



**COMMONS
CONVENING**

— 2024 —

Collaborating for Impact

Paths forward from the Commons Convening 2024



Organising Partners

**Common
Ground**



FOUNDATION FOR ECOLOGICAL SECURITY



Design Partner



205 million acres, a quarter of India's landmass, is covered by **community forests, pastures and water bodies**. These land and water Commons meet critical household and **livelihood needs** of more than 350 million rural people and provide invaluable **ecosystem services** worth over USD 90 billion per year. However, they are being rapidly degraded and depleted.

India's ambitious objectives of doubling farmer's incomes, arresting degradation, carbon sequestration, and achieving the **Sustainable Development Goals** provide immense opportunities to focus on the Commons in programmes at state and national levels. To catalyse these opportunities, system-wide spaces for dialogue, collaborative action, and societal learning are crucial.

As part of a commitment to **connect actors and catalyse collaboration**, the Commons Convening is a joint effort of the Promise of Commons and Common Ground initiatives, designed along with partners including Living Landscapes, UNDP, LandStack, TISS Mumbai and Collaborating for Resilience. At the core of the convening was a spirit of exchange and co-learning meant to build connections and drive conversations necessary to spur increased and innovative collaborative action in support of the Commons in India.

The first of many gatherings, Commons Convening 2024 took place over the course of three days, August 27-29, 2024. **More than 500 people from over 20 states** gathered at the Dr. Ambedkar International Centre in New Delhi to jointly explore the central role of Commons, Commoning and collective action in managing, nurturing, and revitalising shared resources across India.

This report shares key takeaways from the Commons Convening 2024. First, the **ambitions** affirmed that define the key threads of change required; next, the **pathways and approaches** for strengthening work around the Commons to address these ambitions; and, finally, a sampling of the new **commitments and collaborations** that have emerged in support of collective action for the Commons.

AMBITIONS

System-wide dialogue is necessary to address institutional fragmentation in the governance of the Commons. Such system-wide dialogue and focus amplifies the importance of an integrated view of the Commons for achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The discussions at the Commons Convening clearly demonstrated how the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are intricately linked to every aspect of the Commons, be it addressing poverty, hunger, ecological health, developing and strengthening partnerships or deepening climate action.

- There is a need to push our collective socio-political systems to operate like socio-ecological systems, hence bringing Nature (*Prakriti*) into the *Sarkaar-Samaaj-Bazaar* understanding.
- Connecting *Samaaj* (Society) with *Bazaar* (Market) and *Sarkaar* (Government) requires institutions intentionally designed to make this happen in a way that reinforces the Commons. There is an appetite for creating convergence between different government departments; for knowledge exchange across community, civil society, and government at different levels; and for strengthening local institutions for managing Commons.

For this to be effective, it needs to happen in combination with **deep thematic engagements** around the Commons. Given the diversity of land, water, forests and Commons, and the range of communities engaging with them, the Commons Convening aimed to curate spaces devoted to discussing the **nuances and needs of particular Commons**, and **newer areas for Commoning**.

- Wide engagements necessary on the socio-political systems around particular Commons – whether forests, grasslands and pasturelands, urban Commons, or freshwater ecosystems and coastal Commons.
- Recognition of non-physical Commons and their value to such system-wide action is another critical priority to advance. This includes mindfully developing and using public goods and technology that provide critical public services and encourage advancements in dialogue and action for the Commons.

Convergence and linkages across sectors, stakeholders, and levels of institutions will also be fundamental to addressing and responding to the system-wide imperatives discussed above. This means understanding that the Commons do not adhere to traditional political and administrative boundaries. There is a strong need to find ways to work with the Commons and tribal communities that address this challenge and adequately consider ecological interactions.

- Good policy on paper still requires strong collaborative effort to yield real implementation results on the ground. This can mean collaboration across different levels of governance, and between different departments and governance actors.
- Greater Commoning within the NGO sector itself is necessary, wherein pooling resources and knowledge can form the foundation for coordinated and collaborative action agendas to revitalise the Commons.

Improving the agency of women and other marginalised communities must be central. This includes increasing public space for women to voice their *own* thoughts in their *own* ways and prevent stereotyping (e.g., women as collectors and men as financiers in a forest paradigm). The contributions of women, particularly as custodians of traditional knowledge, must not be overlooked. Centring women's agency and voice is part of a larger project of working to address power differentials.

- There is a need to deconstruct community power dynamics to prevent capture by elite interests, promoting alternative knowledge systems for knowledge transmission.
- While fora where communities can deliberate and develop ground-level solutions are critical, they also need to be embedded in or linked to supportive frameworks and public institutions so that such solutions can consolidate, if not also scale or replicate.
- Power differentials in 'co-management' scenarios need to be addressed, which is often linked to finance considerations. A re-evaluation of joint management practices is necessary to align them with customary resource management methods.
- People's movements and decentralised institutions represent an important vehicle for creating space where alternative voice and agency can be exercised, which can include micro-fora premised on direct participatory democracy.

A **climate adaptation and resilience** lens is key. This involves understanding challenges posed by climate change and involving communities in innovative and sustainable climate financing mechanisms that build accountability towards the communities who protect and restore the Commons.

- There is a critical need for green market mechanisms to shift from a dominant focus on carbon credits (focused strictly on climate mitigation) to a broader focus on carbon++ credits wherein social and ecological impacts (e.g. biodiversity or water security) are accounted for.
- Developing innovative and sustainable financing mechanisms may include blending financial resources to leverage them for landscape climate action, centred around the Commons.
- A lack of community-oriented principles in the financing of climate projects is concerning. There is a need for institutional mechanisms and structures that help build transparency and accountability around equity considerations about how project financial benefits are shared with communities.

PATHWAYS AND APPROACHES

It is essential to evolve the **discourse around Commons** and improve the ways we communicate about the urgency and imperative of supporting healthy Commons. The Commons are diverse, encompassing forests, coasts, water, pasturelands — and even urban spaces, which are often overlooked. Discourse around the Commons needs to create a compelling public narrative that links the Commons to human and planetary health, as well as resilient livelihoods. There was also strong support for leaning into the language and heterogeneous narratives of communities that rely on the Commons, from across regions and states.

- Working to recognise the full diversity of the Commons can include experimenting with language around larger landscapes, and their conservation and management, offering an integrative frame across resource systems. This includes efforts towards valuation of the services provided by Commons in broader landscapes.
- If focusing on the discourse of the Commons is ultimately about building public opinion to support the Commons, this means not just working on building the narrative/content but also the infrastructure needed to share these stories.
- There are opportunities to invest in building out networks of journalists who are open to creating shared narratives around the Commons, in part by building and curating grassroots stories. This includes filling the gap in gender-sensitive reporting on the Commons, particularly in local media.

Several approaches were identified to pursue to improve **collaboration, convergence and linkages** within and across sectors. Considering the need for more permeable institutional boundaries in work on the Commons, actors must connect across different scales to catalyse and support local action. Such multi-actor, multi-sectoral collaborations must build upon and strengthen existing institutions and mechanisms.

- Connecting core ideas of *Samaaj* with *Bazaar* and *Sarkaar* requires robust institutions across all levels to engage in decentralised governance, particularly Gram Sabhas.
- Area-based planning processes offer an opportunity to increase the role that local communities and institutions play in decision making and implementation. This in turn represents an opportunity to pursue areas of convergence and linkage in government schemes operating at the local level.
- Strengthening the functioning of Panchayats emerged as a critical pathway to support collaboration underpinned by community-led governance, serving to encourage area-based planning as well.

Engaging youth in uplifting and amplifying the importance of the Commons will be a key pathway moving forward. This includes working to establish Commons and environment curriculum in both lower schools and higher education, supporting indigenous activists and groups documenting ancestral knowledge, and engaging younger generations to take on responsibilities of stewardship over their Commons.

- There are opportunities here to invest in and support processes of inter-generational knowledge transfer. This was reiterated in sessions on many different types of Commons.

- Environmental and Commons education needs to be decentralised and accessible, moving beyond privileged and elite spaces. This includes emphasising and centring community ways of learning to replace factory ways of learning. It should include practical education on basic legal frameworks addressing the governance of resources.

Leveraging **data and technology** will be crucial for supporting collaborative action for healthy Commons and inclusive governance. Much of this will rely on advancing citizen science and locally developed knowledge about specific Commons, as well as improving interoperability between data and technology from different sources. But if we are to engage with technology as a key tool to manage and restore the Commons we also need to address the ethics of data collection and how it is utilised. Joint effort is needed to build community-designed data systems that involve communities in the creation and development of the technologies and data themselves.

- Working with modes of citizen science and involving communities in designing and developing Commons data also requires addressing biases, moving from a ‘tech done to/for people’ to a ‘tech done with people’ approach.
- There is a need for data on ‘bio-based economies’ and there are opportunities for integrating such data with SDG reporting and indicators.
- Part of experimenting with leveraging data and technology for the Commons will mean expanding our understanding of what tech and data can mean for the Commons. This will include going beyond the normal use of data in relation to the Commons, where data often focuses on how much of something (quantification) or where it is (geospatial location), and integrating physical and qualitative information. Community designed data systems, including ‘small tech’, can help add critical and complementary qualitative layers, ultimately supporting more integrated and accessible collective intelligence about each specific Commons.
- Lack of local data – especially around local governance efforts, climate and biodiversity impacts on Commons – limits effective communication and storytelling. Building data collection systems that support informed reporting and showcase local resilience stories can aid greatly in narrative building efforts around the Commons. Yet, this work requires attention to norms for access to data and community knowledge.

Research and learning partnerships will be an important part of helping to build the evidence needed to widen public awareness of the Commons, centre community voices, strengthen education, support institutional and policy reform, and help steer finance and investment towards community-led solutions.

COMMITMENTS AND COLLABORATIONS MOVING FORWARD

The Commons Convening provided an opportunity to strengthen existing collaborations and seed new ones. In a closing plenary session, convening participants discussed a range of partnership and collaboration priorities and commitments, many of which are already bearing fruit.

Some discussed starting **new university courses and curriculum on the Commons**. The Central University of Rajasthan (CURAJ) School of Social Sciences announced a course on Commons and Collective Action as an elective for undergraduate and postgraduate students in collaboration with the Foundation for Ecological Security, which has since launched in September 2024. Others also suggested creating and embedding focused **courses on the Commons in trainings for civil servants**.

Others committed to working across university and community institutions to document and compile **rural development stories linked to the Commons**. This included looking for opportunities to draw further attention to the **Commons and their community champions**. A total of 62 stories in 7 different regional languages – reaching a potential audience of approximately 126 million people – were published across national and regional news platforms, highlighting the importance of the Commons in sustaining local livelihoods, biodiversity and climate resilience. The flagship publication *Our Commons*, released at the Convening, was featured in the India Water Portal in an article [“Beyond the boundaries: Reimagining our shared resources”](#). This was followed up by the release of [ten videos](#) of community champions’ stories. *The Hindu* also published an article on community stewardship titled [“Shining the light on community champions in the spirit of Gandhiji”](#). The session on strategic communications for the Commons also established a group of “Commons Communicators” comprising journalists, visual storytellers, filmmakers, and photographers to craft and disseminate compelling narratives on Commons. Future plans included support to local journalists and grassroots communicators to empower local voices, ensuring communities are active participants in the discourse around Commons.

Many discussed and proposed **updates to key policy provisions and their implementation** relevant to the Commons, such as the Forest Rights Act. Discussions on programmatic action around the Forest Rights Act 2006 have been underway since early 2024, with several partner organisations engaging with Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) in different platforms. The three sessions focused on this during the convening provided a space to re-imagine ‘Forest Rights 2.0’, with stakeholders coming together to discuss the way forward. Continued engagement has led to the Prime Minister’s declaration of a programme called **Dharti Abha Janjatiye Gram Utkarsh Abhiyaan** on 2nd October 2024. The programme provides impetus to the implementation of the Forest Rights Act, with particular focus on Community Forest Rights.

Collaborations born out of particular sessions are also showing initial signs of momentum. For example:

- Insights from the ‘Confluence of Law, Justice, and Commoning’ workshop are being leveraged to design a **legal support tool** that enhances the effectiveness and reach of community resource persons, first respondents, and paralegals, particularly in facilitating **access to enviro-legal data**. The workflow for this tool has been designed among partners, with plans in place for prototyping and testing.
- Building on discussions initiated during the session on panchayat custodianship of natural resources, a **Conference of Panchayats** was organised in October in Chittorgarh, Rajasthan and in

December in Dhenkanal, Odisha. The conference aimed to create a platform for Panchayat officials to explore and define the scope of their custodianship roles and identify steps needed to align these responsibilities with the vision outlined in Article 40 of the Indian Constitution.

- Discussions from the session on **Water Commons and SDGs** at the Convening were also synthesised and shared widely in an article “[Evolving approaches to water governance: Insights from a panel of experts](#)” published on the India Water Portal. The article explores the future of water governance, pushing for a balance between the role of government policy, community-driven models, and technological solutions.
- The session on **area-based approaches to development** underlined key concerns and opportunities to strengthen the supporting institutional architecture. This included linking self-help groups and Panchayats, and other mechanisms to improve institutional ownership of watershed structures and programmes. Initial steps in this direction include joint efforts with the National Rainfed Area Authority to embed this approach in the ongoing design of a drought-proof programme.

While nearly all mentioned a commitment to pursuing and expanding collaborations initiated or identified at the Convening, it was also a space for existing collaborators to deepen their work. There have been ongoing discussions among member NGOs of the Rainfed Livestock Network and the Centre for Pastoralism on extensive livestock systems. Partner NGOs have been advocating for the recognition of pastoral communities. India’s **2024 livestock census will include pastoral livestock** for the first time, marking a significant step towards acknowledging pastoralism as a widespread practice. This shift is expected to help **create a policy framework** to safeguard pastoral communities and their way of life. Following the Convening, several NGOs are coming together to participate in the Pastoral Census and ensure that as many families as possible are enumerated.

Several participants stated and echoed the need for, and their commitment to, investing in creating spaces or platforms to carry forward the conversations that were happening at the convening in their **home institutions**. They committed to transmitting ideas and energy from the convening into work the participants and their organisations are doing across the country, including **organising regional or domain-specific Commons Convenings**.

Others committed to engaging with key groups in work on the Commons, including **forming youth organisations** in specific local contexts focused on the Commons and creating **dialogue spaces** with farmers and producer groups in different geographies.

This is just a limited snapshot of the plans and collaborations that were seeded at the Convening. In the following months, the Convening organising committee will be working to learn more about, track, and identify additional ways to support the collaborative efforts that are being pursued in the wake of the Commons Convening. Particular tracks emerging to follow up include:

- Data and technology for Commons and Commoning.
- Panchayat strengthening.
- Improving forest governance and management, particularly in the frame of the Forest Rights Act; this includes collaborations for sustainable non-timber forest product value chains.

- Financing mechanisms for action around the Commons.
- Interactions between Commons, landscapes, and production systems.
- New areas for Commoning, such as urban and peri-urban Commons and planetary health.
- Linking research and evidence on the Commons with strategic communications; this includes addressing the link between Commons and climate, community stewardship, and more.

ABOUT THE CO-ORGANISERS

The **Promise of Commons** is a collaborative initiative to address key systemic barriers impeding action on the Common by reorganising relevant systems around new values, structures, connections, interactions, and resources. This change is driven by local communities, particularly women who have the voice, agency, power and influence to transform systems, institutions and structures to address deep systemic inequalities and power imbalances. The **Foundation for Ecological Security** (anchor for Promise of Commons) is committed to strengthening, reviving, or restoring, where necessary, the process of ecological succession and the conservation of land, forest and water resources in the country.

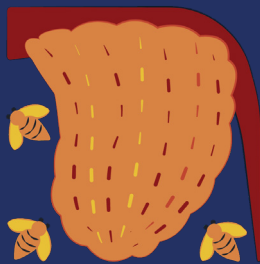
CommonGround is a collaborative initiative leveraging the Common to address linked crises of livelihoods, climate, and equity, through a system-wide collaborative action framework. **Living Landscapes** (anchor for Common Ground) fosters collaborative efforts among individuals, organisations, and initiatives to address the linked challenges of rural livelihoods and environmental governance.

LandStack is committed to advancing sustainable, inclusive and just land governance policy and practice, that recognises the needs of communities, economies and the ecosystems, locally and globally. Through technological solutions, research, partnerships, and community engagement, the organisation strives to build an informed land ecosystem, synergise land interactions and catalyse land stewardship for improved land relations and outcomes.

The **Tata Institute of Social Sciences** has as its vision to be an institution of excellence in higher education that continually responds to changing social realities through the development and application of knowledge, towards creating a people-centred, ecologically sustainable and just society that promotes and protects dignity, equality, social justice and human rights for all.

The **United Nations Development Programme** works in more than 170 countries and territories, helping to achieve the eradication of poverty and the reduction of inequalities and exclusion. UNDP has worked in India since 1951 in all areas of human development, from democratic governance to inclusive growth, to sustainable energy and climate and disaster resilience.

Collaborating for Resilience is an international, non-profit, entrepreneurial change initiative working to address resource competition, and strengthen governance and livelihood resilience in interconnected resource domains and landscapes, including agricultural lands, forests, fisheries, inland waterways and coastal zones.



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[Commons Convening website](#)

[Commons Convening session recordings](#)