



# 4th EDITION COMMUNITY CONFERENCE ON COMMONS 2025

A gathering of community voices  
on governing shared resources

Visual report by Indrajit & Lakshmi



On behalf of the Coalition of Partners, as part of the Promise of Commons initiative



The Promise of Commons Initiative hosted its fourth Community Conference on Commons from December 10-12, 2025, showcasing how communities worldwide are restoring and protecting their shared resources, from water bodies and forests to cultural traditions. The virtual gathering drew 155 community representatives from across the globe, including participants from Mozambique, Uganda, Peru, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Thailand, and Malaysia, as well as 17 Indian states and one Union Territory. This event coincided with World Commons Week, observed internationally from December 8-14, 2025.

Spanning 10 thematic areas across 30 sessions, the conference engaged 2,488 distinct participants. Beyond the main virtual platform, organisers facilitated local screenings in **243 locations** throughout **57 districts** across **12 states** and **7 countries**, reaching more than 15,000 people.

*This visual report captures the conversations that emerged throughout the conference.*





# MOST STORIES OF COMMONS CONTINUE TO BE TOLD FROM AN OUTSIDE PERSPECTIVE

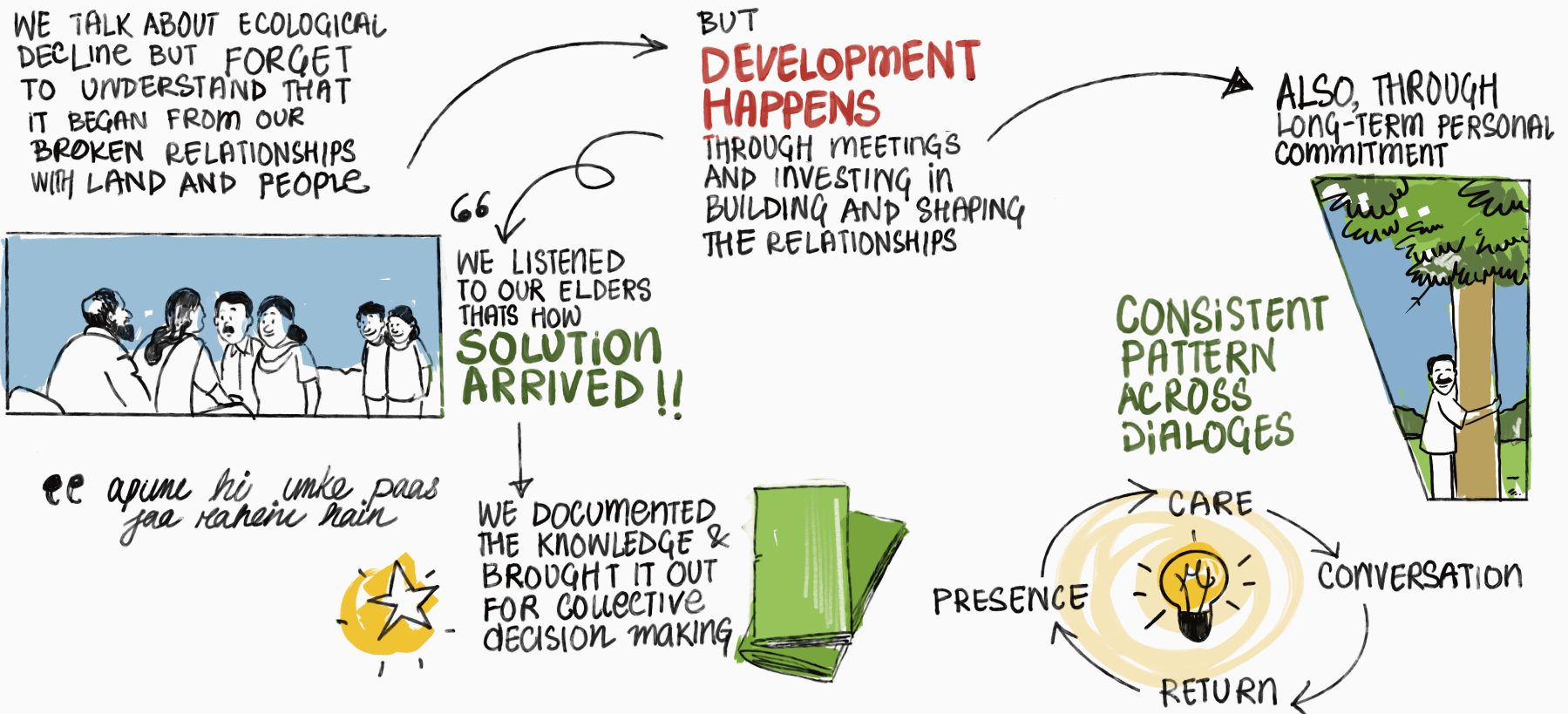
**Knowledge about Commons has rarely been scarce.** Stories of collective resource management circulate widely in academic journals, policy documents, development reports, but the direction of that knowledge flow reveals something about power. The Community Conference on Commons emerged as part of the Promise of Commons initiative to address this challenge: an evolving platform where community members share their experiences in their own voices, not as subjects of study but as practitioners of governance. Discussions revolved around ten themes and featured 155 presentations from 18 Indian states and 7 countries during World Commons Week. The themes included struggles of commoning, Commons and biodiversity, food security, and more. The visual report that follows does not just illustrate the conference but it unfolds what Commons are signaling about how they have been approached, studied, and spoken for.





# COMMON DEGRADATION BEGINS WHEN RELATIONSHIPS FAILS

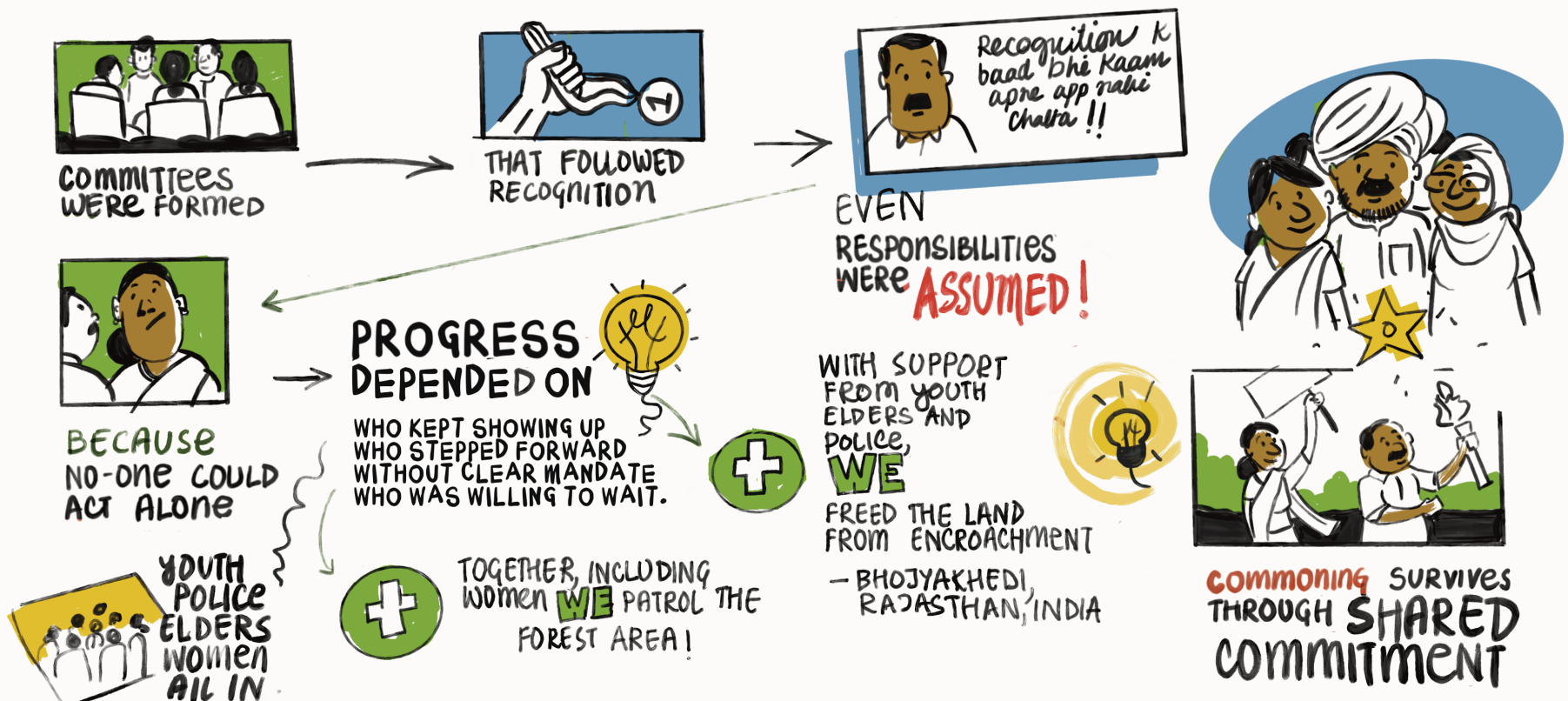
Ecological decline is rarely examined as a problem of relationship. Biodiversity conservation frameworks measure species loss and habitat fragmentation, but often bypass the social fabric holding commons together. What communities reported in the Commons and Biodiversity session repositioned the question entirely: where does degradation actually begin ?





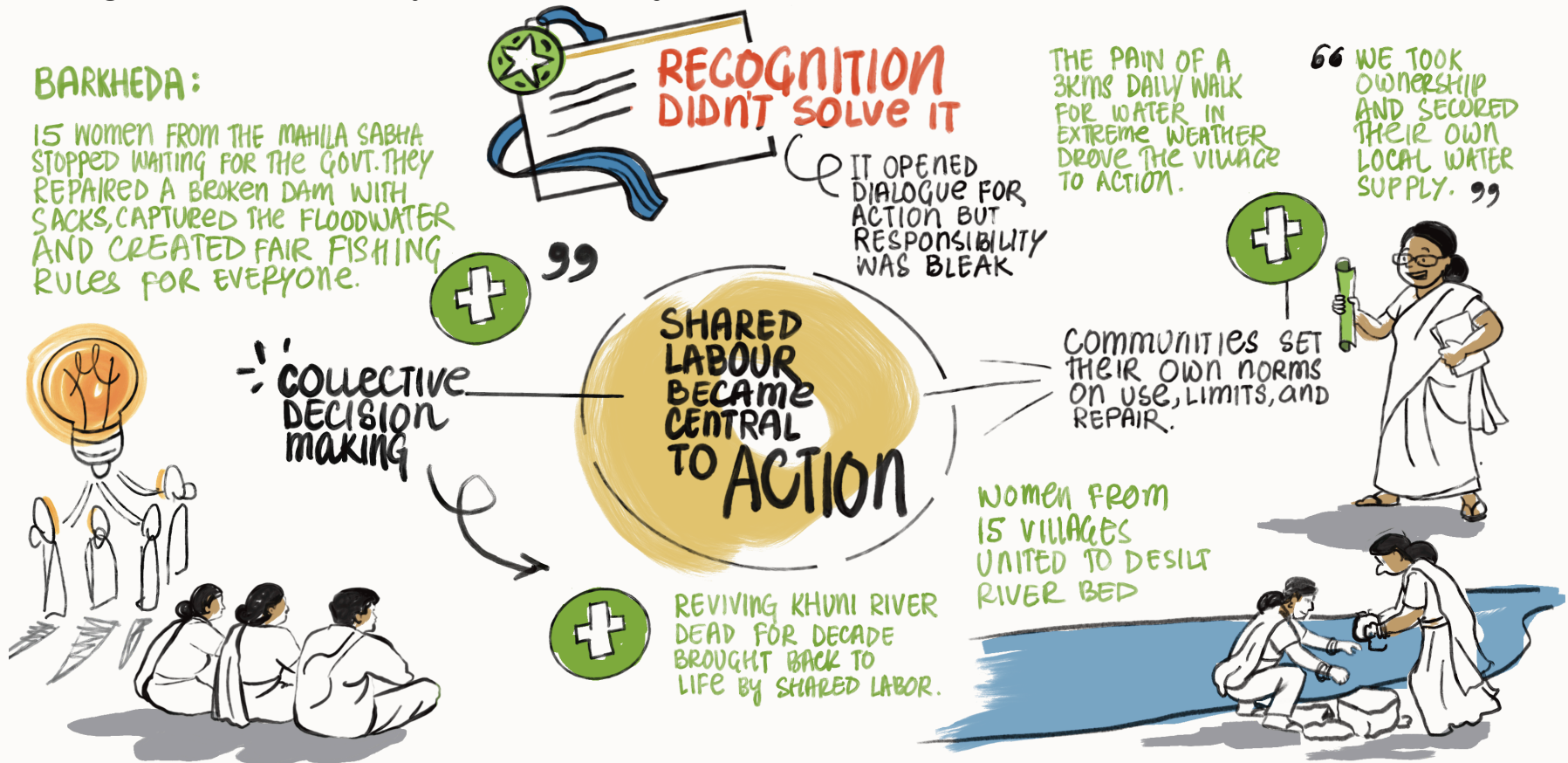
# MULTI-STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT ON COMMONS

As conversations unfolded around what multi-stakeholder engagement in Commons looks like in practice. Community speakers shared stories from their own landscapes: forests, wetlands, grazing lands, where governance involves not one authority, but many. Gram Sabhas, Forest Committees, Panchayats, federations, and line departments exist simultaneously, each with overlapping mandates and expectations. Across these stories, certain patterns began to repeat. Committees were formed. Recognition of titles came next. Certificates were issued. Yet, what followed was the ongoing challenge of keeping these institutions functional and in discussion with each other.



# WHAT HELD THE WATER

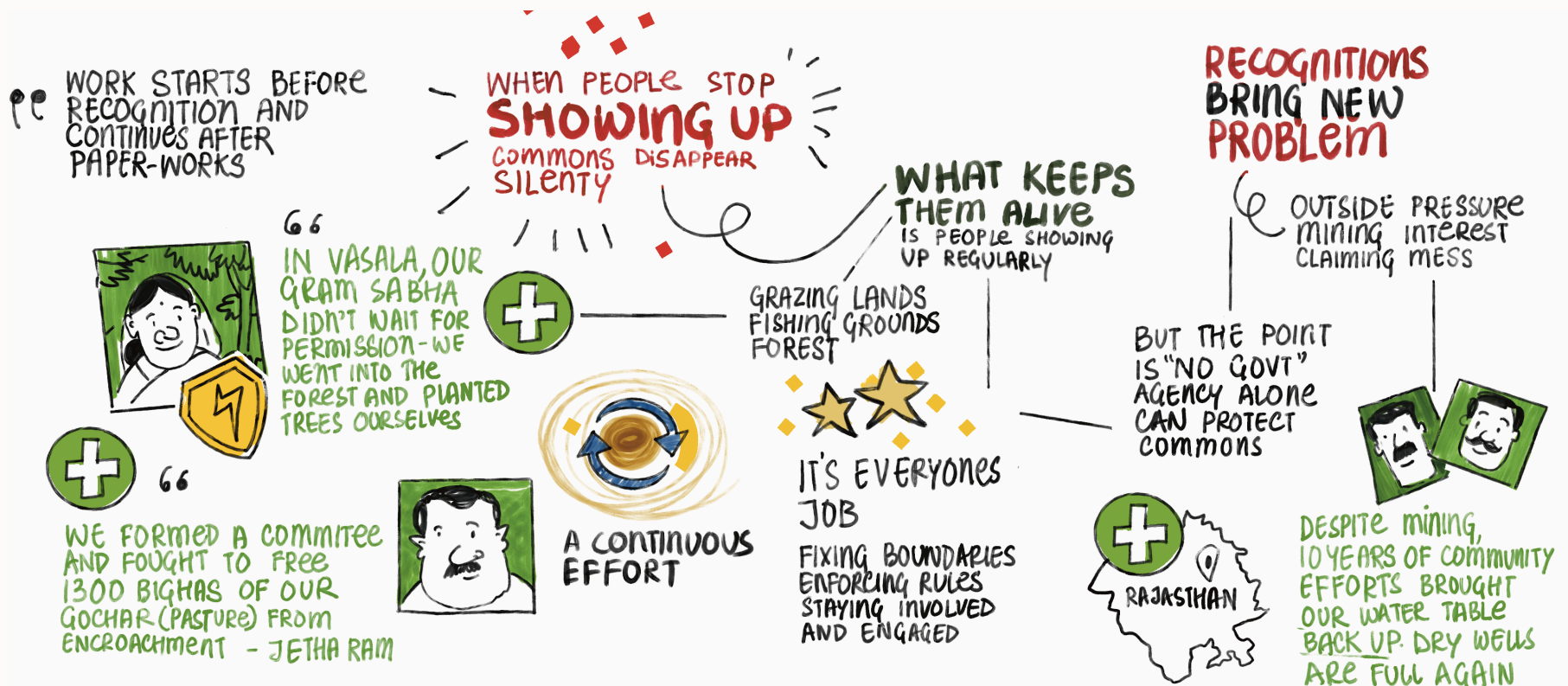
The session reframed water governance as a problem of how responsibility, access, and decision-making are organised across overlapping systems. Different authorities run parallel systems without talking, leaving gaps where nobody fully owns the problem and everyone blames the next. Yet sustainable solutions emerged from the ground up: communities breaking these hierarchies through locally-controlled water sources, transparent allocation decided together, and real veto power for those who know local realities best. Because when the women who walk miles daily for water have a seat at the table, everything changes. Water governance becomes justice when daily carriers become decision-makers





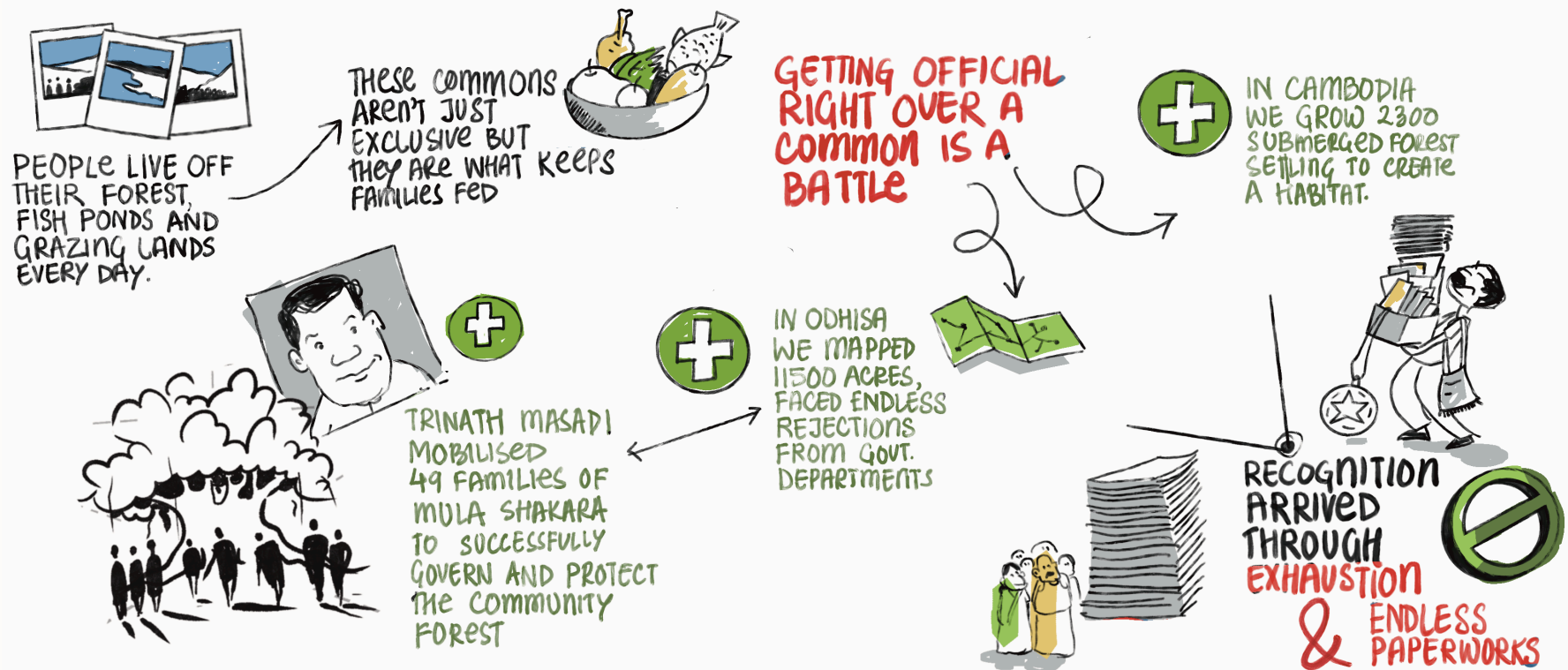
# STRUGGLES OF COMMONS

The session reframed commons struggles as structural grind, not one-time crises the real work is ongoing, not ceremonial. Problem starts builds where nobody fully owns the work, and formal recognition often brings new tensions rather than closure. In the absence of collective action, outsiders grab shares, rival claims pile up, extraction ramps up. Yet the real labor of protection stays stuck in the same hands. Commons don't crash overnight. They erode slowly when teams stop talking, rules gather dust, edges get fuzzy, and people drift away. The point isn't perfection, it's presence. Paper victories mean nothing without daily group effort, tough conversations, and constant watchfulness. This is the unglamorous, essential work that keeps the commons alive



# COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE OF FOREST AND LAND COMMONS

The session examined what governance becomes after rights are secured and the hard truth that rights alone don't fix authority or simplify choices. Often due to ambiguity in who decides what, limited capacities, and fragmented collective action, communities found themselves burdened with coordinating, enforcing rules, and bearing the full weight of caring for spaces tied to their survival. Multiple institutions remained in the picture with blurry roles. Communities struggled to keep proving their ownership not on paper, but in everyday lives. Conservation meant disciplined use, seasonal rules, monitoring, and shared duties shaped by constant negotiation. What lasted wasn't a perfect system, but the grit and political will to keep governing amid exhaustion, overlaps, and unsettled power. Recognition came not as an ending, but as the beginning of a longer struggle





# URBAN COMMON

In cities everywhere, urban commons such as ponds, parks, and open grounds are undergoing rapid changes in how they are used, governed, and valued. These shared resources persist within fragmented and unequal cities and often face neglect and pressures of conversion, revealing deep institutional gaps in safeguarding them. In response, local residents reclaim these spaces through everyday use, care practices, and informal collective action. Through such engagement, communities generate an experiential understanding of the value of commons and knowledge that emerges from practice rather than just formal instruction. Even as questions of use and authority persist, new collectives continue to form around these spaces. Urban Commons are more than physical spaces. They are relationships built through care, contestation, and shared belonging. They thrive on the sustained collective effort of the communities stewarding them.



# COMMONS FOR FOOD SECURITY

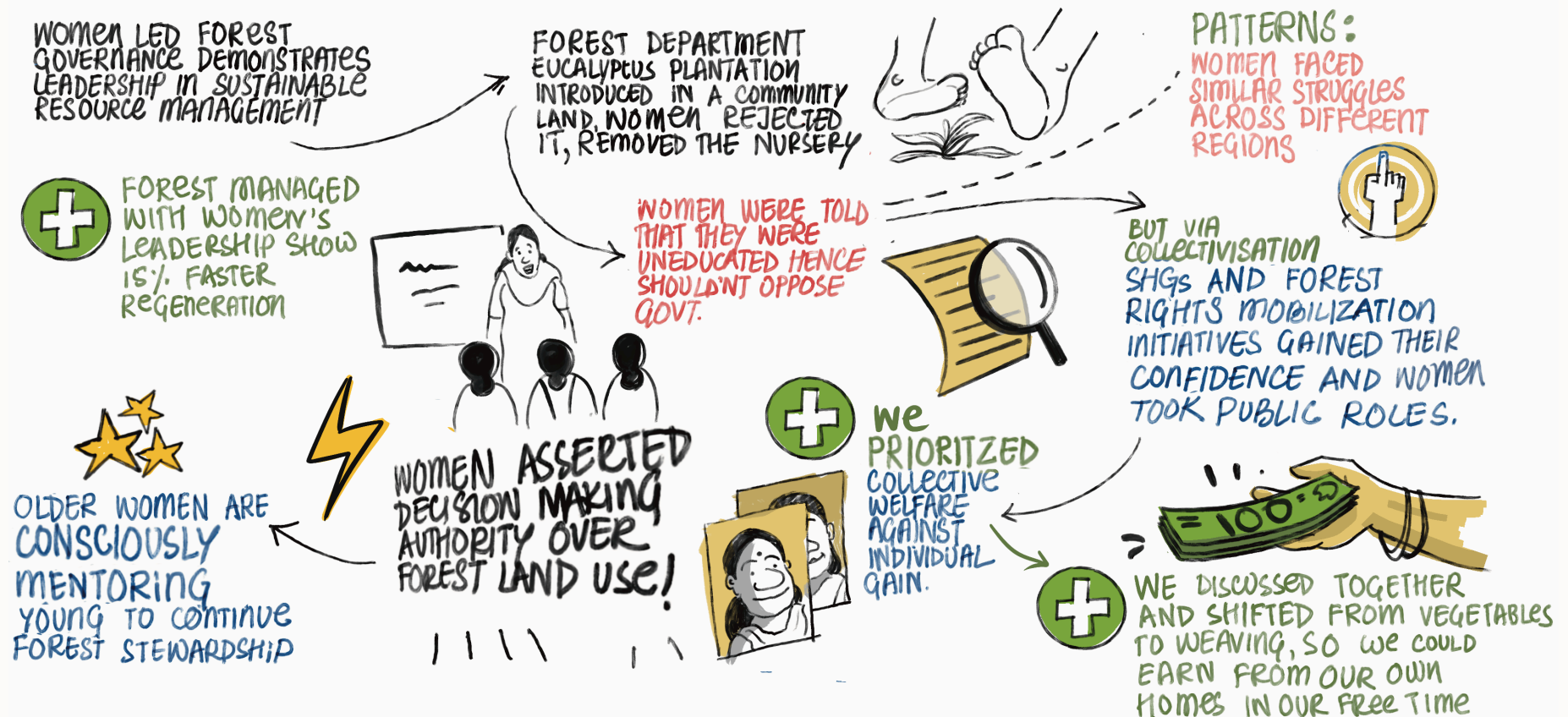
The session examined why legally recognised community forest land under the Forest Rights Act had not improved food security. Participants noted that rights existed on paper, but without local governance over use, degradation and migration continued. The Gram Sabha formed a Management Committee to enforce rules for labor, planting, grazing, and water access. These coordinated rules generated local wages, seasonal food, and forest restoration. Subsistence stability improved and migration declined. The real outcome: when Commons work is governed by community, outcomes move beyond income they strengthen bonds, build institutional confidence, and resolve cascading issues. This is what happens when management shifts from policy to practice.





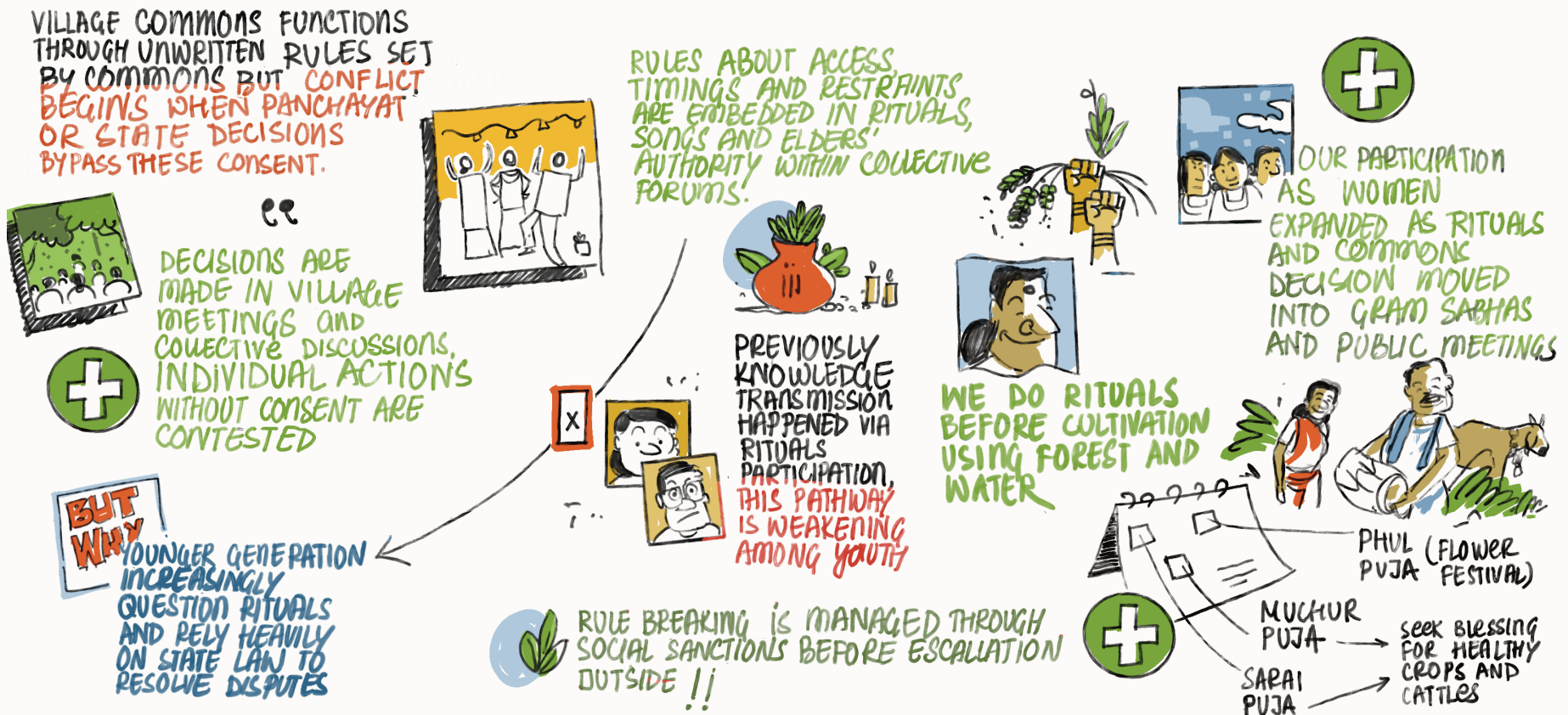
# COMMONS AND GENDER

Across the session, women reported heavy dependence on Commons but minimal say in their governance. External interventions and exclusion undermined existing arrangements. Women responded by forming groups, negotiating with authorities, and intervening directly in Commons management, shifting from following external directives to trusting their own knowledge. They assumed governance roles: attending meetings, coordinating users, enforcing rules, and mentoring the next generation. Resource conditions improved, costs fell, livelihoods stabilized. Yet the real victory was visibility: women took public roles, gained confidence, and demonstrated that authority over Commons flows from practice, not permission. Protection remains contested, but women have proven they are not waiting for security they are building it.



# COMMONS AND CULTURE

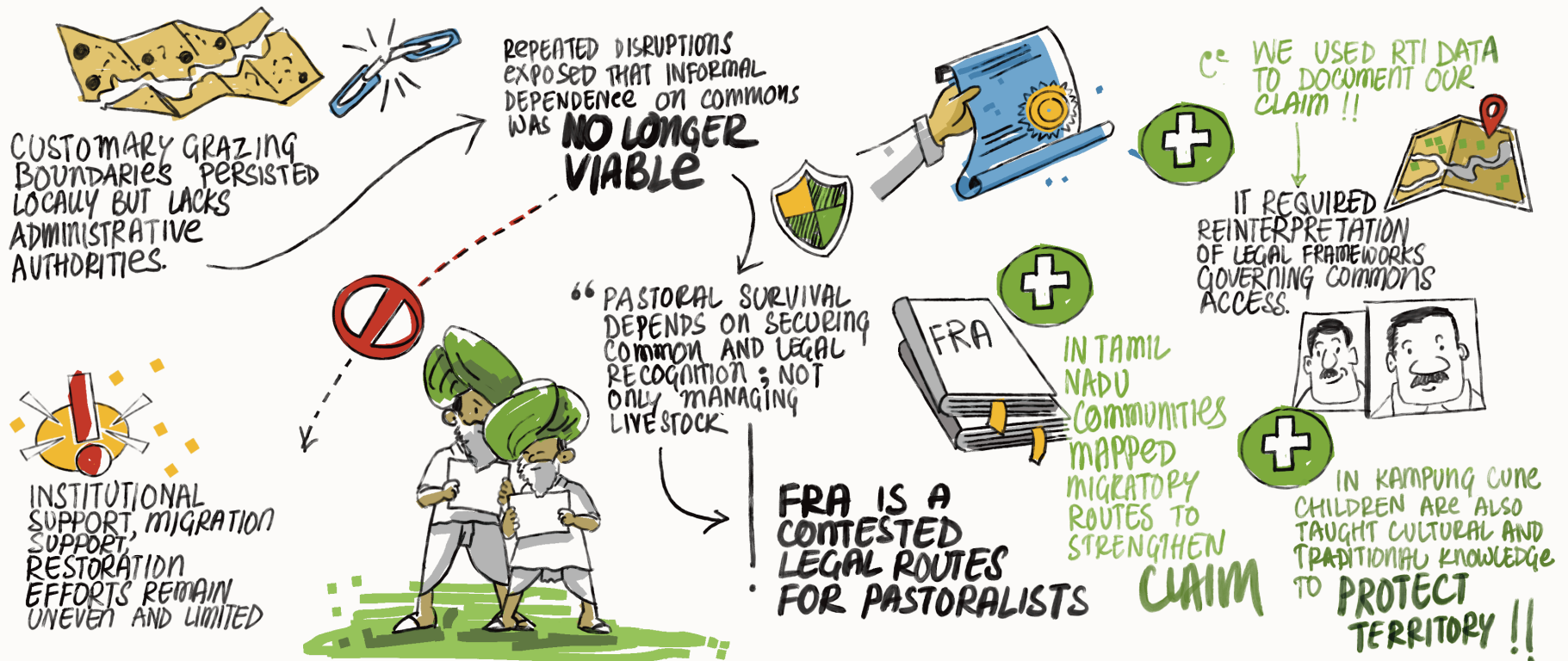
Village Commons functioned through shared norms and collective consent, even when rules were informal. External decisions leasing a pond, promoting chemical inputs bypassed local authority and triggered conflict. Communities responded by reclaiming decision-making through village deliberation, women's participation, and locally enforced rules. Farming and water use shifted toward collectively governed practices, drawing on trusted knowledge. Ecological recovery generated surplus retained and redistributed internally through collective funds. Yet restoring social trust proved slow and contested. Participants acknowledged that ecological and institutional gains remain fragile without sustained collective vigilance. The real work: weaving rituals, ceremonies, and cultural practices into Commons management so that protection becomes not just policy, but part of how communities remember who they are





# COMMON AND PASTORAL SYSTEM

Pastoralists faced declining forage, drought, winter scarcity, and restricted Commons access threats to survival itself. Recognizing that Commons access was non-negotiable, they adapted by coordinating water use, integrating crop residues into grazing, treating livestock and agriculture as one system. Government orders and cluster-based coordination restored Commons access and enabled collective action. Livestock survival improved and dairy income stabilized. Yet gains remained vulnerable to recurring drought. The real innovation: pastoralists used RTI data and Forest Rights Act claims as legal tools to document customary boundaries, turning government frameworks into instruments of territorial protection. In Kampung communities and Tamil Nadu, children are now taught cultural and traditional knowledge to protect territory, proving that survival means combining institutional support with intergenerational memory





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## Shared Credits

**Acknowledgments:** All contributors, including panelists, facilitators and storytellers are recognised for their unique roles in this collaborative effort

**Visual Report & Creative vision** by Indrajit Sinha, Lakshmi Narayan Singh IndiVisuals (WAYCo.)

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