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Is Forest Certification Necessary for Sustainable Forest Management in India?

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India's new wood certification scheme hopes to lead to greener forests. However, studies show limited market value gains for certified products. Certification alone does not guarantee sustainability or boost agro-forestry; there are alternative, cost-effective solutions for achieving these goals.

The government of India [launched the Indian forest and wood certification scheme](#) in December 2023. The scheme offers voluntary third-party certification on timber and non-timber forest products (NTFP) obtained from both forest and private land that they have been harvested sustainably. The objective of the scheme is to promote sustainable forest management and agroforestry (trees on farms) and enhance the market value of forest products through certification.

There are now several private and government agencies providing certification in India as third parties, such as the [Chhattisgarh certification society](#), which began in 2003. The new scheme aims to regulate certification agencies and procedures by mandating the registration of certification bodies with the National Accreditation Board and by providing certification based on criteria and indicators set by the government under the National Working Plan Code, 2023.

This raises an important question about whether certification can lead to sustainable management of India's over 70 million hectares of forests and benefit state forest departments, forest-dependent communities, and farmers growing trees on their farms.

The concept of sustainable forest management in India is not recent but starts from the colonial period. After the Indian Forest Act, 1865, the government took control of forest land to maximise timber production for ship building and laying railway sleepers. Dietrich Brandis, India's first Inspector General of Forests between 1864 and 1883, first proposed the concept of sustainable forest management.

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The idea was to sustainably harvest timber from the forest. For this, each forest division was to be divided into working circles of different timber tree species. Each working circle would be subdivided into compartments. By rotating the harvest of trees across compartments, the regeneration of the forest was assured and a wood stock was maintained. The aim was a sustainable supply of timber to the colonial government.

A forest working plan was to be prepared for each of the forest divisions, describing the estimated volume of timber available and how it would be harvested over a 10 to 15-year period. The first national forest working plan code, which was to serve as a guideline for preparing working plans, was published in 1881.

However, the sole objective being maximising timber production, other aspects of sustainable forest management, such as biodiversity and the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities, were largely ignored in the colonial period. Aggressive plantations of teak (*Tectona grandis*), a valuable timber tree was taken up in wildlife-rich areas, and they can still be seen in many tiger reserves in India. Timber from Deodar trees in the Himalayas were extracted until [exhaustion in a few places such as the Sutlej valley](#).

After independence, the extraction of timber from forests continued rather indiscriminately till 1996 when the Supreme Court intervened. The case, famously referred to as *Godavarman versus Union of India*, was a landmark in Indian forestry. The petition was filed due to the felling of trees on private land and the Supreme Court ruled that the forest, irrespective of ownership, should be treated under its working plan. This meant that the felling of trees on private land would be in accordance with the working plan and permission must be sought from the forest department for it.

This ruling had the positive effect of greatly reducing deforestation on private land and in forests situated above 1,500 metres and in north-east India, where it completely banned tree felling. Its negative effects were that it made many state forest development corporations obsolete and provided farmers no incentives to grow trees on their farms.

The state forest development corporations were set up on the basis of the recommendations of the National Commission for Agriculture in 1976. The objectives of the corporations were to raise forest plantations and harvest timber and non-timber forest products in a sustainable manner, thereby supporting the country's economy.

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After the 1996 ruling, the activities of many state forest development corporations, like the Himachal Pradesh Forest Development Corporation, were reduced to collecting resin (from *Pinus roxburghii*) and extracting salvage trees from the forest. The Lok Vaniki scheme initiated by Madhya Pradesh in 1999 to help farmers grow trees on their farms did not succeed because even small and marginal farmers with land holdings of less than a few hectares had to follow bureaucratic procedures to obtain the government's permission for tree felling. This, in effect, discouraged them from growing trees.

Why Forest Certification?

Globally, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) established as a non-profit organisation in Bonn, Germany, in 1993 is the leading forest certification agency. The FSC aims to promote environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial, and economically viable management of the world's forests. It claims on its website that the certification covers about 160 million hectares of forest land in 89 countries.

Forest certification has been, over the years, shown to reduce illegal logging in some countries such as Chile and Peru, but has not been identified as the only factor to have reduced deforestation in countries such as Mexico and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Forestry researchers still debate the effects of certification because several other factors influence sustainable forest management, such as recognition of community rights, policies on forest protection, and so on.

Further, certification is a costly affair. A case study on the certification of acacia plantations in Vietnam showed only marginal returns from certification and that too only if the plantations were more than 3,000 hectares. This clearly indicates there were no benefits for farmers with smaller land holdings.

In the case of India, a study commissioned by the International Tropical Timber Organisation notes that in 2020 the demand for roundwood in India—mainly used for furniture making, paper and pulp, panels and plywood, and construction—was around 57 million cubic metres, of which 47 million cubic metres was met domestically. Of this, 45 million cubic metres was from trees outside forests and only a meagre 2 million cubic metres came from state-owned forests.

In this context, certification looks a meaningless exercise because large quantities of timber will be produced from trees outside forests as block plantations of poplar, teak, and eucalyptus exist and domestic buyers are least likely to care for certified timber. In terms of export, very little timber from teak and sisham—0.01 million cubic metres—was exported in 2020.

Any shift in demand for certified timber domestically or internationally could tilt the scale in favour of wealthy farmers who can afford certification costs. It could also discourage small farmers from growing trees on their farms.

When it comes to non-timber forest produce, the certification looks even less important. Produce such as mahua flowers, sal seeds, and tendu leaves in central India and rhododendron flowers and pine cones in the Himalayas are gathered and marketed locally. There is no evidence of any of these being exported in their raw form.

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As for state forest departments, the Supreme Court's 1996 restrictions on extracting timber are still in place and they have to prepare working plans and get them approved according to the latest working plan code. This should include the volume of timber that can be sustainably extracted without affecting biodiversity and the needs of forest-dependent communities. Only then will the certification be a value addition if the forest products are exported.

For forest-dependent communities, community rights are recognised in about 6.5 million hectares of forest land under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006. Communities using their Community Forest Rights (CFR) provisions have been sustainably extracting NTFP and

marketing thereby [making good economic gains](#). Many more millions of forest dependent communities still depend on NTFP for their livelihood even without rights. Further, there is no provision for extracting timber under the management rights given to communities, though forest departments run plantations in forests with recognised community rights.

India aimed to boost its agroforestry through the National Agroforestry Policy in 2014. It made tree saplings easily available to farmers and eased restrictions on tree felling and transit. However, almost a decade later, there has hardly been any improvement in agroforestry. A [recent study](#) titled “Severe Decline in Large Agroforestry Trees in India over the Past Decade”, to which I contributed, noted a severe decline of mature trees on farms in India because of changing cropping patterns, mechanised farming, and farmers perceiving no economic benefit in having trees on their farms.

In sum, the global experience shows forest certification can at the most increase the market value marginally but this comes with high certification costs, which doesn't help marginal farmers and forest dependent communities and certification alone does not lead to sustainable forest management or help in increasing agroforestry.

Towards Sustainable Management

In India, the causes of deforestation are diversion of forests to non-forestry purpose such as mining, roads, and other infrastructure and degradation due to fire, cattle grazing, and invasive species such as lantana.

Sustainable forest management is important to ensure ecosystem services such as the flow of streams and rivers, to support the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities, and for a forest-based economy. More than certification, what is required is a good working plan to manage the forests and sustainably extract timber and other non-timber forest produce.

The National Working Plan Code, last revised in 2014 and 2023, provides guidelines on managing forests sustainably through a working plan that considers biodiversity, carbon sequestration, and the livelihood needs of local communities, including grazing and firewood collection.

A [study in the Congo basin](#) has shown that a forest management plan with rotational harvest of timber and a clear benefit-sharing plan with forest-dependent communities were much more effective than forest certification in sustainable forest management.

There is a need to strengthen the capacity of state forest departments to prepare good working plans that can identify plantation areas, raise quality plantations, and sustainably harvest timber—all the while preserving natural forests for ecological security.

To meet the growing domestic demand for timber, plantations outside forests can be increased. This can reduce the logging pressure on natural forests and reduce deforestation. A possible way forward is to encourage forest development corporations to raise plantations on degraded land and farmers to plant trees on their fallow or uncultivable land. Waterlogged and degraded land with invasive trees such as *Prosopis juliflora* could also be utilised for raising plantations.

Some of colonial era plantations of pine and eucalyptus could be slowly removed and planted with native oak and sal trees, which are more resourceful. Communities having CFR in degraded land could also be encouraged to raise plantations with a clear procedure for getting full benefits from the timber produced. Lastly, procedures to fell trees according to a working plan, transit and market them should be made easy for both states and farmers.

However, caution must be exercised to not raise plantations on grasslands and other open natural forest, which are important ecosystems in themselves. There is a need to strengthen the capacity of state forest departments to prepare good working plans that can identify plantation areas, raise quality plantations, and sustainably harvest timber—all the while preserving natural forests for ecological security.

To conclude, these few steps would help improve sustainable forest management in India and increase the income of farmers and state forest departments much more than forest certification .