



ANNUAL REPORT

2024-2025

**Common
Ground**

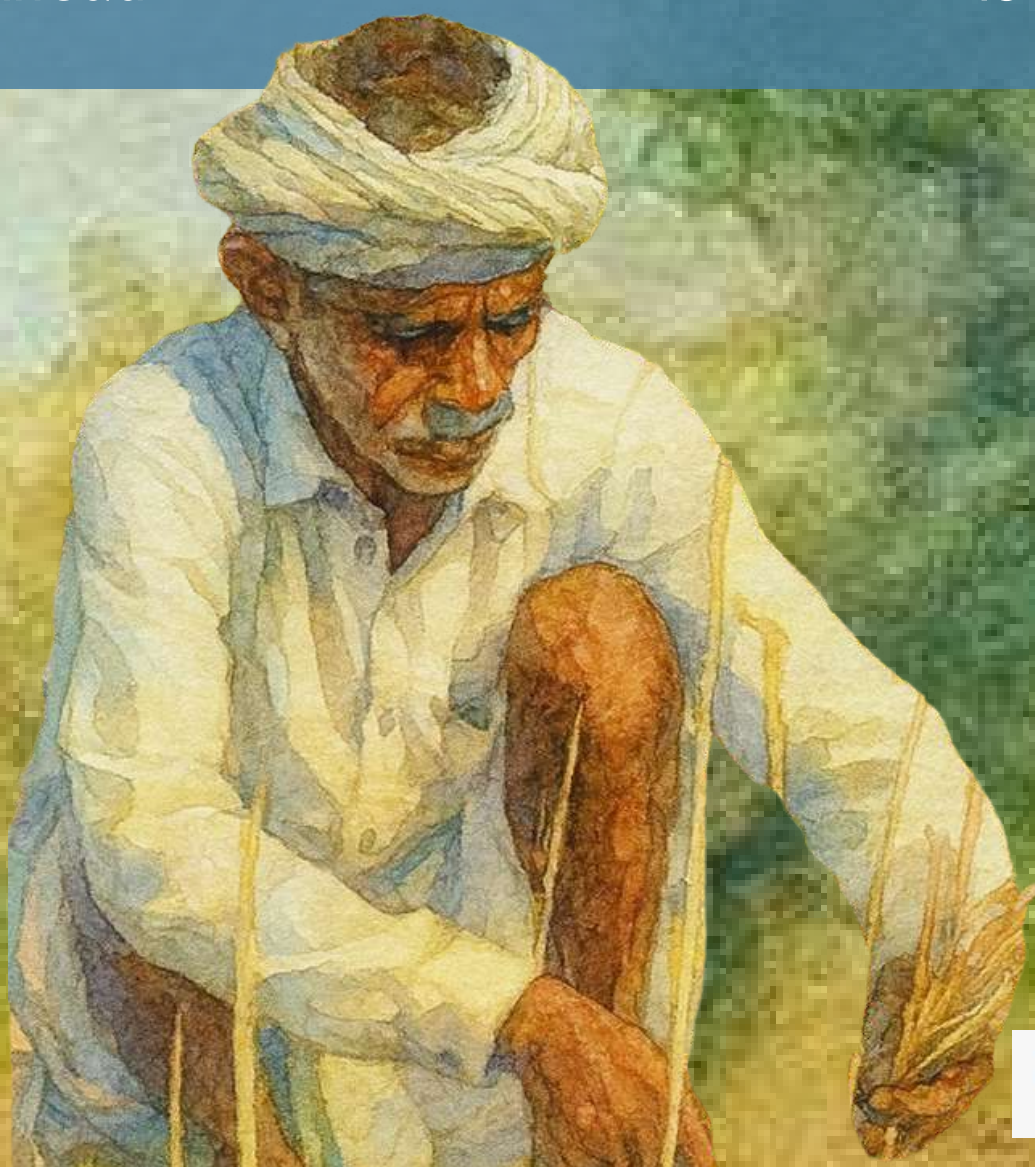
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THE COMMON GROUND INITIATIVE

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.

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.

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

THE COMMON GROUND INITIATIVE

The Challenge

Commons are degrading at 4% annually despite restoration efforts. Fragmented governance and lack of collaboration hinder unified action. Traditional self-regulation in community property systems is weakening, reducing local governance effectiveness. Strengthening these systems, especially in tribal areas, can improve inclusivity and resource management, with potential benefits in health, education, and beyond.

The Problem Statement

Development efforts remain top-down and overlook local and ecological needs, marginalizing rural and women's voices. Weak protection of shared resources and biases against rural communities worsen the issue. Government, private, and civil society initiatives alone are insufficient — a unified, collaborative approach is essential to rebuild local governance and ecological resilience.

The Change We Seek

Common Ground adopts a two-pronged strategy

1. Addressing deeper structural shifts in environmental governance and rural livelihoods.
2. Nurturing a system-wide collaborative infrastructure to connect, convene, align diverse actors for coherent action.

THE COMMON GROUND INITIATIVE

The Vision

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

The Mission

Collaborative action for thriving Commons in rural India.

The Common Ground initiative has been pursuing impact along four interconnected pathways:

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.

THE COMMON GROUND INITIATIVE

The 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.
- **Collective Championing:** Connect different organisations to align and amplify efforts advancing common causes.
- **Collaborative Orchestration:** Ensure alignment and synergy among various initiatives to enhance their collective impact.
- **Collective Learning:** Establish forums and practices that aim to build a culture of learning and adaptation.
- **Convene Dialogue Platforms:** Establish online and in-person spaces for stakeholders to engage.

Partner Organisations





The Year That Went By

The Year That Went By

In the first year of implementation, the Common Ground initiative is transforming from a vision into a force for systemic change, weaving networks of diverse actors while moving from ideation to implementation and landing at the grassroots level, to catalyse transformation across India's Commons-dependent communities and their landscapes. The strategic pathways are beginning to take root in communities, build momentum across community governance, policy and planning, market relationships, and public knowledge, and create the critical first mile connection that bridges systemic change with local realities.

Orchestrating a distributed ecosystem for scale

Critical building blocks are falling into place as Common Ground grows into an ecosystem of aligned actors. The initiative expanded from 23 to 58 strategic partners and grew from 8 to 75 community-led initiatives, creating a distributed, but coherent, network. Partners are leveraging the potential of organic multi-nodal networks—youth networks, indigenous knowledge systems, and community collectives beyond traditional NGO-created forums—for multiplier effects across states and as a vehicle for action.

The initiative began by focusing its efforts across Jharkhand and Odisha through 16 grassroot partners. Partnering with the Centre for Research in Schemes and Policies (CRISP), a policy engagement think tank, efforts are underway to strengthen critical community-level institutions and linkages between them in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, in addition to Jharkhand and Odisha. With emerging opportunities from Maharashtra, Meghalaya, and Chhattisgarh, Common Ground is poised to reach a much larger footprint across India through network effects.

The Year That Went By

The key intent is to expand our footprint at the local level, with several opportunities for expansion shaping up in two broad ways: i) in new states including Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Meghalaya and ii) with other NGOs and grassroots networks, and with networks of networks such as MAKAAAM (which will help centre women), Bharat Rural Livelihood Foundation, and the Natural Farming Coalition.

Partner Organisations: 4S, Abhivyakti Foundation, Badlao Foundation, CRISP, CYSD, Harsha Trust, Kalamandir, NIRMAN, PRADAN, Pragati Koraput, Seba Jagat, SEWAK, SPREAD, SUPPORT, TSRD, WOSCA, XISS

Contributing to policies that reshape systems

A strong momentum is building through collaborative engagement that contributed to shaping the Dharti Abha Janjatiya Gram Utkarsh Abhiyan (DAJGUA), a pan-India tribal development programme converging efforts across Government departments and affecting millions of tribal community members. However, each state implements differently, and so we will continue to work at both - the central level to create enabling conditions for the following priorities: (i) strengthening the harmonisation and linkages between FRA-PESA, GPDP-VPRP and PRI-SHG, and allied areas such as localisation of SDGs in aspirational blocks, (ii) landscape finance models including NTFP market access, and (iii) data-driven panchayat planning—all while working with states to contextualise resulting provisions and assisting them in taking it to practice to the village level.

At state level, the initiative contributed to Chhattisgarh's draft eco-restoration policy and Odisha's Kendu leaf trade deregulation, which, when implemented will lead to direct income increase for tribal women while creating precedents for broader market reform.

The Year That Went By

Expanding interest from Maharashtra and Meghalaya state governments signals the potential for Common Ground's collaborative approach to assist the integration of ecological concerns in policies and programmes as well as translating policies into effective practice on the ground.

Partner Organisations: CRISP, PHIA, PRADAN, UNDP, WASSAN

Building blocks for tilting towards community agency

Community-led governance structures are being institutionalised through formal mechanisms to ensure sustainability beyond project cycles. In Odisha and Jharkhand, MoUs and official invitations have created multi-stakeholder platforms improving access to entitlements, strengthening local services, and advancing decentralised, inclusive environmental governance.

Systems for collaborative change are also emerging. The initiative has developed orchestration models, launched cross-group clusters, and formalised the Learning, Measurement, and Evaluation (LME) Hub. Frameworks based on Common Ground's "economy-ecology-equity" approach are guiding practice, while partnerships with market-facing organisations are improving market access for tribal women in medicinal and aromatic plants and other non-timber forest products (NTFPs).

A partnership with Bamboo Village Trust (BVT) is scaling a market-led bamboo social forestry model. Drawing on BVT's expertise in value chains, product innovation, and ethical sourcing, the collaboration will influence public schemes, build capacity, and promote entrepreneurship—positioning bamboo as a driver of community livelihoods and regenerative growth.

The Year That Went By

The selection of Vrutti and WASSAN's Social Success Note for Natural Farming under the Outcomes Accelerator pilots outcomes-based financing for sustainable agriculture. Using medicinal and aromatic plants (MAPs) to channel blended capital, it supports 200 tribal farmers in establishing Multi-Layer Natural Farms (MLNF) as a proof of concept. The model promotes financial inclusion through cash flow-based lending and tailored credit, laying the groundwork for scalable, outcomes-linked financing that aligns capital with social and ecological impact.

Partner Organisations: CCD, FES, SATTVA, SPREAD, Vrutti CMS, WASSAN

Connecting systemic breakthroughs and local outcomes

The implementation of DAJGUA in the tribal states will demonstrate policy collaboration translating to on- ground impact for hundreds of thousands of tribal community members across over 2,000 blocks. This coupled with the work with CRISP on aligning the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) and Forest Rights Act (FRA), the institutions of Panchayati Raj and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and the development instruments of Gram Panchayat Development Planning (GPDP) and Village Poverty Reduction Plan (VPRP), will strengthen the institutional apparatus at the ground level for effective implementation and community-led environmental governance. The Bamboo Village Trust partnership will showcase scalable community-led enterprise models, while Outcomes Accelerator partnership will pilot blended finance for landscape-specific transitions to agro-forestry models.

Digital public infrastructure partnerships are creating comprehensive support systems for scale. Interoperable systems will enable data-driven governance across multiple states, while partnerships with CoRE Stack, Platform Commons, Reap Benefit, Tarkam, and Aapti Institute create a comprehensive digital infrastructure ecosystem.

The Year That Went By

Building on the ongoing digital public infrastructure work, we will focus on fostering interlinkages with other ongoing open knowledge initiatives such as the India Open Landcover Initiative (which includes contextualising the MapBiomass experience for India) and a regional decentralisation effort of LandMark to ensure synergy between these different initiatives and movement from information to action.

The partnership with the Centre for Exponential Change (C4EC) will help enhance and hone exponential thinking for our strategic execution. C4EC's expertise in fostering systemic change through Societal Thinking aligns with Common Ground goals of activating multi-layered networks and triggering network effects through shared collaborative infrastructure and ecosystem capabilities. Through the partner journey, along with other like-minded missions, we hope to learn, co-design and implement strategies for the Collaborative's evolution and function, learning networks, and distributed ability for innovation.

We are working on elevating the visibility and relevance of Commons in the national discourse by engaging with ecosystem of actors through carefully curated participation in key platforms and events. This approach enables the initiative to attract capital from adjacent domains, foster cross-pollination of ideas, and bring influential voices into the fold who can champion the Commons agenda. By intentionally learning from other systems change initiatives and coalitions, we can accelerate impact while avoiding common pitfalls—grounding our strategies in tested insights and shaping a nationally resonant narrative around community-led stewardship and ecological equity.



— ***Building Collective Impact***

Building Collective Impact

We often use this metaphor to describe our work:

“Common Ground envisions India’s 350 million people dependent on ecological Commons reaching the summit of regenerative prosperity. Rather than carrying each person individually, Common Ground is fixing interconnected ropes-the collaborative infrastructure of policy partnerships, market relationships, governance platforms, and knowledge systems. Over five years, these ropes have been designed to enable a sizeable but smaller portion of people to reach the summit, while positioning the vast majority of the remaining at well-equipped base camps with clear pathways forward. This approach reflects the Collaborative’s work ahead: enduring impact that comes not from scaling delivery, but from building the systems infrastructure that enables communities to chart their own paths to regenerative futures.”

Building Collective Impact

In terms of the operating model for how work done by partners at the system level will land at the local level, the strategy is to improve scale potential and quality by leveraging the existing institutional apparatus and community networks at the village level, while continuing efforts to facilitate and institutionalise multi-actor processes at the landscape level. Common Ground will continue to drive coordinated action and help bridge the gap between village and block levels. Equal focus will be given to engaging more closely with the first mile through constitutionally mandated mechanisms like the Gram Sabha, informal networks of youth clubs and individual changemakers.

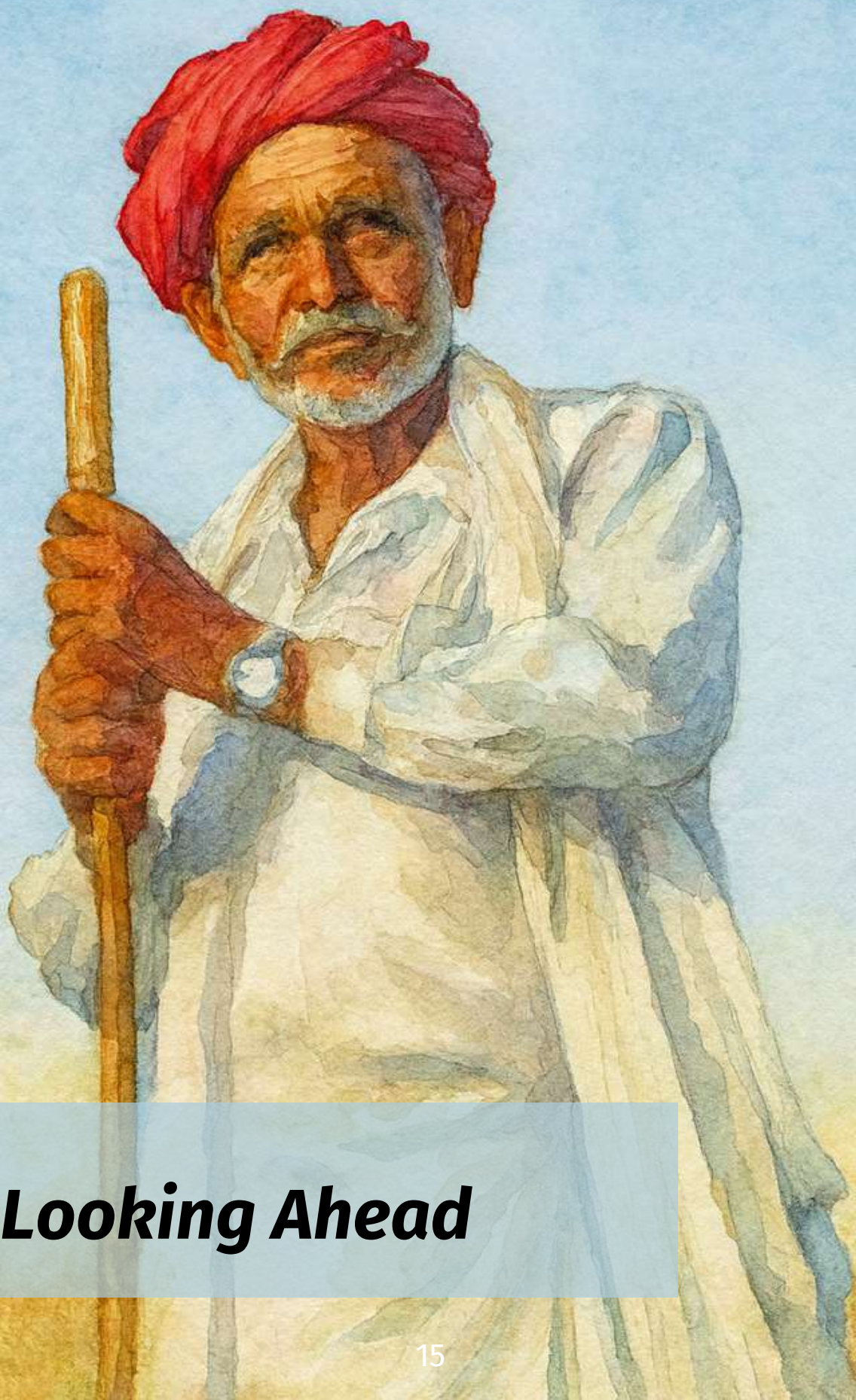
The growing momentum within the Collaborative and the capacity of the backbone organisation to provide strategic support point to opportunities that must be harnessed to deepen impact, shift ownership, and cultivate systems resilience. The growing alignment of partners with Common Ground's strategic pathways, their increasing leadership in external forums, and the successful mobilisation of resources through diversified channels signal a critical inflection point. Going forward, we will build on this momentum by intentionally designing for distributed leadership where multiple nodes across the Collaborative act as orchestrators, and by fostering partners' ecosystem entrepreneurship beyond transactional delivery.

The emergence of shared digital and knowledge infrastructures shows the value of interoperability, reuse, and complementarity. Strategically, this underscores the need to formalise processes that enable co-creation and Commoning especially across technology, data, and narrative-building platforms. Institutionalising working methods that prioritise mutual learning, collective design, and open standards will further catalyse building a shared infrastructure and network-wide impact. The engagement of partners in government and national platforms reveals an opportunity to craft an external engagement and contributing strategy that centres grassroots voices and shared agendas.

Building Collective Impact

At the same time, challenges around differential capacities, tensions between organisational and ecosystem mandates, and variability in Working Group cohesion reveal fault lines that must be addressed. This calls for a clear framework for capacity differentiation and orchestration support. It also points to the importance of conflict addressing mechanisms and narrative scaffolds that support value alignment across partners with scale-oriented or depth-driven approaches. In a growing network, it must be recognised that different actors, landscapes, and systems will evolve at different paces and in different ways. Strategic intent, therefore, must balance pushing toward a more distributed form (as opposed to centralised) while creating space to accommodate different forms too as a feature—not a flaw—of complex systems. As we move forward, the focus will remain on embedding what is working, holding space for what is emerging, and strengthening the scaffolding for distributed leadership and adaptive action. The initiative is discovering how to maintain community roots and their ecologies, centring local knowledge and agency within collaborative infrastructure.

Lastly, in the context of constrained philanthropic support for systems change in India, domestically anchored financial pathways will be actively explored—recasting parts of the initiative in ways that resonate with CSR mandates and regional philanthropies, while safeguarding the core ethos of collaborative systems work. This includes curating narratives and evidence that speak to institutional outcomes, systemic change, and transformative local impact. As part of this approach, ESG-linked finance and carbon/biodiversity credit mechanisms are being further explored, ensuring these instruments are leveraged without compromising local ecological thresholds or undermining community agency. In the same vein, the need is strong to engage more intentionally with bilateral agencies that move significant capital through public systems, and work with them to recognise the criticality of the Commons, the intrinsic interconnectedness of livelihoods, ecology, and social equity, and the potential of a collaborative systems change approach.



— ***Looking Ahead***

Looking Ahead

We are weighing scaling strategies that help the initiative diversify approaches to activating the wide range of nodes needed to reach population scale. In addition to landscape partner CSOs, the nodes could include fellows/changemakers, grassroots networks, local champions and functionaries, across 7–8 states. This will allow us to continue being locally anchored, while also working across states and building the evidence needed to scale exponentially.

Growing spaces for peer-to-peer exchange and collective reflection among grassroots actors, especially women—who are leading local action across geographies, will help stories of locally-led collective action travel, seed locally led action in other contexts and foster a sense of shared momentum among changemakers. Digital tools (like those built on Reap Benefit's 'Samaaja' platform or Platform Commons) accompanied by accessible templates that simplify evidence-based and action-oriented storytelling will support such spaces, at scale.

The Block Resource Centre (BRC), as a connected information hub at the block/landscape level, is one mechanism that Common Ground partners are envisioning to link domains such as policy, local governance, market structures, and price discovery—fostering continuous exchange between apex-level actors and grassroots realities. This will also create models of how hyperlocal knowledge can feed into a larger Knowledge Commons and so drive community-led planning and governance in various contexts. This includes testing tools like *apurva.ai* and deploying contextual playbooks (on FRA, Natural Resource Management, GPDP and other priorities that emerge from Working Groups) for use by grassroots actors, government functionaries and NGOs.

The work on engaging with markets and channeling finance is emerging as a space offering promise.

Looking Ahead

We are seeing traction across multiple fronts: clear paths ahead for value chain interventions, growing alignment with public investment, and encouraging signals from new financing instruments like outcome-based finance and blended capital. These are opening up possibilities for anchoring regenerative rural economies, supporting tribal entrepreneurship, and shaping more equitable market relationships—grounded in community stewardship and long-term resilience of habitats and communities.

As the initiative unfolds we remain mindful of

- the shifting macro environment—changes in the funding landscape, evolving policy priorities, and the broader receptivity to collaborative, systems-based approaches. These shifts challenge both the organisation and the Collaborative to remain agile and capable of meaningful pivots, without losing sight of our long-term purpose.
- how to foster proactive, distributed ownership and orchestration across multiple nodes. Enabling transformative leadership, activating network effects, and strengthening thousands of partners to tilt the system toward nature and people without defaulting to being primarily a funding intermediary which requires deliberate effort and design.
- the critical need to stay outcomes-oriented. This means consciously designing initiatives around clear indicators at the system, people, and nature levels, tracking them consistently, and being able to communicate purpose and progress effectively across diverse audiences. Without a critical mass of purpose-driven action, we risk diluting our impact.
- the deeper structural issues like Natural Resource Accounting (NRA) and area-based planning which can be sidelined amidst the noise imperative in grounding the initiative. Ensuring space for these long-term priorities raises important questions about the organisational design and internal architecture needed to hold complexity while staying generative and responding to emerging needs.

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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