

This case study is one of several produced by the **CLARA** network to coincide with the publication of the IPCC Special Report on Land. We're showcasing **CLARA** member climate solutions which demonstrate the **rights-based, low-emission development pathways** needed for reducing emissions while **promoting livelihoods** and **ecosystem integrity**.

This case study is based on one of over 60 participatory assessments carried out with communities in 22 countries through the Community Conservation Resilience Initiative (CCRI).

Community forest governance and land rights crucial to protecting forests and livelihoods in India

Indigenous Peoples and local communities require the Forest Rights Act to be implemented properly and for power to be devolved to the Gram Sabhas

Organisations and individuals involved

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Global Forest Coalition

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Location

Buxa-Chilapata forest area in the foothills of the Eastern Himalayas, bordering Bhutan, in the Alipurduar District, West Bengal, India.



SOUPARNA LAHIRI FOR GFC/CCRI

VILLAGES IN THE Buxa-Chilapata area are home to the Rabha and Jharkhandi tribes and other local communities, and are surrounded by the Buxa Tiger Reserve and Jaldhapa National Park. These forest villages were formed by the colonial forest administration during late 19th century to aid forestry operations. The communities practiced swidden agriculture and the controlled use of fire to preserve biodiversity, they grew fruit trees and intercropped vegetables between the lines of saplings in plantations.

Traditionally, these communities enjoyed customary rights to practice their livelihoods, including grazing, small-scale agriculture and collection of non-timber forest products. However, erosion of these rights, first by the colonial state and then by the independent Indian state, has resulted in loss of livelihood and acute poverty in these areas.

The Forest Rights Act of 2006 restored their traditional rights and empowered the communities to govern their forests through newly-formed Gram Sabhas, traditional village councils. These rights are closely linked to ideas of livelihoods

and cultural identity, and had allowed the communities and their environments to flourish. The communities initiated community patrolling of the forests and planted indigenous tree saplings where natural forests had been felled.

State forest bureaucracy is the barrier to the implementation of the Forest Rights Act. Worse still, some conservation NGOs and former Indian Forest Service officers have challenged the constitutional validity of the Act. As a consequence, the Supreme Court of India has ordered the eviction of all forest dwellers whose claims have been rejected in the recording of rights process under the Act. This order affects more than 10 million people.

Communities are further threatened by expanding protected areas and the loss of access to the natural resources and economic value of the forests they rely on. The intrusion of commercial interests such as monoculture tree plantations and the growing influence of 'mainstream' cultural practices are eroding traditional relationships and cultural bonds that the communities have with their environments.

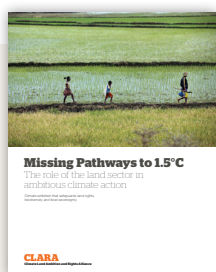
Testimony

Sundersing Rabha, an indigenous leader from Buxa-Chilapata

“Since the colonial period we have lost our rights and access to forests. Now that the Indian Parliament has restored and recognised our rights, we are asserting our rights over our forests, our land and to form our own Gram Sabhas. But the forest officials are against recording our rights. They are threatening my community. But, the struggle continues. We are defending our forests, we are not allowing monoculture or commercial plantations on our village land. My community wants to live in peace, nurture these forests and earn our livelihood.”

‘Missing Pathways’ to climate action

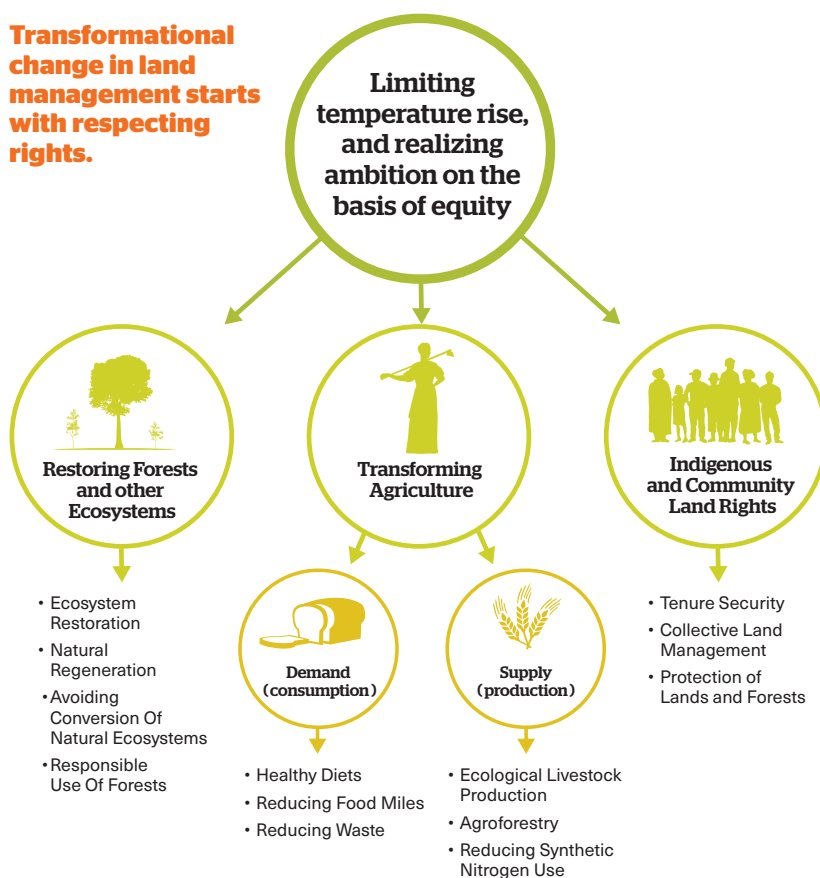
Last year, CLARA published the report ‘Missing Pathways’, identifying areas of global mitigation ambition rooted in land rights, restoration, agroecology, and food system change.



The climate actions that are needed to support the efforts of this community are...

the recognition and protection of secure rights of tenure and governance of forest areas, especially where the colonial forest administration had appropriated the traditional rights of indigenous forest communities. This is crucial to supporting conservation practices and ensuring access to livelihoods. In stark contrast to an approach that forcibly restricts community access to forests and/or commercialises their value with plantations, this is a much surer way of avoiding the conversion of natural carbon sinks and enhancing and protecting terrestrial ecosystems, a point clearly emphasised in the Missing Pathways report.

Transformational change in land management starts with respecting rights.



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