

Community Level Consultation on REDD+ in Dhanaulti on 17th September, 2012

Under the Norwegian funded project on REDD+ in India: Issues and Challenges, one of the REDD+ pilot sites is selected in the Mussoorie division. To facilitate the assessment of REDD readiness of this site, a socio-economic survey was held in the beginning of the year 2012. On 17th September, 2012, a community level consultation was held in Dhanaulti Eco Development Park to interact with the villagers of the 3 villages (Raaton Ke Beli, Jhalki, Suwa Kholi) that had been surveyed for the REDD+ Mussoorie Division site. The workshop was done in consultation and with close cooperation of the Uttarakhand forest department.

The community level consultation was chaired by Dr. Rekha Pai CPD, Watershed Management Directorate. It also saw participation of Mr. R.N. Jha Conservator of Forests, Uttarakhand Forest Department and Mr. Ram Gopal, DFO, Mussoorie Division. TERI was represented by Dr. J.V.Sharma, Senior Fellow and Ms. Nandini Chandra, Research Associate. Also present were Dr. Bibhu Prasad Nayak and Ms. Ridhima Sud among the gathering. The workshop saw good participation from Raaton Ki Beli, Jhalki and Suwa Kholi.

The meeting with the villagers started with Mr. Ram Gopal, DFO, Mussoorie welcoming the gathering and thanking them for taking time out for the purpose of understanding REDD+ and climate change. He addressed the meeting regarding the issue of climate change and how a simple example like the change in the timing of the seasons was reflective of that. He said that Mussoorie site was one of the six sites that had been selected by TERI for the REDD+ project and congratulated the villagers for that. He encouraged them to take up the issues of fuelwood extraction from the forest and understand what the concept of REDD+ meant.

The discussion was started by Dr. J.V.Sharma, Senior Fellow, TERI who said that REDD+ is a mechanism that will give an opportunity to the villagers to be able to leave the forest in a healthy state for their children and the future generations. Dr. Sharma explained the concept of REDD+ to the villagers. He told them to take from the forests but only till the extractable limit that the forest can support it. As the socio-economic survey of these villages had already been carried out, data with regard to the extraction of grass, fodder leaves and fuelwood had been collected. The analysis of the data had been carried out by professionals at TERI in close guidance of Dr. J.V. Sharma. The results of the analysis showed that grass was well within the extractable limit whereas fodder and fuelwood was being over extracted over the sustainable limit of the forest in consideration (Magra 5 Forest compartment). The villagers from the three villages agreed to the above results and showed interest in getting to know about the concept of REDD+. Dr. Sharma told them that under REDD+, no right would be taken away from them. They would still be entitled to extract grass, fodder and fuelwood from the forest but all within the extractable limit. In this way, not only will they be meeting their demands but would also be contributing towards conserving forest for future generations and also conserving the forest carbon which may entitle them to reap some monetary benefits from the carbon market. The villagers showed great enthusiasm in wanting to adopt this concept.

The discussion was further led by Ms. Nandini Chandra, Research Associate, TERI, who told the villagers about the project under which their village was selected. She said that to assess the readiness of this site for REDD+, 2 steps needed to be carried out:

- Socio-Economic Survey of the forest dependent villages
- Biomass assessment of the forest compartment under consideration

The socio-economic survey had already been carried out by TERI professionals and field staff that had given some idea about the demographic characteristics of the region. It had helped to assess the dependence of the villagers on the forest for grass, fodder leaves and fuelwood. This data, along with input from the forest department had helped in calculating the sustainable limit of the forest. The next step that was to be carried out was the biomass assessment of the Magra 5 forest compartment which would lead to carbon estimation of the site. This would be done using a GPS survey by TERI field staff with the help of the forest guards and villagers. Biomass assessment will lead to estimation of a baseline year that will become the starting point for comparison of forest carbon in the forest.

The discussion was furthered by Mr. R.N. Jha, Conservator of Forests, Yamuna Circle, Uttarakhand, who went on to explain the significance of forests and their utility to the gathering. He explained how and why the villagers needed to realize that the forest could only be protected if they agreed to put concerted efforts to reduce the pressure on the forests. He tried to emphasize the significance of community perspective to be try and convince the villagers that simply extracting from the forests would lead to its depletion far more than imagined.

Finally the session chair Dr. Rekha Pai, CPD, WMD, Uttarakhand Forest Department addressed the gathering by comparing the significance of forests to that of water. She explained that just like without water life is not possible, similarly, without forests life is impossible. It was our duty and responsibility to protect, save and conserve forests.

The session was then open for questions from the villagers. They showed interest in the idea of REDD+. With the Panchayat of Jhalki village being present amongst the gathering, the discussion brought out a very important point. It was pointed out by the villagers that this meeting would be more effective if it would be held in the village with the Gram Panchayat. The concept of REDD+ should be accepted by one and all so that the whole idea of the protecting the forests should not get diluted. It would give an opportunity for more queries from the villagers and community perspective about that site would be received. TERI's professionals also felt that such a meeting would be a good opportunity to validate the project's findings and data. It would also be a good opportunity for the professionals working on this project to understand the different problems of the region and to find solutions for them in consultation with the forest department.