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Contribution of common grazing lands to people's livelihood in semi-arid India

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Introduction Livestock production is one of the main occupations of people living in India's semi-arid tropics , and common grazing lands have always played a major role in livestock-based livelihood systems . Grazing in common forests and pastures was estimated to account for 31% of livestock feed consumption in India (World Bank 1999) . This paper describes the extent and condition of common grazing land assets , discusses the management strategies people pursue to utilize them , and examines the outcomes in terms of implications for both the resource management and people's livelihoods .

Materials and methods The study focused on a semi-arid region in India , and followed a two-tiered , iterative approach in order to capture both the documented and undocumented knowledge of common grazing lands . A formal literature and data review was conducted on the one hand , and parallel to this , NGOs consulted with grassroots organizations to capture their experiences with innovative management options . Sustainable rural livelihood framework was adopted to analyze the information on status , dynamics and management systems of common grazing resources .

Results and discussion Common grazing resources (CPRs) can be categorized as permanent pastures , areas under tree crops and groves , fallow lands , and areas unsuitable for cultivation and belonging to the village *panchayat* , the state revenue department or forest department , or a religious trust . After harvesting of crops , farmers' fields become another major grazing resource . Accurate information on the extent of CPR is difficult to obtain and available studies give widely varying figures . There is growing evidence that CPR at village level are on a declining trend . The reasons for this decline are many , and range from population pressure to socio-political and economic transition (Reddy et al 2004) . About 40% of the potentially productive CPR pastures are either not productive or producing well below their productive capacity . The declining productivity of CPRs can be observed from the change in the composition of plant species , the widespread change in the composition of livestock from cattle to sheep and goats , and the reduction in the effective period of sustained grazing . Table 1 presents estimates of carrying capacity for grazing lands in India .

Table 1 Estimated carrying capacity of grazing lands in India .

Rainfall (mm/year)	Estimated pasture yield (tons/ha)	Carrying capacity (cattle unit/ha)
>1905	9.0-13.7	3.3-5
1270-1905	4.4-6.8	1.6-2.5
890-1270	2.7-3.4	1.0-1.25
635-890	1.7-2.3	0.62-0.83
<635	1.4-1.6	0.5-0.6

Management systems for utilizing common grazing lands include uncontrolled grazing , privatisation , and special projects that aim to raise productivity while also restricting access through social institutions . In addition , with the decline in area and productivity of common lands people have looked to other areas for supplying fodder or earning their livelihoods . Many grazing lands were traditionally managed as CPRs , but lack of institutional support and the disintegration of community management structures have contributed to the decline of these systems .

Conclusions The contribution of CPRs to the people's livelihood varies from area to area , depending upon the availability of quantity and quality of these resources and socio-cultural traditions of the communities . Rotational grazing is the only economically viable system , but the institutional arrangements for this and the technical interventions are still poorly developed . This calls for a participatory approach to help livestock keepers develop viable systems and institutional frameworks for efficient management and utilization of grazing resources .

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