

Advocacy case studies

Reclaiming land rights in India

Country:

India

Themes:

Land and property rights; food security; livelihoods; stigma and discrimination

Advocacy approaches:

Government officials: meeting with; government officials: lobbying; educating community members

In India, land is precious because people's lives and identity are closely attached to the land they own. However, it is very difficult for citizens to reclaim land once taken or encroached upon. This is even more so for some of the most vulnerable and marginalised people, such as the tribal community of Sahariya in Lalitpur district of Uttar Pradesh. In the village of Paron, there were some Sahariya families who had been given a few acres of land many years ago by the government. This land was leased to them to grow crops for their families. However, the demarcation boundaries for this land were unclear and it was not fertile. Therefore, these families rarely used this land as it did not provide enough food for their families, so they had to migrate to nearby towns in search of a livelihood. When the Indian government's Forest Department officials surveyed this land, they thought it was forest land and tried to mark its boundaries as such. The families felt helpless to reclaim it due to prevailing circumstances.

Tearfund partner, Emmanuel Hospital Association (EHA), had been working in this area, establishing Village Development Committees (VDC) to coordinate local charities' work, finances, and to get access to resources available for their locality's needs. EHA helped people to understand that they have rights, including a right to information, and taught them the procedures to follow to access it, including through the VDC. Consequently, the Sahariya families from Paron brought their land issue to their local VDC meeting. The families were advised to write an application describing their issues to a senior government official who oversees the grievance redressal system for local communities. They were also advised to meet with the Forest Department officials to share their problem before they submitted their application to the government official.

As a result the VDC members went to a forest ranger in the government's Forest Department to petition the officials to re-demarcate the boundaries of the families' land. The families were able to provide documents concerning the land lease and a map of the land in question. The Forest Department officials inspected these papers and found the families' claims were correct. Accordingly, the government officials surveyed the land and demarcated it correctly to give it back to the families.

Furthermore, the families were supported by the VDC to make the land more fertile using watershed management techniques and digging a well for irrigation. Finally, after many years of not being able to use this land well, these families are growing crops for themselves, ensuring sustainable livelihoods and food security. This experience is expanding the work of EHA supporting marginalised communities to overcome the barriers of caste discrimination and poverty, and access the local government and resources through established means.

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