

Foundation for Ecological Security — 17 Million Acres of Commons, Governed by Communities

There is a category of land in India that belongs technically to everyone and practically to no one: the commons. Village grazing lands, community forests, sacred groves, seasonal water bodies — these are not private land and not government-protected forest. They exist in a legal...

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For communities that depend on commons for grazing, NTFP collection, fuelwood, and groundwater recharge, the degradation of commons is an existential livelihood threat. The restoration of commons, and the building of community institutions capable of governing them sustainably, is therefore not an environmental programme. It is a livelihoods programme, a water security programme, and a governance programme simultaneously.

Foundation for Ecological Security — FES — was established in 2001 to do exactly this work at a scale that no other civil society organisation has attempted.

Who They Are

FES was set up in 2001 in Anand, Gujarat, to reinforce the task of ecological restoration in India. Their founding premise: ecological security is the foundation of sustainable and equitable development. Without healthy commons — the grasslands, forests, and water bodies that poor communities depend on most directly — sustainable rural livelihoods are impossible.

As of March 2025, FES, along with its NGO partners, has assisted more than 68,000 village institutions in protecting and managing 17 million acres of common lands, positively impacting the lives of 32 million people across 14 states of India. These numbers have grown steadily: in March 2022 it was 41,880 village institutions and 12.52 million acres. The growth rate is not a campaign spike but an accumulation of community governance capacity over two decades.

FES operates across 14 states: Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Telangana, Uttarakhand, and others. Their member status in IUCN, the International Land Coalition, the International Association for the Study of the Commons, and the UN ECOSOC places them at the global frontier of commons governance thinking while remaining rooted in Indian village institutions.

The Village Institution Model

FES's operational unit is the village institution — a community governance body (often a committee of the gram sabha) that takes collective ownership over a defined area of common land. FES's work builds the institutional capacity of these bodies: helping them map their common lands, establish governance rules, manage conflicts, and build the legal standing to protect their rights.

The institutional strengthening model reflects a specific understanding: ecological restoration without governance produces plantations that communities have no stake in protecting. Community governance without ecological knowledge produces well-intentioned but ecologically ineffective interventions. FES integrates both — which is why their 68,000 village institutions are protecting and managing land rather than simply claiming it on paper.

When community institutions manage commons well, the Skoll Foundation has documented an important secondary effect: collective action spins off from managing natural resources into other spheres of village life — education, health, and economic opportunity. The commons institution becomes a general-purpose governance body.

The Commons Policy Dimension

FES has played a documented role in shifting how Indian states invest in commons restoration. They have influenced public investment in commons restoration in three Indian states and cooperated with state governments to shape implementation of new commons programmes. Their post-CFR (Community Forest Rights) scoping study across Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha is among the most important documented analyses of what happens to communities after Forest Rights Act titles are granted — a critical question that most FRA implementation work leaves unanswered.

Their collaboration with Arghyam (covered separately in this Knowledge Commons) on Village Community Facilitators for natural resource management — three VCFs per village, including at least one woman — is an active programme that integrates water, land, and commons governance into a single community capacity building model.

The Odisha Connection

FES's work specifically includes Odisha among its 14 operational states. Odisha has significant common land — degraded revenue forest, community grazing lands, seasonal water bodies — that could support tribal and agricultural community livelihoods if properly governed. The Forest Rights Act Habitat Rights and Community Forest Rights titles that Odisha's tribal communities have received create the legal foundation for the community governance that FES specialises in building.

For Odisha NGOs facilitating FRA implementation: FES's village institution model and their documented experience of post-CFR support across central Indian tribal states are the most relevant available reference material. Their land portal publications and commons governance frameworks are directly adaptable to Odisha's specific FRA implementation challenges.

Contact and Further Reading

Website: fes.org.in | **Contact:** Post Box No. 29, Jahangirpura, Anand District, Gujarat

Key evidence:

- Give.do FES profile: 68,000 village institutions, 17 million acres, 32 million people, as of March 2025
- Wikipedia: Foundation for Ecological Security — operational states, IUCN membership, funding partners
- Land Portal: FES post-CFR scoping study across Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha
- Skoll Foundation profile: commons-to-governance spillover documentation
- RCRC/IASC profiles: FES role in India's Commons paradigm

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