood through forest-based activities. With the generated revenue, ideas of integrated all-round development such as soil and water conservation to increase bamboo productivity and improving road connectivity were implemented.

Source: KII with Social inclusion expert