



POLICY BRIEF

# The Commons

*Foundation for India's Livestock Economy*





## Introduction

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The Commons such as pastures, forests, barren and uncultivated lands, rivers and tank beds, agricultural fallows and in many areas harvested agricultural fields contribute significantly to the livestock production systems in India. Estimates suggest that around 77 per cent of India's livestock is kept in extensive systems and dependent on common pool resources. 53 per cent of India's milk requirement and 74 per cent of the meat requirements is also met from livestock kept in extensive systems.

Extensive livestock systems are also crucial in maintaining the health of India's agro-ecosystems. Organic fertilizer with an estimated value of Rs.3,35,000 crore annually is contributed by livestock dependent on such systems (Kullu Call, 2016). Further, mobility strengthens the adaptive capacities and resilience of rural households, especially in current times of increasing climate variability.

Nonetheless, extensive livestock production is often associated with environmental degradation, and poor faith is reposed in the ability of local communities to self-regulate and manage natural resources. This is compounded by information and knowledge gaps related to the value of the Commons and extensive systems. Standard policy solutions that focus on sedentarization, capital and resource intensification have created an un-conducive environment for an open grazing system. On the other hand, growing appreciation for the significance of the Commons, increasing recognition of the role of secure tenurial arrangements for governing the Commons, and higher public investments for natural resource rejuvenation has opened up opportunities to revitalize livestock keeping under extensive (grazing-based) systems.

This policy brief draws from insights from several studies undertaken over the past ten years in the rainfed regions of India to examine the trends, challenges and opportunities in extensive livestock production systems. While doing so, we also provide policy leads building on our experiences from the ground that can

help reinforce the complementarities between livestock, agriculture and the Commons.

## Recommendations

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- Secure tenurial rights of the local communities, particularly the landless, marginal and small farmers, livestock keepers, and women on common land and water resources.
- Empower local governance and strengthen stewardship around the Commons.
- Programmatic approach for ecological restoration with focus on promotion of a mix of indigenous grass, shrub and tree species.

## Background

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Foundation for Ecological Security (FES) and Rainfed Livestock Network (RLN) has been engaged in undertaking action research for more than ten years to improve information and knowledge around the Commons and livestock. The studies build evidence on the criticality of grazing-based production systems to the rural and national economies. FES with the support of the South Asia Pro-Poor Livestock Policy Programme (SAPPLPP) undertook a study in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh to evaluate the role of the Commons in rural livelihoods, specifically the benefits of common land development to poor livestock-keepers (SAPPLPP 2009). In 2010, another study was undertaken in collaboration with several partners across 100 villages in seven states of India to (a) assess the contribution of the Commons to farming and livestock systems sustainability, (b) assess its contribution in reducing households' vulnerability and strengthening their resilience, and to (c) map out the institutional environment influencing governance of the Commons (FES 2010). Further, existing legal provisions, programmes and policies were reviewed to identify areas of integration.

## Key Findings

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- 70 per cent of the households across the arid, semi-arid and sub-humid regions of India graze their livestock on common pool

resources, which contributes to 45 per cent of the annual fodder requirements of these households (FES 2010).

- Bulk of the nation's milk and meat requirements is still met from low-input grazing-based systems (Kullu Call 2016)
- Common lands have been declining at the rate of 0.38 per cent per annum. Livestock population on the other hand has increased by 12 per cent over the past 20 years. Species-wise analysis of the changes in the livestock population indicates that there has been an increasing shift towards keeping small ruminants that can adapt better to poorer conditions. This transition in livestock systems has important implications for the continuing role of the Commons and grazing-based systems (FES 2010).
- Privatization of the Commons is increasing pressures on biodiversity, especially livestock genetic diversity and impacting rural livelihoods.
- Secure tenurial rights coupled with robust local governance and investments for restoration result in a 2.3-times increase in standing biomass (from 6.64 t/ha to 15.64 t/ha) and a 5.7-times increase in palatable biomass (from 0.95 t/ha to 5.37 t/ha). Improved fodder and water availability also increases the livestock productivity and the average livestock holding per household. This contributes to diversification and strengthening resilience of rural households, particularly of the landless, marginal and small farmers (SAPPLPP 2009).

## Conclusion

Evidence from the ground suggests that despite the prolonged neglect in policies and programmes, Commons and grazing-based systems continue to play a vital role in sustaining and flourishing India's livestock economy. Recognizing community's tenurial rights over the Commons and investing on restoration can help in addressing constraints – such as access to land, feed and water – faced by the extensive livestock keepers. There is need to value a

grazing-based system as an important land-use strategy and re-orient policies to strengthen the complementarities between the Commons, agriculture and livestock systems.

## Way forward

The NITI Aayog in its Three Year Action Agenda raises concerns regarding shrinking Commons and declining livestock productivity and highlights the need for institutional innovations for protection and management of common lands (NITI Aayog, 2017). Further, it emphasizes on realizing the Government's vision of 'Minimum Government, Maximum Governance' and doubling farmers' incomes from agriculture (inclusive of animal husbandry, forestry and fishing). To this end, the following measures could be taken:

- Formulate a Model Commons Bill at the national level which could serve as an enabling direction to the state governments.
- Improve public investments for rejuvenating Commons and supporting grazing-based systems through convergence with programmes such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Watershed Development Programmes, National Rural Livelihood Mission, and Livestock Development Programmes.
- Develop a unified programme architecture at district and block levels for different programmes and schemes with focus on natural resource management, agriculture, livestock keeping and livelihood development.
- Develop systems to conduct surveys and maintain a database on the extent of common lands and water sources, and livestock population dependent on these resources.
- Map, demarcate and register all types of common lands along with their land use and users (including customary and seasonal users) in the Panchayat and Revenue records.
- Restrict indiscriminate diversion of common lands both physically or through actions

which can restrict access/usage from primary purpose.

- Recognize the value of small ruminants (sheep and goats) in the livelihoods of poor livestock keepers and the national economy, and focus on inclusion of small ruminants and pastoralists while defining the rights to grazing.
- Periodic assessments of economic contributions of livestock in extensive systems.

## Thematic Partner

This work on behalf of the Rainfed Livestock Network has been led by Network Partner Foundation for Ecological Security. For more information contact [pratiti@fes.org.in](mailto:pratiti@fes.org.in)

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## References

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“The Rainfed Livestock Network is a consortium of organisations anchored by the Foundation for Ecological Security. The Network’s objective is to strengthen the knowledge, information and analytical base on livestock rearing, with specific reference to arid and semi-arid regions, required to encourage and support favourable policies, planning and increase public investment for livestock development in these regions.

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