



Common Ground

Annual Report

2023–2024

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Executive Summary

Despite commitments to climate action, restoration, conservation, and rural livelihoods, the solution ecosystem remains fractured. Communities dependent on marginal resources face heightened vulnerabilities, increasing risks of conflict and displacement. As macro-drivers outpace local response capacities, it is essential to find “common ground” to bridge differing perspectives, foster diverse solutions, translate innovation into practice, and co-create responsive social infrastructure with communities to catalyse change at pace and scale.

The Common Ground initiative aims at catalysing collaborative action by connecting various actors, initiatives, organisations to amplify impact, at scale, for community-centric environmental governance and rural livelihoods. Through 2022 and 2023, with a group of 23 organisations we collectively identified the barriers and opportunities, and co-designed the strategy, the organisational arrangements and collaborative ways of working needed to cause shifts at the system level.

In 2023–24, we progressed from design to implementation, testing and refining our strategy. We made inroads into:

- a) Aligning policy and public investments with social-ecological contexts
- b) Mapping points of intervention in market value chains on forest produce besides working on emerging market instruments (such as carbon/biodiversity credits and environment, social and governance (ESG)) to enable better negotiation spaces for local communities
- c) Architecting digital public goods that enable system-wide interoperability that enable informed locally-led action
- d) Working out strategies for system-wide narrative building and learning and adaptation



We began exploring geographies and identified two broad categories with a predominance of commons:

- a) Forest and tribal livelihood landscapes in central India and northeastern parts
- b) Pastures and mixed farming areas in the dry peninsular region. We gained better understanding of the contextual problems, larger tailwinds, key actors and initiatives. We began convening partners in Jharkhand and Odisha, while surveys were initiated in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Meghalaya. In Odisha and Jharkhand, efforts were directed towards integrating landscape approaches within existing agricultural, livelihoods and natural resource programs besides expanding tenure rights recognition on commons under the Forest Rights Act and designing the next generation interventions post recognition to aid ecological restoration, improved local self-governance and increasing incomes.

This period simultaneously focused on planning and laying the foundations for structured collaboration through the initiation of working groups, the development of regional partnerships, and the design of tools and frameworks to support decision-making by partner organisations, at multiple levels.

Cross-cutting initiatives reinforced these efforts. A conceptual outline that could help agile learning and adaptation was developed to track both progress across the strategic interventions as well as the functioning of the collaborative. Similarly, a high-level design of the communications strategy was developed with an aim of setting the narrative, promoting evidence-based dialogue, and sound information flows between (and across) local communities and partner organisations. A fellowship program was initiated to enhance local capacity, with an emphasis on strengthening coordinated action at the block and district levels.

By intertwining initiatives aimed at:

- a) Assisting the translation of enabling policies and public investments into sound practice
- b) Building digital and non-digital public goods that could be accessed and translated into action by local communities
- c) Influencing the design of market incentives that do not erode the agency of rural communities and safeguard ecological thresholds, the Common Ground initiative is well-poised to achieve sound and enduring ecological, social and economic outcomes, at scale



About Common Ground



The Vision

Thriving Commons for ecological, social, and economic well-being.



The Mission

Collaborative action for thriving Commons in rural India.

India’s commons, spanning 205 million acres (about the area of Egypt) of forests, pastures, and water bodies, are essential for over 350 million rural people. These areas provide critical resources like food, firewood, and fodder, especially for historically marginalised groups such as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and women. However, overuse and degradation have exacerbated climate vulnerability, social inequalities, and rural distress.

While common pool resources and their value are one aspect, equally important are the mechanisms and practices followed by the local communities to govern and regulate the sustainable use of these resources. In tribal areas, this has been customary. This self-regulation is vital for inclusion and representation in grassroots democracies, particularly where traditional practices govern resource management.

Population Dependence

Over *350 million* rural poor in India rely on common property resources for their livelihoods

Economic Value

Commons contribute around *USD 90.5 billion (6.6 lakh crore)* annually to the incomes of rural poor households

Land Area

Commons in India cover approximately *205 million acres*

Despite growing commitments to climate action, landscape restoration, and rural livelihoods, these commons are degrading at an alarming rate of 4% a year. The fragmented solution ecosystem lacks cohesive dialogue and collaborative action, highlighting the need for a unified approach.

Neglecting the principles of self-regulation in common property regimes weakens micro-level democracies, resulting in a missed opportunity to strengthen the pillars of the governance system, particularly the panchayats. The assumption that village communities cannot self-regulate leads to top-heavy approaches. Maintaining these self-regulatory systems is crucial for effective local governance, especially in tribal areas where traditional practices are essential for resource management. These systems need to be further challenged to become more inclusive, particularly of women. They also have immense potential to be applied in other areas, such as health, education, etc.

The current development landscape is hindered by deep structural barriers and top-down approaches that fail to address the needs of local communities, particularly women and marginalised groups. This also results in the de-prioritisation of ecological considerations and local priorities. The ineffective protection of collectively held shared resources, coupled with biases against the capabilities of rural populations exacerbates the issue. Moreover, government capacity, private sector incentives, technological reach to the ‘first mile’, and civil society influence are each insufficient to catalyse the change required. Common Ground recognises the urgency to strengthen the capacity of the entire ecosystem to tackle these crises effectively through collaboration and co-creation.

Our Approach

Leveraging the commons to address linked crises of livelihoods, climate, and equity, through a system-wide collaborative action framework, Common Ground tackles these challenges by bringing together civil society, decision makers, and businesses to promote sustainable management of the commons.

A. Addressing deeper structural shifts in environmental governance and rural livelihoods

This framework operates across four interconnected pathways. First, **strengthening the effectiveness of grassroots actors** focuses on making Commons central to rural development and environmental governance, reinforcing women’s agency, and promoting inclusive governance. Second, **enabling policy and financial flows** ensures the alignment of policy and financial support to foster ecologically sound and gender-equitable rural development. Third, **creating equitable market opportunities** aims to reorient market incentives to support resilient, gender-equitable rural livelihoods.

And fourth, **catalysing collaborative action** promotes collaboration across natural resource sectors and intervention domains to build responsive social infrastructure. These interconnected pathways aim to **impact 22 million acres of Commons and benefit 75 million people, including 37 million women.**

TARGET: REACH 22 MILLION ACRES OF COMMONS AND BENEFIT 75 MILLION PEOPLE, INCLUDING 37 MILLION WOMEN	
PATHWAYS	Strengthening Grassroots Networks: Making Commons central to rural development and environmental governance. This pathway aims to reinforce women’s agencies and promote inclusive governance.
	Enabling Policy and Financial Flows: Alignment of policy and financial support to foster ecologically sound and gender-equitable rural development.
	Creating Equitable Market Opportunities: Reorient market incentives to support resilient, gender-equitable rural livelihoods.
	Catalysing Collaborative Action: Promote collaboration across natural resource sectors and intervention domains to build responsive social infrastructure.

B. Nurturing a system-wide collaborative infrastructure to connect, convene, and align diverse actors for coherent action

The initiative employs a collaborative framework to tackle the systemic barriers hindering the sustainable management of Commons. This framework encompasses five core intervention strategies: co-creating public goods to benefit communities and ecosystems, fostering collective championing to align and amplify shared causes, convening dialogue platforms for meaningful stakeholder engagement, building collective learning forums to cultivate a culture of adaptation, and orchestrating collaborative efforts to ensure alignment and maximise collective impact.

Collaborative Action Framework

A wide range of actors work on the Commons, but their efforts are often fragmented, limited in scope, isolated, and duplicated. The initiative’s five core intervention strategies will facilitate connectivity, co-development, and alignment among them.

Co-create Public Goods

Co-create critical resources that benefit the broader community and ecosystem.

Convene Dialogue Platforms

Establish online and in-person spaces for stakeholders to engage on Commons-related issues.

Collaborative Orchestration

Ensure alignment and synergy among various initiatives to enhance their collective impact.

Collective Championing

Connect different organisations to align and amplify efforts advancing common causes.

Collective Learning

Establish forums and practices that aim to build a culture of learning and adaptation in the ecosystem.

The design process for Common Ground embraced the complexity of addressing systemic challenges by bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders to co-create the initiative's framework. Over the course of a year, 23 partners, including practitioners, academics, think tanks, technology innovators, policy advisors, and ecosystem orchestrators, participated in key touchpoints. This collaborative effort analysed the characteristics of the system, defined actionable and compelling outcomes, mapped pathways to impact, and co-designed the organisational structures and relationships essential for success. This process built alignment among a broad spectrum of partners committed to the initiative's vision. It established structures and processes to ensure mutual accountability, agility, and institutional sustainability, laying the foundation for driving impact at scale. Central to this framework is the distinction between two components:

1. **Common Ground** as a collective initiative for ecosystem-wide action, encompassing two complementary structures of engagement — the Collaborative to begin with, and an organically evolving Alliance.
2. **Living Landscapes** as the backbone entity anchoring Common Ground, providing support for ecosystem engagement, strategic direction, convening, program management, communications, fund management, LME, and administrative functions.

The Year That Went By

In 2023–24, Common Ground advanced key priorities through structured working groups and regional collaborations. During the year, partner organisations came together to work on the following areas that played a key role in shaping Common Ground's efforts.

Strengthening the Effectiveness of Grassroots Actors

At the ground level, action is being viewed at a landscape level, which could be coterminous at a block level. This enables working with commons as well as the public and private natural resources in an integrated manner, and it also enables building a strong implementation apparatus between the block and village level. Groups of like-minded organisations work together with government and other agencies in not only aligning the various programmes and translating them into village-level practice, it also helps village communities determine their priorities and inform 'what's working and what's not'. Information on programmes, schemes, entitlements, market incentives etc. are married together with local ecological and socio-economic data provide contextual information for local planning.

This combined with initiatives that promote coordinated action amongst local actors help build a block-level infrastructure, which is necessary for managing and governing landscapes and improving livelihoods.

As for geographic focus, Common Ground aims to work in the forests of Central India, North-east India and other Himalayan regions and in the forests and grazing lands of peninsular India, where there is a predominance of commonly held resource systems (community forests, pastures and water bodies) and critical dependence of rural livelihoods on these resources. The priority states include: Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Odisha, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Meghalaya, and Nagaland. Of these, Jharkhand and Odisha were identified as initial geographies to begin operations due to initial tailwinds and presence of strong local partnerships.

Common Ground will prioritise landscape partnerships that integrate ecological resilience with socio-economic development. These 'Landscape Partnerships' are conceptualised as platforms for local-level collaboration that strengthen the effectiveness of grassroots action for integrated landscape management with a focus on commons, promotion of green economies, building resilience against livelihood risks and vulnerabilities, and increasing returns on investments in landscapes.

Assisting Policy-practice-finance Connections

In Odisha, Watershed Support Services and Activities Network (WASSAN) worked with the Odisha Rainfed Agriculture Mission (ORAM) to embed landscape restoration within large-scale agricultural programmes like the Millet Mission and Natural Farming programmes along with the State Governments of Karnataka and Odisha, GIZ, Bharat Rural Livelihoods Foundation (BRLF), and other initiatives of NABARD. The model specifies effective planning tools, capacity building frameworks, and processes for coordinated action between government agencies, CSOs and communities for landscape restoration.

In Jharkhand, a network of 33 partners, led by PHIA Foundation, collaborated with Common Ground to expand tenure rights recognition beyond legal frameworks and toward implementation. The possibility of establishing a policy and planning unit (PMU) or think-do tank was taken up for discussion.

Additionally, TISS Mumbai led a policy exchange dialogue between government officials from Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Maharashtra, focused on scaling the implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) across these states. A framework for "FRA saturation" was developed to assist state agencies in designing strategic plans and setting clear responsibilities for recognising community forest rights.

In the coming year, the initiative will deepen its engagement with state and national programs to embed ecological and social considerations into flagship policies such as MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), the Forest Rights Act, and natural farming initiatives. Common Ground will facilitate convergence frameworks to align financial flows and programmatic efforts with the needs of Commons-dependent communities. Collaborative efforts will be directed at developing evidence-based propositions, drafting actionable guidelines, and ensuring that grassroots perspectives are factored into governance structures.

Tilting Market Opportunities Towards Equitable Arrangements

Vrutti (CMS) developed an implementation strategy and architecture for engaging with market systems. The exercise aimed to develop an operational framework towards leveraging potential opportunities from the market system to ‘pay for the ecosystem services’ and enhance the incomes of forest rights holders. The framework supports the creation of desirable mechanisms on four key levers of market systems — non-timber forest produce (NTFP) value chains, ESG compliance, carbon and biodiversity credits and catalytic capital for community inclusion.

Aranyak EcoHarvest developed a conceptual and operational framework including actor mapping of carbon and other green market arrangements, from the point of view of influencing these markets to include the ecological thresholds of a given area as well as the equity concerns of local communities.

An initial institutional design for how a Fair and Equitable Benefit Sharing (FEBS) approach can be applied to other Common Ground initiatives; has also been developed with four proposed initiatives that need to be tested: biodiversity exchanges, biotrade audits and assessments, conservation measures (OECMs for Commons) and/or a national atlas of FEBS arising out of access/use of Commons.

In the coming years, Common Ground plans to embark on creating equitable value chains and enhancing income opportunities for rural communities, particularly women in three or four non timber forest produce (NTFP). This will also include the development of fair-trade systems, access to decentralised finance, and capacity building for community-led enterprises as well as cluster-level market facilitation centres to promote community stewardship in value chain markets.

Catalysing Collaborative Action

Gram Vaani anchored initial work on the Social-Ecological Action Framework (SEAF) along with other partner members including IIT-Delhi, IIT-Palakkad, Magasool, GIZ, and FES, and progressed on the following fronts:

- a) Initial conceptualisation of the various streams of work that comprise the SEAF, and also the underlying principles of design and deployment. The streams of work focus on building the infrastructure needed for collaboration — both in terms of technical protocols and standards required, as well as networks of partners and communities that would ensure action and tangible impact through the SEAF
- b) Development of the CoRE Stack, as a tech stack that contributes data and planning tools to the SEAF. For this, the initial long-list of social-ecological variables and data-sources for a village-level index were identified in consultation with communities and other experts and was used to create analytics and visualisations on landscape-level parameters to inform dialogue and action

ASAR Social Impact Advisors developed the Common Ground communications strategy and engagement plan through listening exercises and consultations with women PRI and SHG members, journalists, and social media influencers across different states, and policymakers in Jharkhand and Tamil Nadu. Key tenets of the engagement plan are the criticality of foregrounding women as important storytellers and communicators within their own communities and with other system actors. There is a need to amplify and insert the Commons narrative into other mainstream and local narratives to build the ‘surround sound’ required to lift the Commons to a priority issue for various key stakeholders. Two fellowship modes have been worked out and are being iterated and further refined. One mode comprises fellows who will facilitate and spearhead convergence at the block and district level, whereas the other mode will comprise fellows who can influence and create enabling environments for the Common Ground agenda at a state and national level.

The Learning, Measurement and Evaluation (LME) approach for the initiative has been developed and indicators for the three levels of outcomes (people, system, organisational) finalised. The measurement approach for each indicator is being finalised and current baselines being established. Common Ground is expanding its LME framework to track progress across people, systems, and organisations. This framework will provide insights to adapt strategies, scale successful models, and ensure accountability across all interventions.

In the coming year(s), digital public infrastructure and frameworks such as the Social-Ecological Action Framework (SEAF) will be designed and developed to enable data-driven planning and facilitate investments from public, private, and philanthropic sources, at scale. These efforts aim to improve bargaining power, increase village incomes, and ensure that market systems align with the capacities and aspirations of rural communities.

Strategic communication efforts will amplify grassroots narratives, positioning Commons as central to climate resilience, equity, and economic sustainability. It will also aim at breaking silos around the imagination of the 'Commons' both internally (within the Collaborative) as well as externally (with key stakeholders). This will help create larger circles of coordinated influence and action.

Looking ahead, Common Ground will build on the progress made in 2023–2024 by scaling its impact across five focus states: Jharkhand, Odisha, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Chhattisgarh. Each pathway will be advanced through landscape partnerships, multi-actor platforms, and collaborative frameworks designed to align local actions with systemic goals.

The Backbone Organisation

As a backbone organisation, Living Landscapes has been set up to serve the Common Ground initiative and its partner organisations. It assists the collaborative of partner organisations and provides leadership, strategic direction, and operational coordination. It manages relationships with partner organisations, including key decision-makers, philanthropic organisations, and other stakeholders. In addition to regulatory compliance, Living Landscapes co-develops the structures and capabilities needed to support the initiative's long-term objectives.

Incorporated as a Section 8 non-profit under the Indian Companies Act on December 5, 2022, Living Landscapes is governed by a board comprising Dr. Jugal Kishore Mohapatra (Chairman and Director), Ms. Urvashi Devidayal (Director), Ms. Moutushi Sengupta (Director), and Mr. Jagdeesh Puppala (CEO and Director). This governance structure provides oversight and accountability.

As of March 31, 2024, Living Landscapes has 14 staff. The team brings expertise in natural resource governance, multi-stakeholder processes, strategic communications, public goods ecosystems, and adaptive management.

Financial Overview

The Common Ground initiative is committed to joint fund-raising strategies and partnerships, with Living Landscapes holding primary responsibility for judicious use of funds and resource allocation.

In the year 2023–24, we received both single-year and multi-year commitments, with most commitments ranging between 1 and 3 years. These funds have been allocated across programmatic activities, the development of collaborative infrastructure, and operating expenses.

Along with partners, we continue to raise funds and aim to unlock new sources of funding to ensure the financial health of the initiative, with scope for innovation and greenfield ideas.

Acknowledgments

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all partner organisations and funders. Their collaboration has been instrumental in shaping and advancing Common Ground’s mission. Together, we will continue to preserve the commons and support the communities that depend on them.



LIVING LANDSCAPES

Living Landscapes, a dedicated and agile backbone organisation, anchors the Common Ground initiative. It provides facilitative support for collaboration, direction, and strategic coherence, nurturing relationships with a wide network of partners, including decision-makers, philanthropy, and other ecosystem actors. Through these partnerships, actors aligned with the Common Ground vision for change will collaboratively expand spheres of influence, spur innovation, and create exponential impact.

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