

Supporting Options for Enhanced Income for Marginalized and Disadvantaged Communities in the Uplands and Mountains: The necessity for harmonizing Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) in shifting cultivation

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Abstract

Although substantial resources and efforts have been invested by governments over the last three decades in transforming shifting cultivation to settled agriculture, these efforts have been less than satisfactory in ensuring the required transformation, and shifting cultivation continues to be practiced in many parts of the South and South Asia, mainly by indigenous communities in the uplands and mountainous areas of the region. In northeast India alone, despite efforts by governments both at the center and in the states, over 400,000 families continue to practice shifting cultivation and affecting an area of approximately 1.73 mha (Task Force for Management of Shifting Cultivation, Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, 2003).

The policy approach toward management of shifting cultivation has fundamentally been to attempt to replace the practice with settled agriculture, particularly through the promotion of horticulture, cash crops, and wet rice cultivation, with the ultimate goal of eradicating the practice. As part of this policy approach, all programs and technical support are designed to replace shifting cultivation and extend support solely for the promotion of settled agricultural systems, with no scope or space to accommodate approaches or attempts to synthesize the options available within the traditional practice or to modify shifting cultivation to align with market demands. The fundamental drawback in this approach, therefore, is the failure to address the needs of those in transition who are attempting to accommodate cash crops and related options within the framework of the practice. The rigidity of the policy denies any support—technical, financial, or otherwise—during transition and hence fails to address the need of shifting cultivators, who, for various reasons, cannot make a drastic transformation from shifting cultivation to settled agriculture. It is not surprising, therefore, that shifting cultivation and its practitioners continue to remain among the most marginalized, disadvantaged, and vulnerable communities in the world.

With no support forthcoming from government agencies to realign shifting cultivation toward commercialization and market orientation in order to enhance cash returns, shifting cultivators have innovatively taken initiatives to do so on their own. Shifting cultivators have “commodified” the practice, and it is common in many parts of the region to find cash crops being cultivated in shifting cultivation systems—ginger, potato, chillies (pepper), turmeric, and even upland cotton from the agricultural phase, and black pepper, cinnamon, lac, and other NTFPs from the fallow phase. These products, together with vegetables and tubers, are sold in local, regional, and national markets. The returns, however, do not reflect the organic character of the products, as no attempt is made to brand and market them as organic, despite the fact that these products are grown using traditional organic methods inherent in the practice and no external inputs of chemical fertilizer or pesticides are used. It is here that the relevance of the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) becomes important and desirable.

Traditional practices within shifting cultivation have strong foundations in organic agriculture principles—weed management and mulching, crop diversity, and multiple crops to ensure risk aversion, sequential harvesting to ensure food availability, reduced competition between crops for nutrients and satisfactory production, as well as sound fallow management nurturing and promoting a diverse variety of broad-leaved tree species that contribute to ecosystem recuperation and soil fertility enhancement. These practices together contribute to ecosystem recovery and also ensure retention of the organic nature of the practice. Common misconceptions about shifting cultivation have prevented acknowledgment and recognition of the organic characteristic of shifting cultivation. Harmonizing the Participatory Guarantee System with shifting cultivation, however, not only offers a tremendous opportunity to acknowledge this attribute of the practice, but, in the process, but also offers shifting cultivators in transition the opportunity to enhance returns from their products and lay the foundation for a standardized practice of farming which subsequently can facilitate upscaling of organic agriculture in the uplands and thereby help such disadvantaged communities—particularly indigenous peoples—to come out of poverty and marginalization. The presentation will attempt to highlight the strengths of shifting cultivation, demystifying the common misconceptions about the practice, and try to demonstrate how PGS can be harmonized with shifting cultivation.

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