

CONFERENCE OF PANCHAYATS

Raigad, Maharashtra | 2026

A *Report on Deliberative and Participatory Climate Governance*

SUDHAGAD BLOCK-LEVEL COP

पंचायत
परिषद

CONFERENCE OF PANCHAYATS (COP)

Raigad, Maharashtra | 2026

A Report on Deliberative and
Participatory Climate Governance

Sudhagad Block – Level COP



29 April 2026



Sudhagad Maratha Hall, Pali



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Sudhagad Block-Level Conference of Panchayats (COP), held on 29th April 2026 at Sudhagad Maratha Hall, Pali, would not have been possible without the generous support, active participation, and goodwill of many individuals and institutions. We take this opportunity to express our heartfelt gratitude to all who contributed to making this conference a meaningful and successful platform for deliberative and participatory climate governance.

Our sincere thanks go to the community members and Panchayat representatives of Sudhagad Block, who generously gave their time, shared their lived experiences, and offered invaluable suggestions during the deliberations. Their active participation, candid insights, and grounded understanding of local climate challenges formed the very heart of this conference, and it is their voices that give this report its true meaning and purpose.

We are equally grateful to the panellists and government officers who took time out of their busy schedules to attend and speak at the conference. Their presence lent credibility and depth to the discussions, while their words of encouragement motivated participants to engage more openly and confidently. Their contribution went beyond sharing knowledge and expertise; it helped build a shared sense of collective morale and solidarity among all present, reaffirming that climate governance is truly a shared responsibility between citizens and the state.

We extend our special appreciation to the teams at Waatavaran Foundation and ASAR for their tireless efforts in conducting the conference and ensuring its smooth and seamless execution. Their meticulous planning, on-ground coordination, and commitment to the spirit of the conference were instrumental in bringing this initiative to fruition.

We also extend our appreciation to the University of Toronto (UTIF) for supporting us in advancing this innovative climate intervention in Raigad, Maharashtra.

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FROM TARGETS TO VILLAGES: IMPLEMENTING SDGs AT THE LOCAL LEVEL



1.0 Historical Background

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in September 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, represent one of the most ambitious attempts in the history of multilateral governance to coordinate global action on poverty, climate change, inequality, and justice. Their genealogy runs from the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972, through the Brundtland Commission's landmark 1987 report *Our Common Future*, to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and the Millennium Development Summit in New York in 2000. The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that emerged from the latter process were primarily directed at developing countries and focused on a narrow register of quantifiable targets, including the halving of extreme poverty, the reduction of child mortality, and the expansion of primary school enrolment, all measured from a 1990 baseline against a 2015 deadline. The SDGs marked a decisive rupture with this model. Following the Rio+20 summit of 2012, which mandated the creation of an Open Working Group to draft a successor framework, a consultative process unprecedented in its breadth was convened: nearly ten million people across the globe submitted views, and civil society organisations, local governments, indigenous groups, academics, and the private sector were formally incorporated into the negotiation structure (UNDP, 2016). The outcome, adopted by all 193 UN member states on 25 September 2015, was a framework of 17 goals, 169 targets, and 231 indicators, universal in its application and binding on developed and developing countries alike, structured around the explicitly integrated ambition that no one should be left behind (United Nations, 2015).

Yet the journey from Geneva and New York to a village in Sudhagad block in Raigad district, Maharashtra, is neither linear nor simple. A farmer in coastal Raigad does not experience Goal 13 on Climate Action as a numbered target. She experiences it as a failed monsoon, a ruined harvest, or a spring that has not returned

for a decade. This disjuncture between the technocratic architecture of the global agenda and the lived texture of local vulnerability is not incidental. It is structural. Critics of the MDG framework had already observed that the focus on aggregate national averages systematically obscured subnational and intra-household disparities: Moser and Dani (2008) noted that the MDGs, by measuring progress at the national level, allowed countries to claim success even as internal inequalities deepened. The failure was both epistemic and political. Poverty remained concentrated in precisely those social categories, notably rural, female, lower-caste, and tribal populations, that national averages rendered invisible. Reviewing the MDG period, the UN's own synthesis found that poverty reduction was driven disproportionately by growth in China and India's urban manufacturing centres, while the rural and tribal populations that bore the heaviest burden of multiple deprivation were passed over (UN, 2015). This historical record shaped the SDG framework's explicit commitments to disaggregated data, intersectional targeting, and the leave-no-one-behind principle. Yet the question of whether these commitments can be operationalised in the institutional architecture of federal democracies like India remains the decisive challenge of the current decade. The challenge of making the SDGs meaningful at the community level is, at its core, a challenge of translation, political, epistemic, and democratic. Who gets to interpret what development means? Whose knowledge counts? These questions reveal that the localisation of the SDGs is not merely a technical problem of implementation. It is a political and epistemological necessity. The SDGs will remain aspirational abstractions unless they are grounded in the lived realities of communities.

1.1 What Localisation Actually Means and What It Does Not

Localisation is often reduced, in policy language, to the delivery of central government programmes through local bodies. This understanding is incomplete. As the United Nations Development Programme has clarified, localisation is a process of making global frameworks relevant to local contexts by embedding them in the

aspirations, knowledge systems, and governance capacities of local communities (UNDP, 2016). The definition matters, because the distinction between delivering schemes and transforming governance structures is the difference between a cosmetic and a substantive intervention.

The intellectual history of localisation as a concept in development theory is instructive here. From the 1980s onward, a generation of scholars working within the new institutionalism tradition, drawing on Ostrom's (1990) foundational work on collective action and common-pool resources, built an empirical case that local governance institutions, when endowed with genuine authority and accountability, consistently outperform centralised bureaucracies in managing shared ecological and social goods. Ostrom's research demonstrated that communities develop sophisticated informal rules and monitoring systems for managing shared resources, systems that are rendered invisible and undermined by top-down planning interventions that neither see nor respect them. At the same time, scholars working in the post-colonial tradition drew attention to the political dimensions of this invisibility. Chambers' (1983) influential critique of rural development tourism, in which visiting planners and officials saw only what they were shown and heard only what they expected, identified the epistemological problem at the heart of development practice: the systematic devaluation of local knowledge. What appeared as ignorance on the part of rural communities was frequently sophisticated contextual knowledge. What appeared as development was frequently a redistribution of resources toward already-privileged groups.

Scholars working on multi-level governance have long drawn attention to what Grindle (2007) described as the implementation gap, meaning the distance between policy design at the top and lived experience at the bottom. Decisions made in national capitals carry assumptions about who the beneficiary is, what their needs are, and how development should look, assumptions that often do not hold in specific local contexts. In the absence of a genuine process of contextualisation, the

SDG framework risks reproducing this gap at a global scale. Grindle's work across decentralisation case studies in Latin America, Africa, and South Asia consistently found that the variable most predictive of local development outcomes was not the design quality of national programmes but the degree to which local actors possessed both the formal authority and the informal legitimacy to adapt those programmes to local need.

Localisation can itself replicate the technocratic logic it claims to disrupt. Appadurai's (2004) concept of the capacity to aspire is useful here. He argues that communities do not simply need access to schemes; they need the capacity to articulate their own futures, to imagine alternatives to their current conditions, and to hold institutions accountable for acting on those alternatives. This capacity is not uniformly distributed: it is shaped by historical experience of exclusion, by access to education and information, by familiarity with the bureaucratic languages through which claims are made. True localisation must therefore address this deeper level of agency, not just the administrative proximity of government services. Without this, what looks like localisation is in fact a more efficient form of top-down delivery.

1.2 Why the SDGs Have Not Reached the Ground: Structural Barriers

The evidence from India consistently shows that SDG progress has been uneven and structurally biased. India's composite SDG Index score, as measured by NITI Aayog's SDG India Index, rose from 57 in 2018 to 71 in 2023-24, an aggregate improvement that masks wide inter-state and intra-state variation (NITI Aayog, 2024). Goal 5 on Gender Equality continued to record the lowest score among all SDGs, improving only marginally from 36 in 2018 to 49 in 2023-24. Critically, the SDG India Index itself operates at the state and union territory level, not at the sub-district level where deprivation is most acute. The Panchayat Advancement Index, launched by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj in 2023 to track SDG progress across over 2.16 lakh gram panchayats against nine linked themes, found that no single

gram panchayat in the country qualified for the Achiever category, and that states with the largest concentrations of tribal and rural poor, including Bihar, Chhattisgarh, and Andhra Pradesh, recorded the highest proportions of Aspirant, that is, low-scoring, panchayats (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2023). Urban, male, upper-caste, and formally employed populations have benefitted more from development programmes, while rural, tribal, and female populations bear the heaviest burden of the deprivations those programmes are meant to address.

A central reason for this pattern is administrative fragmentation. The 2030 Agenda recognises SDG 13 on Climate Action, SDG 5 on Gender Equality, SDG 6 on Clean Water, and SDG 15 on Life on Land as deeply interconnected. In practice, these goals are administered by different government departments with separate budgets, no shared monitoring framework, and little cross-departmental communication (UNEP et al., 2020). Scholars in public administration have described this arrangement as silo governance, meaning the systematic incapacity of bureaucratic structures to address problems that cut across sectoral boundaries (Christensen and Laegreid, 2007). The result is that the interlocking vulnerabilities communities actually face are met by a system that addresses each dimension in isolation and none of them in relation to the others. The farmer whose land has become unviable because of both groundwater depletion and the collapse of a feeder road is, in this system, the simultaneous responsibility of the agriculture department, the water resources department, and the public works department, which means, in practice, the responsibility of none.

Feminist economists have been particularly pointed about this fragmentation. Elson's (2010) work on gender-responsive budgeting demonstrates that public expenditure, when not disaggregated by gender and location, systematically underfunds the domains of life where poor women carry the heaviest burden. Water collection, subsistence agriculture, and caregiving, all of which intensify under climate stress, fall outside the categories that standard budgeting processes can see

or measure. Research conducted by the International Center for Research on Women in Maharashtra found that tribal women in districts adjoining Raigad spent an estimated 85 per cent of their daily energy on water collection alone, a burden that is invisible in both national accounts and local planning documents (as cited in Earth Journalism Network, 2024). Elson's analytical framework predicts exactly this outcome: when gender-disaggregated data is absent from budget formulation, the activities that constitute the reproductive economy, and that disproportionately fall on women, will not be funded, regardless of the formal commitments of the policy framework.

In Raigad district specifically, this invisibility is not abstract. Field research found that tribal women in Sudhagad block spend up to five hours daily collecting water from receding springs, a burden that appears in no local plan and on no national SDG scorecard (TISS Raigad Scoping Report, 2024-26). Research on water stress in the Raigad-Konkan region confirms that while coastal Maharashtra receives high average annual rainfall of over 2,000 mm, the actual availability of safe drinking water at the village level is severely constrained by a combination of seasonal surface water depletion, groundwater contamination, and the absence of last-mile distribution infrastructure (India Water Portal, 2024). The women who carry this burden are not absent from the data because their situation is unknown. They are absent because the monitoring systems were designed around different assumptions about whose life counts as development.

1.3 The Case for Localising SDGs: What the Evidence Says

The High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development has repeatedly found that global progress on the SDGs stalls where sub-national ownership is absent (HLPF Voluntary National Review Synthesis, 2023). The correlation is not coincidental. When communities do not participate in designing the goals that apply to them, they are less likely to trust the institutions implementing those goals, less

likely to access available schemes, and less likely to invest in the sustainability of gains that feel externally imposed. The academic literature on development programme uptake is consistent on this point: participation in design is a significant predictor of programme adherence and sustained benefit (Mansuri and Rao, 2013). The World Bank's landmark meta-analysis of participatory development programmes by Mansuri and Rao found that community participation improved outcomes most significantly when it was embedded in genuine decision-making authority, and that induced participation, in which communities were consulted but not empowered, produced at best marginal improvements and at worst deepened existing power asymmetries by giving formal legitimacy to decisions made by local elites.

Dreze and Sen's (2013) argument in *An Uncertain Glory* is particularly relevant here. India's development paradox, they argue, is precisely that strong aggregate economic growth has coexisted with persistent deprivation at the local level. India's GDP grew at among the fastest rates in the world in the decade preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, yet its global rankings on nutrition, maternal mortality, sanitation, and educational quality remain substantially below countries with far lower per-capita incomes. The SDGs risk reproducing this paradox if they are measured at the national level while the conditions that generate local deprivation remain unaddressed. A country can improve its aggregate SDG score while the women of Sudhagad continue walking five hours for water. Dreze and Sen's analysis points to the political dimensions of this failure: the deprivations that persist are concentrated among populations whose political voice is weakest, particularly Adivasi communities, women, and seasonal migrants, and whose welfare, precisely for that reason, receives the least sustained policy attention.

Robertson's (1995) concept of glocalisation offers a useful theoretical frame for understanding what must happen instead. The global and the local do not exist in opposition, he argues. The question is always how global frameworks are remade

through local practices. SDG localisation, properly understood, is a site of this remaking: a process in which global commitments are not simply delivered downwards but transformed through contact with local knowledge, governance structures, and lived realities. The literature on what scholars have termed vernacularisation, understood as the process through which global human rights and development norms are translated into locally resonant forms, suggests that this transformation is both inevitable and necessary: frameworks that are not translated lose legitimacy, while those that are translated acquire the cultural embedding that enables sustained practice (Merry, 2006).

1.4 Gender as the Litmus Test of Localisation

SDG localisation cannot be considered inclusive until its margins are included in its operationalisation. Not women as beneficiaries of programmes, but women as decision-makers, knowledge producers, and community leaders. This is not a supplementary concern. It is the test of whether localisation has actually occurred.

The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (2022) establishes that climate impacts are not socially neutral. They are mediated by gender, caste, class, and location. Women face disproportionate exposure to food insecurity, water stress, and disaster mortality, not because of biology, but because of structural discrimination in who holds land, who accesses credit, who sits in governance spaces, and who is reached by public services. Research conducted on climate and women's health in India found that in Palghar district, a tribal district in the same coastal Maharashtra region as Raigad, nearly thirty per cent of women were clinically underweight, a condition directly linked to the intersection of nutritional poverty, agricultural labour burden, and climate-induced food insecurity (Kalra et al., 2020). These are not separate problems. They are expressions of the same structural condition, reproduced across the landscape of tribal Maharashtra.

Kabeer's (1999) framework on gender, agency, and wellbeing underlines the implications of this for planning. Empowerment is not a by-product of development; it must be built into the architecture of planning itself. Kabeer draws a critical distinction between access to resources (what she terms resources), the ability to make strategic life choices (agency), and the outcomes of those choices (achievements). All three dimensions must be present for women's empowerment to be real rather than nominal. In the context of local governance, this translates into a requirement that formal inclusion be accompanied by access to information, capacity to participate effectively, protection from social sanction, and genuine devolution of authority over decisions that matter. The presence of women in a Gram Panchayat, in the absence of these conditions, does not satisfy the empowerment test.

Agarwal (2001) empirical grounding for this argument in the context of natural resource governance. Her work shows that women's exclusion from forest governance bodies leads to poorer conservation outcomes and reduced community resilience, findings with direct implications for SDG 15 and climate adaptation in Raigad. When the people with the most detailed knowledge of local forest conditions are excluded from forest governance, the decisions that result are worse, for the forest and for the community. Agarwal's findings are supported by a growing body of quantitative research: a cross-national study of community forest management found that groups with higher female participation in governance produced better conservation outcomes as measured by forest density, species diversity, and the sustainability of extraction practices (Westermann et al., 2005).

In Roha taluka in Raigad, male outmigration to industrial employment has feminised agriculture without a corresponding increase in women's access to credit, land titles, or decision-making authority (TISS Raigad Scoping Report, 2024-26). The pattern is well documented in the literature on agrarian transition in India: the feminisation of agriculture, defined as the increasing share of agricultural labour performed by

women as men migrate to non-farm employment, has not been accompanied by the institutional recognition that would allow women to access the resources and rights attached to that work (Agarwal, 1994; Kelkar, 2011). Women are doing the work of agriculture while being denied the formal standing that would enable them to apply for agricultural credit, participate in crop insurance schemes, or be represented in farmers' producer organisations. This structural condition is not captured in aggregate development data, and it will not be addressed by programmes that do not begin by seeing it.



The SDGs will remain abstract goals unless they travel into Gram Sabhas, self-help groups, and the everyday lives of women, farmers, and forest-dependent communities. That journey, from the targets of the 2030 Agenda to the lived realities of a village in Sudhagad, is what localisation actually means. It is not a technical exercise in scheme delivery. It is a political and epistemological commitment to remaking global frameworks through local knowledge, governance, and agency. It requires confronting the structural barriers of administrative fragmentation and gender exclusion. It requires building the capacity to aspire, not just the access to schemes. And it requires recognising that women's inclusion in local governance is not a development outcome to be achieved at the end of the process. It is a condition for the process to work at all. Until that recognition is built into how the SDGs are planned, measured, and implemented at the local level, localisation will remain an ambition rather than a practice.

DECENTRALISING POWER: STRENGTHENING LOCAL GOVERNANCE FOR INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT



2.1 The Indian Experience: What Decentralisation Has and Has Not Delivered

The constitutional history of decentralisation in India predates the formal amendments of 1992 by several decades. The Balwant Rai Mehta Committee report of 1957 first articulated a vision of democratic decentralisation through a three-tier system of Panchayati Raj institutions, a vision that was endorsed by the Nehru government but unevenly implemented across states, and that progressively lost momentum through the 1960s and 1970s as state governments proved reluctant to devolve real authority. The Ashok Mehta Committee of 1977 identified the principal reason for this failure: in the absence of constitutional guarantees, state governments treated local bodies as administrative conveniences rather than as autonomous democratic institutions, withdrawing and reinstating them as political circumstance dictated (Mathew, 1994). The G.V.K. Rao Committee (1985) and L.M. Singhvi Committee (1986) sharpened this diagnosis. Singhvi famously described gram panchayats as beheaded and headless without a constitutional anchor, functioning as pass-through mechanisms for scheme delivery rather than as genuine self-governing bodies.

India's 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1992 represent some of the most far-reaching commitments to democratic decentralisation in the postcolonial world. They mandated the devolution of 29 functional subjects to Panchayats, required the reservation of seats for women and marginalised communities, and established State Finance Commissions and District Planning Committees to channel resources to the local level. The ambition was significant: to make approximately 250,000 Gram Panchayats the active centres of local planning and development. The Acts were notified in April and June 1993 respectively, adding two new Parts to the Constitution, Part IX on Panchayats and Part IXA on Municipalities, and transferring 29 subjects to panchayats and 18 to municipalities (Mongabay India, 2022). Three decades later, the institutional landscape of local governance in India has been transformed: over 260,000 local bodies now exist, with

3.1 million elected representatives, of whom approximately 1.4 million, or 46.6 per cent, are women (Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies, 2023).

In practice, what most Panchayats received was responsibility without power. Jayal (2006) describes this as decentralisation without devolution, a situation in which the administrative shell of local government exists but financial autonomy, staffing, and genuine planning authority remain concentrated at the district and state levels. Multiple studies conducted across Indian states since 1993 have confirmed this diagnosis. Own-source revenue of gram panchayats typically constitutes less than five per cent of their total receipts; the remainder consists of tied grants from central and state governments for pre-specified schemes (RGICS, 2023). Panchayats cannot allocate funds according to local need, cannot prioritise issues that fall between departmental silos, and cannot easily integrate the knowledge of their own communities into the plans they are asked to implement. A review of thirty years of the 73rd Amendment by the Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies found that the centrality of state governments in deciding the extent and process of decentralisation continues to constrain local autonomy, with per capita devolution from State Finance Commissions varying dramatically across states, from Rs. 234 per capita in Assam to Rs. 6,101 per capita in Karnataka during the period 2015-2020.

The contrast with Kerala is instructive. Isaac and Franke's (2000) study of Kerala's People's Planning Campaign demonstrates that where devolution is accompanied by substantial financial resources, technical capacity-building support, and genuine political commitment, local governance can be genuinely transformative. Between 1996 and 2001, the Kerala government devolved 35 to 40 per cent of its plan funds to local bodies as untied grants, provided structured technical assistance through neighbourhood groups, and created a process of participatory needs assessment that drew in hundreds of thousands of citizens across the state. The campaign generated participatory planning processes, improved public services, and deepened

democratic culture in ways that proved durable over time. The lesson is not that Kerala's model can be directly transplanted, as it emerged from specific historical conditions including a long tradition of political mobilisation by left parties, high literacy rates, and an active civil society. What it demonstrates is that the gap between constitutional promise and governance reality in India is not inevitable. It is the product of deliberate choices about how much power the state is willing to share.

2.2 The Meso Tier Problem: The Block as the Missing Link

Much attention in decentralisation debates in India has been directed at the Gram Panchayat at the village level and the district administration at the regional level. The block, which sits between these two tiers, has been systematically neglected in both policy design and academic analysis. This neglect is consequential, because the block is precisely the level at which cross-Panchayat coordination becomes possible, and at which shared ecological challenges, including a common watershed, a forest system spanning multiple villages, or a river whose health affects an entire cluster of settlements, can be addressed collectively rather than in isolation.

The significance of the meso tier for development outcomes is not merely administrative. Political scientists working on the theory of polycentrism, most influentially Ostrom and her colleagues at the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, have argued that effective governance of complex social-ecological systems requires overlapping jurisdictions at multiple scales, each capable of addressing externalities that operate at its particular level (Ostrom, 1990; 2010). The block is the natural scale for managing watershed-level water governance, for coordinating forest protection across panchayat boundaries, for linking women's self-help groups into federated structures with bargaining power, and for aggregating the episodic planning capacities of individual panchayats into a coherent sub-district vision. In the Sudhagad block of Raigad, where a shared ridge-and-valley ecology spans more than a dozen gram panchayats and where the water security of downstream villages depends on forest cover decisions made upstream, the absence

of an effective meso-tier governance institution is not an administrative inconvenience. It is a structural obstacle to climate adaptation.

The Block Development Office is structurally positioned to play this coordinating role. In practice, it rarely does. Its staff are appointed rather than elected, its planning processes are vertical and scheme-driven rather than horizontal and community-integrated, and its relationship with Gram Panchayats is supervisory rather than collaborative. The block therefore functions as an administrative pass-through rather than as a genuine governance tier in its own right. Reforming the block tier to enable genuine coordination, between panchayats, between departments, and between formal governance and community knowledge systems, is among the most underdiscussed and consequential institutional challenges in Indian decentralisation.

2.3 Women in Local Governance: Between Reservation and Real Power

Constitutional reservation has brought women into Panchayat governance in historically unprecedented numbers. As of 2023, women constitute 46.6 per cent of all elected panchayat representatives in India, amounting to over 15 lakh women leaders across the country (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2023). Over 20 states now mandate 50 per cent reservation for women in local bodies, exceeding the constitutional minimum of one-third. These are not trivial achievements. Research by Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) demonstrated that the introduction of reservation for women in West Bengal and Rajasthan produced measurable shifts in public investment priorities, with panchayats headed by women investing significantly more in drinking water infrastructure and less in roads, reflecting the differential priority that women placed on the reduction of water collection burdens. This finding, replicated and extended in subsequent scholarship, established that descriptive representation, meaning the presence of women in office, can translate into substantive representation, meaning differences in policy outcomes, under the right institutional conditions.

The qualification matters critically. Constitutional reservation has not automatically produced women's meaningful participation in decision-making. Agarwal (2001) documented the proxy phenomenon, in which elected women Panchayat members hold seats while their husbands or male relatives exercise actual authority. This practice, known colloquially as *sarpanch pati* or *pradhan pati* in the Hindi belt, has been described by the Supreme Court of India as unconstitutional and unlawful, and the National Human Rights Commission has directed all states to submit reports on its prevalence (Tribune India, 2026). The Ministry of Panchayati Raj's own panel, in a 2025 report titled *Transforming Women's Representation and Roles in Panchayati Raj Systems and Institutions*, recommended exemplary penalties for proven cases of proxy leadership, an acknowledgment, at the highest levels of policy, that formal inclusion and substantive authority remain deeply decoupled (NHRC, 2026). Recent scholarship at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for the Advanced Study of India cautions against treating the *sarpanch pati* phenomenon as uniform or exhaustive: women's authority, the research finds, is constrained not only by household substitution but also by institutional practices, bureaucratic ecosystems, and local elite networks that can sideline women even without a visible male proxy (Bhowmick, 2026). The gap between formal inclusion and substantive agency reflects structures of patriarchal authority that are not resolved by electoral reform alone.

Fraser's (1997) framework of redistribution and recognition is particularly useful here. She argues that structural equality requires both material redistribution, meaning access to resources, income, and institutional power, and cultural recognition, meaning the genuine acknowledgment of women's authority, knowledge, and perspectives as legitimate. In the context of local governance, this translates into a requirement that formal inclusion be accompanied by access to information, capacity to participate effectively, protection from social sanction, and genuine devolution of authority over decisions that matter. In Raigad, the stakes of this argument are grounded in specific social realities. Tribal women from Katkari

and Thakur communities carry the heaviest burden of climate-related work in the district, including water collection, fuelwood gathering, and subsistence farming. They simultaneously hold the most detailed knowledge of local ecological conditions, knowing where water sources are, how forest produce cycles with the seasons, and what changes in the landscape signal about climate stress. Yet they are the most excluded from formal governance processes (TISS Raigad Scoping Report, 2024-26). Their exclusion is not only a failure of justice. It is a failure of governance that produces worse outcomes for the communities they would otherwise help to shape and lead.

2.2 The Meso Tier Problem: The Block as the Missing Link

Local governments are closest to the communities most affected by climate change. They are best positioned to understand local ecological conditions, identify social vulnerabilities, and develop adaptation strategies that are culturally appropriate and practically workable. The evidence for this from comparative climate governance research is substantial. Bulkeley and Betsill (2005), in a seminal comparative study of local climate governance in the United Kingdom and United States, documented that municipalities pursuing locally-driven climate action achieved emissions reductions and adaptation outcomes that national policy frameworks were unable to produce, not because local governments had more resources, but because they had more granular knowledge of local conditions and stronger accountability relationships with the communities bearing the consequences of inaction. Subsequent research in the Global South, including studies of climate adaptation at the panchayat level in India, has confirmed that the critical variable is not the scale of the governance institution but the depth of its embeddedness in community knowledge and democratic accountability.

And yet India's architecture of climate governance has largely bypassed local institutions. National and State Action Plans on Climate Change have remained

within state bureaucracies, and Gram Panchayat Development Plans that are supposed to include a climate planning dimension are frequently filled with pre-formatted templates rather than genuine community deliberation. A review of GPDPs across several Indian states by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj's own technical support units found that the majority of climate-related entries were copied from state-level templates, with no evidence of community consultation or adaptation to local ecological conditions (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2022). The disconnect is institutional: the departments responsible for climate planning and those responsible for local governance operate in separate administrative silos with no formal coordination mechanism.

Agrawal and Ribot (1999) argue that local governance is only environmentally effective when local actors have downward accountability to their communities as well as upward legitimacy within the state system. Without downward accountability, local governance simply reproduces the top-down logic it was supposed to replace. Without upward legitimacy, local decisions cannot access the resources or policy influence needed to translate community knowledge into sustained institutional change. Both conditions are currently weak in the Indian climate governance architecture, and both need to be rebuilt if decentralisation is to fulfil its potential as a climate governance strategy.

The DIL framework provides an orienting logic for this rebuilding. Decolonising climate governance at the local level means dismantling the assumption that scientific and technical knowledge generated at the state level is more reliable than community knowledge generated through lived experience. Indigenising climate planning means incorporating traditional water management practices, indigenous forest stewardship systems, and community seed knowledge into the plans that determine how resources are allocated and how risks are managed. And localising climate governance means ensuring that the people who bear the greatest burden of climate change also hold the greatest authority in designing the response.

2.5 Towards Deliberative Democracy at the Local Level

The deepest promise of decentralisation is not administrative efficiency but democratic self-governance, understood as the creation of spaces in which communities do not merely implement decisions made elsewhere but actively shape the problems, priorities, and solutions that govern their lives. Habermas (1984), in his theory of communicative action, provides a philosophical grounding for this aspiration: legitimate decisions, he argues, emerge from open, inclusive, and reason-governed dialogue in which all affected parties have a genuine voice. This is not merely a normative ideal. A significant body of empirical research on participatory governance suggests that deliberative processes produce better-quality decisions, in the sense of decisions that are better adapted to local conditions, more equitably distributed in their benefits, and more durably implemented, than technocratic processes, precisely because they mobilise distributed local knowledge that no central authority can aggregate (Fung, 2015).

Fung and Wright's (2003) concept of empowered participatory governance translates this philosophical principle into institutional design. They describe institutions that combine participatory deliberation, devolved authority, and state accountability to address practical local problems. What distinguishes their model from ordinary consultation is precisely the combination of genuine deliberation and genuine authority: communities that deliberate but cannot decide are not empowered, and communities that decide but cannot be heard by the state cannot access the resources to implement their decisions. Their case studies, including participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, community policing in Chicago, and watershed governance in Kerala, demonstrate that these are not utopian abstractions but achievable institutional forms, given adequate political commitment and institutional support.

The Gram Sabha, as India's constitutionally mandated assembly of all adult village residents, is the natural institutional home of deliberative democracy at the local

level. Field observation of Gram Sabhas across Maharashtra consistently reveals a gap between constitutional aspiration and quotidian practice: meetings are frequently held to satisfy administrative requirements rather than to enable genuine deliberation, attendance is dominated by already-influential community members, and the decisions taken bear little relationship to the concerns most acute in the community (GRAAM, 2026). Transforming Gram Sabhas into real forums for deliberation requires political will, institutional redesign, and the kind of facilitated, inclusive process, with specific provisions for women's voices and tribal community participation, that the Conference of Panchayats is working to model.

Decentralisation, genuinely practised, is a collective redistribution of power, from the state to communities, from bureaucrats to elected representatives, from technical experts to local knowledge holders. The gap between the constitutional promise of that redistribution and its current reality in India is structural, and it will not close through administrative tinkering alone. It requires the deeper transformation that the DIL framework calls for: a decolonisation of the epistemic hierarchies that determine whose knowledge of climate risk is taken seriously; an indigenisation of the planning processes through which communities name their problems and design their solutions; and a localisation that is not merely administrative proximity but genuine democratic authority. The communities of Raigad are not waiting to be taught about climate change. They are already navigating it, every season, with the tools and knowledge they have. What they need are governance institutions that are capable of recognising, receiving, and acting on what those communities already know.

2.6 Decolonisation, Indigenisation, and Localisation: The Theoretical Imperative

The concept of decolonisation, in its intellectual genealogy, extends far beyond the formal end of colonial rule. Wa Thiong'o (1986) argued that colonialism's most durable legacy is the devaluation of indigenous languages, knowledges, and ways of governing. Applied to climate discourse, this insight is pressing. The dominant frameworks through which climate risk is measured, adaptation is designed, and resilience is evaluated continue to privilege centralised, technocratic, and quantitative knowledge over the place-based, relational, and experiential knowledge that communities have accumulated across generations. Quijano (2000), in his foundational work on the coloniality of power, argues that colonial hierarchies of knowledge did not dissolve with political independence but were absorbed into the institutional structures of postcolonial states, including development bureaucracies and environmental governance systems. Decolonising climate discourse therefore means challenging the assumption that a scientist in Pune or a planner in Delhi knows more about Sudhagad's water crisis than the women who have been walking to fetch water from shrinking springs for the last three decades. It means redistributing epistemic authority, not just administrative responsibility.

Indigenisation directs attention to the specific knowledge systems, ecological relationships, and governance practices that communities have developed in particular landscapes over long periods of time. Shiva (1993) showed that traditional farming and forest management practices in India are not merely cultural artifacts but living systems of ecological intelligence, ones whose displacement has had measurable consequences for biodiversity, water retention, and soil health. The IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report (2022) formally recognised what postcolonial scholars had long argued: that indigenous and local knowledge is an irreplaceable resource for climate adaptation, offering insights into ecological change that scientific monitoring systems frequently miss. Berkes (2008) defines traditional ecological knowledge as a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief that

Localisation, as discussed in Section 1, is the process through which global frameworks acquire meaning in specific places. But localisation without the first two principles risks reproducing the same power hierarchies at a smaller scale. Mohanty (2003), writing on feminist politics and the global south, cautions that localisation must be grounded in a genuine politics of self-determination, in which communities are not merely consulted but hold real authority over how development is named, planned, and evaluated. Robertson's (1995) concept of glocalisation captures how global and local forces interact, but it is Appadurai's (2004) more politically grounded notion of the capacity to aspire that clarifies what genuine localisation requires: communities must be able to articulate their own futures, not just receive programmes designed elsewhere.



These three concepts do not operate independently. They form a symbiotic and integrated framework for understanding climate change discourse in communities like those of Raigad. Decolonisation opens the space for new epistemic authorities. Indigenisation fills that space with the knowledge and governance practices that communities have developed through long ecological relationship. Localisation ensures that this knowledge shapes actual institutions, plans, and decisions. This paper conceptualises this integrated framework as DIL, and Raigad serves as the site where DIL moves from theoretical orientation to practical methodology. The governance arguments that follow in this section are all, at their root, arguments about what it would mean to apply DIL to local institutional structures in India.

LOCAL CLIMATE ACTION PLANS: TURNING RISK INTO RESILIENCE



In Raigad, climate change arrives not as a future projection but as an accumulating disruption of everything communities have built their lives around. The spring that dried up a decade ago. The cyclone that flattened the kharif harvest two years running. The forest that no longer produces the fuelwood or food it once reliably did. The governance question this raises is not whether something must be done. It is who gets to decide what, on the basis of whose knowledge, through which institutions, and with what relationship to the communities carrying the heaviest weight of that disruption. Local climate action plans are one institutional response to this question. But for them to be meaningful rather than merely bureaucratic, they must be built from the ground up, grounded in community knowledge, and embedded in institutions that communities genuinely trust and can influence (TISS Raigad Scoping Report, 2024-26). Without those conditions, a climate action plan is just another document produced elsewhere and delivered downwards.

3.1 What Makes Climate Action Plans “Local”

The proliferation of climate action planning in India has been remarkable in its scale and modest in its reach. National Action Plans, State Action Plans, and district environment plans have multiplied across administrative tiers, each carrying the language of vulnerability assessment and adaptive capacity. What most of them share, alongside their ambition, is a technocratic logic that privileges measurable outputs over lived experience. Tonnes of carbon sequestered, trees planted, hectares covered by micro-irrigation schemes: these are things that can be counted and reported. They are rarely the things that determine whether a Katkari woman survives a bad monsoon season.

Sheila Watt-Cloutier (2015), Inuit activist and Nobel Peace Prize nominee, has argued that climate change is fundamentally a human rights issue, one that cannot be addressed through carbon metrics alone but must attend to the cultural, social, and livelihood dimensions of community life. Her argument is drawn from the Arctic, where Inuit communities are watching the sea ice that structures their entire way of

living disappear within a single generation. A climate action plan that cannot see the five-hour daily walk for water, the loss of a seed variety that has sustained coastal farming for centuries, or the dismantling of a forest governance system that managed dry-season fuelwood across multiple villages is not genuinely responding to the climate crisis. It is responding to a simplified version of it that fits a reporting framework.

Local climate action plans require, at a minimum, four things: community-driven vulnerability assessments that identify who is exposed to which risks and through which pathways; integration of indigenous and traditional ecological knowledge into understanding how the landscape is actually changing; gender-disaggregated analysis of who bears which burdens and who is excluded from existing adaptation resources; and linkage to the financial and institutional mechanisms that communities can access and control (TISS Raigad Scoping Report, 2024-26). These are not supplementary design features. They are the difference between a plan that responds to community reality and a plan that replaces it with administrative convenience.

3.2 Indigenous Knowledge and Local Ecological Intelligence

One of the most consistently underused resources for climate adaptation is the body of ecological knowledge that communities have accumulated through generations of living in particular landscapes. This is not sentimental knowledge. It is detailed, practical, and place-specific intelligence about how water moves through a watershed in different seasons, which forest patches regenerate after fire, which seed varieties hold in saline soils, and what early signs in the behaviour of birds or the colour of spring water signal that something in the ecosystem is shifting. It is knowledge that no satellite monitoring system can fully replicate, and it is eroding rapidly because development policy has treated it, for decades, as something to be replaced rather than engaged.

Berkes (2008) defines traditional ecological knowledge as a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief that evolves through adaptive processes and is transmitted across generations through cultural transmission. He is careful to insist that this is not a static archive of past practice but a living, dynamic system that communities continuously revise through observation and experience. It has its own standards of evidence, its own mechanisms of verification, and its own institutional structures for governance and transmission. Agrawal (2002) moves the argument forward by asking not whether indigenous knowledge is right or wrong in the abstract but how it can be brought into productive dialogue with scientific knowledge to generate better adaptation strategies. A hydrological model is more accurate when cross-checked against the observations of farmers who have watched water behave in a particular watershed across four decades of variable monsoons. A crop variety recommendation is better calibrated when it incorporates the knowledge of women who have maintained diverse seed systems through drought years that preceded any formal agronomic documentation.

In Raigad, communities carry precise knowledge of local spring systems, seasonal forest produce cycles, traditional paddy varieties adapted to the salinity of coastal soils, and the ecological cues that signal approaching storms. This knowledge has been eroded by decades of policies that did not see its value. Reclaiming it is not nostalgia. It is one of the most practical things a local climate action plan can do.

3.3 Gender, Risk, and Resilience: Who Bears the Burden

Climate vulnerability is not distributed randomly. It follows the lines of existing social inequality, and in Raigad, as in most of rural India, gender is one of the sharpest of those lines. Women's structural relationship to water, land, forests, and food means that environmental stress reaches them first, presses hardest, and is met with the least institutional support. When a water source recedes, it is women who walk further. When forests degrade, it is women who spend more hours gathering fuelwood. When subsistence agriculture fails, it is women who manage food

insecurity at the household level, typically by reducing their own consumption before reducing anyone else's. When a cyclone forces displacement, it is women who maintain household continuity without their usual resource base.

Women are the primary practitioners of everyday climate adaptation. They are the ones who know which crops failed and which held, which water sources are still reliable, which forest patches are recovering, and which traditional practices still make sense under changed conditions. Fraser's (1997) triadic framework of justice captures what this means for climate action planning. Genuine justice, she argues, requires redistribution of material resources, recognition of cultural difference and dignity, and representation in decision-making. In this context then, in climate planning, this demands that plans not only allocate adaptive resources equitably but also recognise women's ecological knowledge as authoritative and create the institutional structures through which women can genuinely participate in designing, monitoring, and revising plans.

Tribal women from Katkari and Thakur communities simultaneously bear the greatest burden of climate-related work in the district and possess the most detailed local knowledge of water sources, forest conditions, and agricultural practices (TISS Raigad Scoping Report, 2024-26). These are not two separate findings. They are two faces of the same structural condition: the people who know the most about the local ecology are the ones most excluded from the processes that make decisions about it. A climate action plan that does not address this exclusion, through both the design of its process and the content of its proposals, will reproduce the governance failure it claims to be solving.

3.4 The Institutional Gap: Why Local Plans Fail to Stick

Even where local climate action plans are developed with community participation, they frequently fail to produce sustained institutional change. The causes are consistent

across contexts and well documented in the literature on local governance and environmental planning. Paudel et al. (2021) identify three recurring failure modes: inadequate and inflexible financing that prevents communities from acting on locally identified priorities; institutional fragmentation that prevents coordination across the departments responsible for water, forests, agriculture, and disaster response; and the absence of accountability mechanisms that would require government agencies to respond to what communities have said they need.

Gram Panchayats continue to receive largely tied grants for nationally determined schemes, leaving little room to allocate resources according to local need. The sectoral siloing identified earlier in this paper reappears at the local level: the department responsible for water does not share a planning process with the department responsible for forests, and neither of them is required to align with community-produced climate priorities. And there is, in most states, no institutional mechanism that would make visible and actionable the gap between what communities have identified as their needs and what they actually received.

Ostrom's (1990) foundational work on governing the commons established that institutional fit is a more reliable predictor of governance effectiveness than institutional type. Rules designed by the people who will live with their consequences tend to be better calibrated to local conditions, more widely trusted, and more durably enforced than rules designed by distant authorities and imposed through vertical administrative chains. The same logic applies to climate action planning. A plan that communities design, monitor, and have the institutional authority to revise is a plan that stands a genuine chance of translating into changed behaviour, changed resource allocation, and changed outcomes. A plan designed elsewhere and delivered downwards is a plan that communities have no particular reason to own or defend.

3.5 Introducing the Conference of Panchayats: A New Platform for Local Climate Action

It is within this context, of unfulfilled decentralisation, undervalued indigenous knowledge, gendered climate vulnerability, and the absence of genuine deliberative space at the block level, that the Conference of Panchayats emerges as a significant institutional experiment. The CoP does not operate as a conventional consultative exercise. It is a structured deliberative platform through which fifteen Gram Panchayats collectively name their shared climate challenges, aggregate their community-level knowledge, and bring their demands to block and district governance institutions with a collective democratic voice (TISS Raigad Scoping Report, 2024-26).

In doing so, it activates several of the conditions that this paper has argued are necessary for genuine local climate action. It works at the block level, the meso tier that existing decentralisation frameworks have consistently neglected. It positions women Sarpanchs not as participants in a consultation but as speakers in a public deliberation, presenting demands with the authority of elected representatives to block-level officials who are expected to respond. It draws on community-produced knowledge of local ecological conditions as the basis for identifying vulnerabilities and setting priorities, treating that knowledge not as background material but as the primary evidence base. And it creates a record of community demands and government commitments that can form the foundation of accountability over time.

The broader significance of the CoP model, as a replicable platform and as a conceptual contribution to local climate governance, will be developed in sections that follow. What the argument of this section establishes is the principle from which that significance flows: local climate action plans are only as strong as the democratic processes through which they are built. Technology, financing, and technical expertise all matter. But they are not sufficient without institutions through which communities can shape the decisions that will determine whether their lives become more or less precarious in an era of deepening climate change.

Climate risk in Raigad is not a natural condition to be accepted. It is produced and intensified by governance arrangements that have left communities without the institutional resources to prepare for, respond to, and recover from environmental stress. It is deepened by epistemic hierarchies that have treated community knowledge as noise and indigenous ecological intelligence as an obstacle to modern planning. And it is concentrated on those, particularly tribal women, who have the least power to influence the institutions that are supposed to protect them. Turning that risk into resilience is not primarily a technical challenge. It is a political and institutional one. It requires climate action plans built by communities rather than delivered to them, grounded in the knowledge that communities already hold, and embedded in governance structures that communities can genuinely hold to account.



CONFERENCE OF PANCHAYATS: A PLATFORM FOR LOCAL VOICES AND SOLUTIONS



4.1 Introduction: The Conference of Panchayats as an Idea

The Conference of Panchayats (COP) is a bold experiment in participatory democracy. Its core idea is simple but powerful: to bring India's village-level governance bodies, the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), into the heart of climate change conversations. Drawing its name and spirit from the United Nations' Conference of Parties, which gathers countries to negotiate global climate commitments, this COP flips the direction entirely. Rather than top-down negotiations, it works from the ground up, creating a space where Panchayats and the communities they serve can speak about their climate realities, their resistance, and their hopes in their own words and on their own terms.

At the heart of this initiative is an honest recognition: local climate action matters just as much as, if not more than, grand global negotiations. The communities that live on the front lines of climate change, those watching monsoons grow unpredictable, groundwater disappear, forests shrink, and livelihoods fall apart, rarely find their voices in national or international policy spaces. The COP is built to close this gap. It sits alongside elected Panchayat leaders, women from self-help groups, tribal elders, and other often-overlooked groups, and helps bring their lived experiences, their ways of adapting, and their indigenous knowledge into a real, structured conversation with administrators and policymakers.

In doing so, the Conference of Panchayats is more than a consultation exercise. It is a democratic assertion: the people who carry the weight of climate change every day are the ones with the authority and the agency to help design solutions. It is a practical methodology rooted in local realities, producing climate action plans that are grounded in experience and actually workable. It challenges the tendency in mainstream climate governance to privilege data and expert opinion over community knowledge and indigenous wisdom.

4.2 Objectives

The Conference of Panchayats was built around the following core aims:

- To strengthen the role of Panchayats in climate governance, recognising them not just as agencies that implement government schemes, but as bodies that generate knowledge and shape locally-owned climate solutions.
- To document and promote local resilience practices, ensuring that indigenous ecological wisdom, traditional farming methods, water conservation techniques, and community-based adaptation strategies are recorded, validated, and shared more widely.
- To catalyse climate solutions that actually fit local conditions, by facilitating structured conversations that move from naming shared problems to designing concrete, workable interventions at the village, block, and district levels.
- To create genuinely inclusive spaces where the diverse experiences of women, tribal communities, youth, landless workers, and other marginalised groups are brought into climate dialogue as equal participants alongside elected representatives and administrators.
- To build a working interface between different levels of climate governance, positioning Panchayats as central actors who engage with block officials, district administrators, state agencies, researchers, and civil society organisations on equal terms.

Together, these objectives reflect a vision of climate governance that is participatory, evidence-based, inclusive, and rooted in justice. Democratic agency and local knowledge are not decorative additions to this vision; they are its foundation.

4.3 Background: Coverage Across States

Between 2022 and 2026, the Conference of Panchayats grew steadily across several Indian states, reaching approximately 1,000 Panchayats and building a rich body of experience, evidence, and methodology. Each edition brought a deeper understanding of how climate vulnerability plays out at the local level, while adapting its approach to the distinct ecological, social, and political realities of each region.

4.3.1 Jharkhand COP 1.0 (2022): The Beginning

The journey began in Jharkhand, a state whose communities are caught in a web of overlapping environmental pressures: declining agricultural productivity, groundwater depletion, widespread deforestation, and the long shadow of coal mining. The inaugural COP brought together communities for a state-level deliberation in Ranchi in March 2022, followed by a national consultation in June 2022. Panchayats spoke clearly about the need for greater autonomy, better technical support, and the revival of traditional ecological practices. These themes would echo across every edition that followed.

4.3.2 Jharkhand COP 2.0 (2023-24): Deepening the Dialogue

Building on the momentum of the first edition, COP 2.0 expanded through regional consultations held in Bokaro, Dumka, Chaibasa, and Daltonganj. This round went deeper into its thematic focus, centering discussions on just transitions and the particular vulnerabilities of marginalised communities. Priority issues included gathering evidence on climate-induced migration, building the capacity of PRI leaders to engage with climate governance, and exploring decentralised renewable energy as a pathway to both energy access and community economic resilience.



4.3.3 Bihar and Karnataka (2024-25): Floods, Droughts, and Tailored Action

The COP then extended to Jamui in Bihar and Kolar in Karnataka. Bihar's communities were grappling with recurring, devastating floods, while Karnataka's Kolar district faced the slow-burning crisis of persistent drought. These editions facilitated discussions that produced demands for climate action plans tailored to specific local conditions. Gender-sensitive approaches, the strategic use of MGNREGA funds, and the leveraging of District Mineral Foundation Trust resources emerged as concrete areas for intervention.

4.3.4 Maharashtra: Beed (2024) and Nagpur (2025): Scaling and Institutionalising

The Beed COP, held in the Marathwada region, brought together over 30 PRI representatives from five talukas. Discussions centred on agroecology as a climate-adaptive farming approach, climate finance, and migration driven by agricultural distress. The Nagpur COP convened more than 80 participants from six districts, foregrounding the institutional role of Panchayats in driving climate action at scale. A pivotal development was the active partnership of the State Climate Action Cell under the Department of Environment and Climate Change, Government of Maharashtra, marking a meaningful step towards integrating the COP platform into formal state governance.

4.4 Key Learnings from the COP Journey

- Panchayats remain largely confined to implementing externally designed schemes. Greater autonomy and real planning authority are essential for meaningful climate action at the local level.
- Communities are aware of the climate impacts around them, but often lack knowledge of the resources, rights, and schemes that exist to help address them.
- Partnerships between government, civil society organisations, academic institutions, and community representatives are critical for effective and sustained outcomes.
- Generating evidence on climate-induced migration and its livelihood impacts is a matter of urgency across all regions.
- Gender inclusion and youth participation must be treated as central to resilience strategies, not as optional additions.



CONFERENCE OF PANCHAYATS (R) – RAIGAD 2026



5.1 Towards Deliberative Democracy in Climate Governance

The Conference of Panchayats (CoP), initiated by Asar and PDAG, established a decentralised and democratic platform for dialogue on climate action. CoP Level 1 amplified grassroots voices, documented indigenous practices, and positioned Panchayats as legitimate actors in climate governance.

Building on this foundation, the philosophical, methodological and operational pathways of the second version of CoP – CoP (R), Raigad 2026 – were conceptualized, formalized and executed by TISS Mumbai which marks a significant evolution. Here, the platform moves beyond dialogue into deliberative democracy, activating the meso tier of governance (block level) and embedding climate action into the organisational structure of Local Governance Institutions (LGIs).

CoP (R) is not simply a continuation; it is a new philosophical and methodological intervention by TISS. Anchored in the philosophy of DIL - Decolonisation, Indigenisation, and Localisation, it seeks to co design and co produce climate action plans with communities, ensuring that development issues and aspirations identified by Panchayats are transformed into actionable, replicable programs.

Dil se, DIL as the Foundation

Dil se... from the heart begins the conversation. Climate dialogue must be heartfelt, not technocratic. It must emerge from the lived emotions, vulnerabilities, and aspirations of communities—their everyday struggles with water scarcity, their memories of forests as sources of livelihood, their anxieties about migration, and their hopes for resilience. When people speak *dil se*, they speak of life as it is felt, not as it is measured. This is the foundation of CoP (R): climate action that is relational, ethical, and rooted in the heart.

From this poetic grounding in dil, emerges DIL as philosophy - Decolonisation, Indigenisation, and Localisation.

Thus, dil se conversations become DIL se conversations—where the heart and the philosophy converge. In Raigad, this convergence is vital. Climate action cannot be imposed from above; it must be co produced with communities who own the dialogue and shape the solutions. By embedding DIL into practice, Raigad's Panchayats become laboratories of democratic innovation, where climate justice, resilience, and sustainability are woven into everyday governance.

5.2 Why Sudhagad?



Sudhagad block in Raigad district was chosen as the site for the first block-level COP for reasons that are simultaneously ecological, social, and strategic. Raigad itself sits at a remarkable and increasingly fragile meeting point of geographies. It is coastal, forested, and industrially active. The communities here navigate overlapping realities: coastal flooding and erosion, forest degradation from encroachment and industrial expansion, agricultural distress from erratic monsoons, and livelihoods under pressure from industrial corridors.

Sudhagad block embodies these intersecting vulnerabilities in concentrated form. Its communities include tribal and coastal populations with deep histories of ecological stewardship, who have developed sophisticated indigenous knowledge systems for forest management, water conservation, and climate-resilient farming. At the same time, these same communities face the acute pressures of industrial proximity, land being sold to outside investors, pollution of the Amba River, and the slow erosion of both their ecological base and their cultural practices.

Strategically, Sudhagad represents what the COP has come to identify as the 'meso tier' of governance, the block level, which sits between the Gram Panchayat at the micro level and the district administration at the macro level. This tier has historically been overlooked in participatory planning processes, yet it is precisely the level at which common issues across multiple Gram Panchayats can be collectively addressed. The Sudhagad COP was designed to activate this meso tier as a genuine deliberative space.

5.3 Aims of the Sudhagad COP

- To identify, across 15 Gram Panchayats in Sudhagad block, the priority climate-related development issues, including water scarcity, forest governance, agricultural livelihoods, migration, gender equity, and health, through a structured pre-COP mapping process.
- To facilitate block-level deliberation in which each Gram Panchayat presents its issues, and facilitated discussions distil these into shared thematic areas for collective action.
- To examine these thematic areas in depth, connecting local lived experiences to structural challenges and identifying both indigenous solutions and resource gaps.



- To document indigenous practices, community assets, and the human and social resources available at the GP and block levels, creating a knowledge base for solution design.
- To co-design a solution matrix integrating GP-level activities with block-level interventions, presented to the BDO and officials for response and institutional incorporation.
- To reach consensus among elected local government representatives, Village Development Committees, community members, and administrators on four to five replicable development programmes that can be implemented across the block.
- To generate a model of block-level participatory climate governance that can be adapted and scaled across other blocks in Raigad and eventually across Maharashtra.

OUR PHILOSOPHY: DIL – DECOLONISATION, INDIGENISATION, AND LOCALISATION



6.1 Dil Se – From the Heart



The philosophy of the Conference of Panchayats does not begin in the abstract. It begins in the concrete, the felt, and the lived. The word that anchors the Raigad COP's philosophical orientation is dil, which means heart. Dil se, from the heart, describes the quality of engagement the platform seeks: climate dialogue that is heartfelt rather than technocratic, emerging from the lived emotions, vulnerabilities, and aspirations of communities rather than from statistics and policy frameworks alone.

When a farmer from Sudhagad speaks of watching water sources dry up over the past decade, she speaks dil se. When a tribal elder describes the forest as a living entity whose illness mirrors the community's own, he speaks dil se. When a woman from a self-help group articulates her anxiety about the monsoon's unpredictability and its effect on her family's food security, she too speaks dil se. This quality of speaking, grounded in memory, grief, hope, and intimate ecological knowledge, is not merely personal testimony. The COP insists on recognising it as a form of expertise.

From this grounding in dil emerges DIL as a philosophy: an acronym for Decolonisation, Indigenisation, and Localisation. These are three facets of a single, integrated commitment that climate action must be co-produced with communities who genuinely own the dialogue and help shape the solutions.



6.2 Decolonisation: Reinvigorating Local Governance



As the Raigad COP uses it, decolonisation is a present-tense political and epistemic commitment. It challenges the technocratic, extractive, and market-driven models of governance that continue to push local voices to the margins, treating communities as beneficiaries of solutions rather than as decision-makers who produce them.

In the context of climate governance, decolonisation means asserting that Panchayats are not simply channels for the downward delivery of state schemes. They are governance institutions with constitutional standing, political legitimacy, and their own kind of authority. They understand their local ecologies, their community's capacities and vulnerabilities, and their cultural contexts in ways that no outside expert can replicate. In practice, the Raigad COP embeds the principle of subsidiarity, the idea that decisions should be made at the lowest capable level, as a governance norm rather than just an aspiration.

6.3 Indigenisation: Routes Through Roots



Indigenisation in the Raigad COP is as much a methodological commitment as a philosophical one. It recognises that development, as historically practised, has often displaced local knowledge systems, delegitimised traditional ecological practices, and privileged extractive growth over sustainable living.

The Raigad COP proposes a methodology it calls 'mapping routes through roots': a structured process of tracing the historical, cultural, social, ethnic, and ecological pathways that shaped community practices in Raigad. In practice, this means documenting oral traditions related to forest stewardship, tribal art forms that carry ecological knowledge, community rituals that regulated resource use, and agricultural practices adapted to the region's specific coastal and forested conditions. These are then brought into dialogue with contemporary climate science, not as opposites, but as complementary sources of knowledge.

6.4 Localisation – Translating Global Goals into Community Action



Localisation, as the Raigad COP practices it, is an act of re-imagination. It takes global frameworks, most notably the Sustainable Development Goals, and asks what they actually mean when translated through the lens of Raigad's specific communities, ecologies, and aspirations.

The Block Level – Activating the Meso Tier

One of the Raigad COP's most significant innovations is its deliberate focus on the block level, the meso tier of governance that sits between the Gram Panchayat and the district administration. The block is, in many ways, the most consequential tier for turning Panchayat-level aspirations into workable programmes. It is the level at which shared infrastructure, common resource pools, and cross-village coordination become possible, and yet it is also the level most frequently bypassed in participatory planning processes.

THE 5As FRAMEWORK



7.1 The 5As

The Raigad COP uses the 5 As framework to ensure that all the different kinds of actors needed for meaningful climate governance are present and actively engaged:



Actor	Role and Contribution
Academicians	Provide analytical depth, methodological rigour, and policy framing, ensuring community insights are connected to evidence and broader knowledge systems.
Advocates	Mobilise voices, ensure accountability, and connect local deliberations to broader social movements and governance processes.
Administrators	Bring the institutional authority, resources, and operational capacity needed to translate deliberative outcomes into implemented programmes.
Artists	Channel indigenous and creative expressions into the deliberative process, making climate discourse culturally resonant and emotionally accessible.
Amplifiers (Media)	Extend the narratives generated by the COP into the public sphere, shaping public understanding, opinion, and accountability.

7.2 Justice as the Core Commitment

At the heart of the Raigad COP lies a commitment to justice, understood not as an abstract value but as a practical requirement for every dimension of the platform's work. This manifests in three specific orientations: gender justice, which means ensuring women's leadership in Gram Sabhas and community planning processes; epistemic justice, which means according indigenous and community knowledge the same legitimacy as scientific expertise; and climate justice, which means designing adaptation and mitigation strategies with clear attention to who is most vulnerable and who bears historical responsibility for the crisis.



THE SUDHAGAD COP: SESSIONS AND PROCEEDINGS



The Sudhagad block-level Conference of Panchayats was held on 29 April 2026 at the Maratha Hall, Pali. It brought together Panchayati Raj Institution representatives, Sarpanchs, community members, block-level officials, and representatives from academic and civil society organisations. The day was structured into three sessions, each designed to move progressively from individual experience to collective deliberation to shared action points.

8.1 Session I: Ice-Breaking – Priority Mapping Exercise



8.1.1 Structure and Purpose

The first session was designed not merely as a warm-up, but as a structured participatory exercise with a clear analytical aim: to enable communities to look collectively at their shared challenges and to surface, through lived experience, the most pressing issues confronting their villages. This laid the foundation for the deeper deliberations that followed in the afternoon.

Facilitating volunteers guided participants through an exercise in which they were presented with six thematic areas representing common challenges in rural communities:

1. Forest	2. Water	3. Agriculture	4. Women	5. Health	6. Culture
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Each participant was asked to rank these themes from the most to the least pressing concern in their village, assigning a number from 1 (most critical) to 6 (least). Volunteers explained the exercise and supported participants in articulating their priorities. The activity was deliberately simple in format but profound in purpose: it invited community members to step back from the specific details of their village's problems and see the broader pattern of shared vulnerability across the block.

8.1.2 Aim: Collective Priority Mapping

The session was designed to produce a collective priority map, to move from individual and village-level articulation of problems towards a shared understanding of what communities across the Sudhagad block are experiencing together. This collective view then shaped the structure of the breakout group discussions in the afternoon, ensuring that deeper conversations were grounded in what communities themselves identified as most urgent.

8.1.3 Result: The Three Dominant Issues

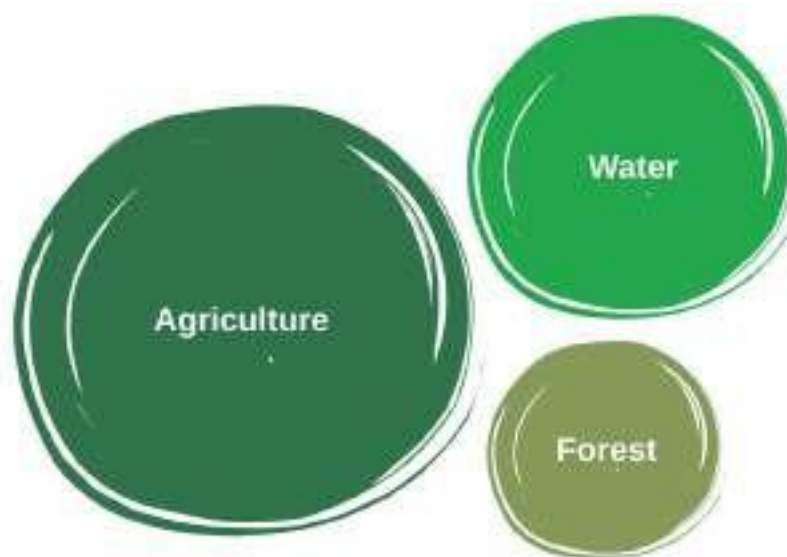
When the individual rankings were pooled across all participating groups, a clear and consistent picture emerged. Three themes stood out as the most critical concerns across villages in the Sudhagad block and the wider Raigad district:

#1 Agriculture	#2 Water	#3 Forest
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This outcome was significant. The consistent emergence of agriculture, water, and forest as the dominant concerns across all participating communities, regardless of their specific geographic or social context, showed that these three issues are structurally connected and collectively experienced across the block. The interdependence is clear: depleting water sources undermine agricultural viability; deforestation reduces water retention and degrades the forest-based livelihoods that help communities survive agricultural failures. The priority mapping therefore did not merely enumerate problems; it revealed a system of interlocking vulnerabilities that demands a joined-up, cross-sectoral response.

Women, health, and culture, while not emerging as the top three, were understood throughout the session as cross-cutting concerns, lenses through which all three primary issues are experienced with particular intensity by specific social groups, especially women and tribal communities.

The session concluded with the formation of breakout groups structured around the primary thematic areas, for the afternoon's detailed deliberative work. Before breaking for lunch, however, the day's second session took place: a panel discussion with government officials.



8.2 Session II: Panel Discussion with Government Officials



8.2.1 Overview

The panel discussion was one of the most significant moments of the day. It brought elected Sarpanchs and community representatives into direct, structured dialogue with government officials responsible for agriculture, revenue, and block-level administration. This kind of face-to-face, accountable conversation between community leaders and government functionaries at the block level is uncommon, and its value was felt throughout the session.

The discussion was were anchored to the concrete issues that had surfaced during the morning's priority mapping exercise: climate change, agricultural distress, water, forests, and women's concerns. Three government officials made substantive presentations, after which four female Sarpanchs and community representatives responded with their own observations and demands. What followed was a genuine exchange, at times pointed and at times collaborative, between those who govern and those who are governed.

Vishwajeet Poojary from ASAR opened the proceedings by warmly welcoming the participants and providing an overview of the session's sequence. He outlined the specific issues to be discussed, framing the session as a critical interface between grassroots governance and administrative policy. Poojary emphasized that this dialogue was designed to ensure that the deliberations of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) move beyond mere consultation to becoming a structured part of the climate action planning process.

To set the formal context, Poojary introduced Prof. Manjula Bharathy from TISS, who spoke deeply on the essence of the Conference of Panchayats (COP). Prof. Bharathy highlighted that the initiative is built upon the importance of a collective voice, drawing directly from the residents of each village to ensure that climate governance is rooted in lived experience rather than just technocratic data. She explained that this approach is vital for a collective journey towards climate justice, asserting that the people who bear the weight of climate change daily must have the authority and agency to design their own solutions.

Bhagwan Kesbhat, founder of Waatavaran Foundation, then further defined the COP concept, explaining it as a bold experiment in participatory democracy that flips traditional top-down negotiations. He broadly outlined the intersecting vulnerabilities faced by communities—ranging from coastal flooding to forest degradation—and noted that because these issues manifest differently in each village, they require specialized, locally-led attention to achieve development in its true essence. Kesbhat stressed that the inclusion of every member of the village, especially marginalized groups, is essential to sustain solidarity in the fight for climate justice and to ensure that resilience is embedded within democratic structures.

The panel discussion was then formally facilitated by Suhas Joshi from Waatavaran. Joshi welcomed the government guests and anchored the conversation to the priority mapping results surfaced by the communities earlier in the day, specifically focusing on the critical pillars of agriculture, water, and forests. He ensured a structured dialogue between the elected Sarpanchs and officials, moving the session from individual testimonies toward shared action points for the block.

8.2.2 Panelists

Panelist	Role and Focus
Vaishali Kolekar	Assistant Agriculture Officer, Sudhagad — Presented schemes for farm ponds, horticulture, mechanisation, and organic farming available to farmers in the block.
Ashok Mahamuni	Agriculture Officer, Panchayat Samiti, Sudhagad — Spoke on the broader agricultural and environmental context, climate risks, and the range of government schemes accessible through the Taluka Agriculture Office.
Nakul Polekar	Nayab Tehsildar, Sudhagad — Addressed the structural environmental challenges facing the block, including large-scale land sales, Amba River pollution, forest fires, and the urgent need for community-led climate governance.

A. Vaishali Kolekar, Assistant Agriculture Officer



Vaishali Kolekar opened her presentation by doing something that many farmers in the room had not experienced before: she walked them through the government agricultural schemes they are actually entitled to, in plain, accessible language.

She began with the Farm Pond Scheme under the Integrated Horticulture Development Mission, which provides a subsidy of 50% of construction costs, up to Rs. 75,000 for farm pond lining. She explained that even in areas where direct water storage may not immediately be viable, farm ponds can significantly improve water availability for agriculture and help raise groundwater levels over time. She then described the agricultural mechanisation scheme, under which farmers can access tractors, power tillers, and other equipment at a 50% subsidy, through a simplified single-application process valid for five years, allowing farmers to apply for multiple items, from ponds to equipment to plantation support, in one submission.

On plantation, she noted that mango attracts a subsidy of one to two lakh rupees, cashew over one lakh, and that even farmers without dedicated land can plant trees on farm bunds. She also flagged a common but fixable problem: many eligible families had their PM-Kisan instalments interrupted due to incomplete Aadhaar seeding or e-KYC, and she encouraged anyone affected to visit the Taluka Agriculture Office for assistance.

She concluded with a direct offer to the room: 'If anyone wants to take up plantation, everyone has some fallow land, please contact our Assistant Agriculture Officers. We will provide the plantation for you.' Her presentation was informative and genuinely helpful. However, the Sarpanchs who followed her were quick to name a gap she had not fully addressed: the distance between a scheme existing and a farmer being able to actually access it.

"If anyone wants to take up plantation — everyone has some fallow land — contact our Assistant Agriculture Officers. We will provide the plantation for you."

Vaishali Kolekar, Assistant Agriculture Officer

B. Ashok Mahamuni, Agriculture Officer, Panchayat Samiti



Ashok Mahamuni's address ranged more broadly across the environmental and agricultural situation in Sudhagad, and he brought to it a candour about the severity of the challenges that participants appreciated. He welcomed the Conference of Panchayats as a platform he considered both timely and necessary.

He began by framing the foundational problem: 'If there is at least 33% plantation on our land, our environment remains balanced. But because of industrialisation and tree-cutting, this balance has been disturbed.' He used this to make the case for proactive, village-level environmental monitoring and disaster preparedness, arguing that communities need to be ahead of the curve rather than reacting to crises after they happen.

He spoke at length about the need for farmers to track rainfall patterns actively. The weather department's estimates, he noted, are now highly accurate, and farmers should be using them for agricultural planning. He described a Taluka-level app developed by the agriculture office that provides weather forecasts and farming guidance, and encouraged Sarpanchs and Gram Sevaks to share this tool widely with farmers in their villages.

He also introduced communities to what he called the '10-drum theory', an initiative that promotes organic farming through home-made inputs and natural pest-management solutions. The aim is to reverse the chemical fertiliser dependence that has degraded soil quality across the region, and to give farmers a low-cost, practical pathway back to healthier soil.

Mahamuni spoke frankly about the severity of disaster risks in the region, referencing the 2005 Mahad landslide and the more recent Khalapur incident as examples of what happens when environmental degradation, deforestation, and inadequate early warning systems converge. He made a pointed argument: climate change readiness must begin at the village level, with the Sarpanch, the Gramsevak, the Talathi, and the Agriculture Assistant working together in a coordinated system.

He also highlighted two underutilised schemes specifically designed for marginalised communities: the Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Agriculture Self-Reliance Scheme for Scheduled Caste farmers, and the Birsa Munda Agriculture Revolution Scheme for Scheduled Tribe farmers. Each provides up to four lakh rupees for agricultural development, including borewell construction. Both schemes, he acknowledged, remain significantly underutilised among the tribal communities of Sudhagad.

"The environment is not a small subject. If a disaster comes to a village, it does not spare anyone. What care must be taken so disasters do not happen? We must think from this perspective."

Ashok Mahamuni, Agriculture Officer, Panchayat Samiti

C. Nakul Polekar, Nayab Tehsildar, Sudhagad



Nakul Polekar's address was the most wide-ranging and structurally analytical of the three official presentations. He began not with schemes, but with a quiet, honest observation about why the environment has received so little attention in governance discourse: 'We only notice that it is hotter this year. Every year we say how much hotter it is, how strong the sun is. People suffer tremendously in summer; there is a shortage of water, it is hotter, or forest fires break out. But we treat these as things only for talking, and we do not pay any attention to what can actually be done about them.'

He then identified three structural issues as his primary concerns for Sudhagad's environmental future.

The first was large-scale land sales. In the two years of his posting in Sudhagad, Polekar had witnessed a significant amount of agricultural land being sold to investors and industrialists from Mumbai and Pune, with the land subsequently being converted for non-agricultural commercial purposes. Older officers who worked in Sudhagad 20 to 25 years ago, he noted, describe the block as having been entirely lush and agriculturally active; now, large tracts lie fallow or repurposed. His appeal to the community was direct and personal: 'Please do not sell your lands if possible. Do not sell your source of livelihood or your rightful property for so little in return.'

The second was Amba River pollution. He drew attention to the fact that Pali town, with a population of 15 to 17 thousand and a daily floating population of five to six thousand, draws its water directly from the Amba River without adequate filtration, even though the same river receives effluents from chemical companies on its banks. He compared this to a river in Hingoli, Marathwada, which he described as now almost dead, and warned that the Amba River faces the same fate within 20 to 30 years without sustained, community-level conservation efforts.

The third was forest fires and plastic pollution. Despite Sudhagad's relative forest richness, which he attributed to the efforts of local communities, recurring forest fires continue to destroy ecosystems. He called for village-level awareness campaigns through Panchayats to prevent fire-setting, and also flagged the pervasive use of plastic in Pali, estimating two to three thousand plastic bags used daily, as an environmental problem that requires both community ownership and administrative action.

He closed on a note of genuine solidarity, pointing to the State Climate Action Cell and TISS collaboration to prepare the Raigad Climate Action Plan, with 15 Gram Panchayats in Sudhagad as primary focus areas, and assuring participants of the Tehsil Office's full cooperation with the Conference of Panchayats going forward.

"We have a saying in Marathi: 'What can a village do?' But the work that happens when everyone acts together cannot happen if only one or two people decide. If all of us — Waatavarana Foundation, TISS, the State Climate Action Cell, local administration, and most importantly you, the local citizens — decide to work together on this subject, very good and sustainable large-scale work can happen."

Nakul Polekar, Nayab Tehsildar, Sudhagad

8.2.3 Sarpanch Voices: Community Perspectives in the Panel



Following the official presentations, four female Sarpanchs and community representatives took the floor. Their interventions were not passive responses; they were pointed, specific, and sometimes challenging. They confirmed what the officials had described, corrected what was incomplete, and added what had been left unsaid.

A. Sneha Bhoir, Sarpanch, Rabgaon

Sneha Bhoir opened with a question that cut to the heart of why scheme accessibility remains so poor: 'When you provide a benefit for something, why do you keep so many conditions attached beforehand? Seeing those conditions, the farmer turns back and says, I do not want this.' She explained that it is not ignorance that drives farmers away from government schemes, but the weight of the application process: the bank requirements, the documentation, the bureaucratic steps that each farmer must navigate alone.

On agriculture, she reflected that Sudhagad was historically known for its farming, describing it as the identity of the place, but that this identity has been quietly eroded by large-scale land sales. On water, she did not mince words: while the Amba River has water throughout the year, the contamination from chemical companies is a direct public health issue, and the fish, crabs, and other organisms that arrive with the river water in Pali are a visible symptom of a much deeper problem. On forest fires, she acknowledged that community plantation efforts have been extensive, including trees planted at the foothills of Sarasgad, but that fires consume these efforts entirely. She also raised a concern that did not appear in the official presentations: the need for work-from-home employment opportunities for non-tribal village women, who currently have no access to local income.

B. Asmita Bailkar, Sarpanch, Aptawane

Asmita Bailkar's most powerful contribution came on the question of water, and she opened it with a statement that silenced the room: 'Water is the life of us common people. If there is no water, we might manage for a day; if there is no food, we might manage for two days, but we cannot live without water.' She then described what she had witnessed over her years in Aptawane: the dramatic change in water access over the past 30 to 40 years, from community-dug 'Davras' in riverbeds, which the whole village would collectively maintain, to borewells that now need to reach 300 feet and still sometimes fail to provide reliable water.

She also raised a concern that sits at the intersection of climate change, migration, and governance: tribal families who leave the village for work often give birth away from home, and the children born during these periods cannot easily access Aadhaar cards, school enrolment, or government schemes because they were not registered at birth in their home village. She argued strongly for local and Taluka-level employment creation as a solution to the root cause of migration, and for the full and practical implementation of forest rights so that tribal communities can sustain themselves on forest produce without needing to leave.

"Water is the life of us common people. Health depends on water. If we drink contaminated water, our health deteriorates. If there is no water, who is most affected? Women."

Asmita Bailkar, Sarpanch, Aptawane

C. Ashika Pawar, Sarpanch, Siddheshwar

Ashika Pawar addressed land, water, and cultural identity. On land sales, she corroborated Polekar's concerns with her own observations, noting that outside investors who purchase land in Sudhagad often dig multiple borewells on their plots, which drives down the water table for surrounding communities. 'Because of this, the groundwater level is going down, soil erosion is happening, and all of this is affecting the local villagers who have lived here for generations,' she said.

She made a particularly sharp observation about plantation programmes that drew visible recognition from the room: 'We plant trees every year in the rainy season. It has become a habit. But how many of those planted trees are actually being cared for, and how many are still standing by the following year? This is something we should pay serious attention to.' She was calling for a shift in focus, from the act of planting trees, which generates photographs and reports, to the sustained care and survival of the trees that are planted. A tree planted but not nurtured is not a forest; it is just an activity.

On culture, she raised the specific and quietly urgent concern of the tribal community: 'Today the tribal community is leaving its own culture and adopting others' cultures to a large extent. This is, going forward, very damaging for our next generation and our future. Our people should preserve their culture and pass on its legacy to the generations that come after us.'

"Trees are planted, photos are taken, and posted on social media. But how many survive? While discussing climate change, such things must be addressed."

Suhas Joshi, summarising Ashika Pawar's observation

D. Utkarsha Belose, Sarpanch, Pacchapur

Utkarsha Belose spoke from direct personal experience of what climate change does to a farming family's life. She described the destruction of sown crops due to unseasonal rain in the previous year, and the emotional and economic toll it takes on families who depend entirely on agriculture: 'Their mentality was most crushed. The crop did not come; things did not happen as expected.' She also noted that mango crops, historically a reliable source of income in Pacchapur, had suffered dramatic declines over her four years in the village, linked to increased cloud cover, pest pressure, and weather unpredictability.

On water, she identified specific areas in the GP, including the Tagak area and Mumbewadi, where borewell and well levels drop critically in summer. On women's health, she raised a concern that is increasingly common but rarely documented: rising heat is causing high blood pressure, dizziness, and other heat-related conditions among middle-aged women in the village. She closed with a direct appeal to the organisations present to offer practical guidance on fire prevention, tree conservation, and community awareness.

8.2.4 Community Voices

A. Moro Nirgude, Mahagaon Village

Moro Nirgude spoke to a fundamental ecological relationship that underpins many of the block's challenges: the link between forest depletion and water scarcity. His Gram Panchayat covers twelve villages and faces extreme water scarcity, with water needing to be brought from the Amba River 25 kilometres away. He connected the water crisis directly to forest loss: 'Because the forest has decreased significantly, soil erosion is happening more, the land gets burnt by the sun, and the agricultural yield decreases.'

He made a call for honesty and leadership from within the community: 'We teach others, but we should start from ourselves. How to get more yield from organic and vermicompost: ten to fifteen people from each village should start, and only then will people see us and follow.' He also echoed the concern about tree survival that Ashika Pawar had raised: 'What is the use of only giving a count of trees planted? We should nurture them properly. Otherwise, the forest cannot grow.'

B. Sandeep Pawar, Community Representative



Sandeep Pawar spoke briefly but with force about the migration cycle and what drives it. He described how the absence of local employment compels families to take advances for coal work or sugarcane cutting, forms of arduous, hazardous labour far from home, because there is nothing available nearby. Forest fires, he added, destroy the trees that young people might otherwise harvest for income, eliminating even that option. His words captured something that the statistics rarely do: out-migration from Sudhagad is not a choice made by people who want to leave. It is a structural compulsion, created by the convergence of agricultural failure, forest degradation, and the complete absence of local livelihood alternatives.

8.2.5 Issues and Demands Raised in the Panel Discussion



Across the panel discussion, the following key issues and demands were consistently and clearly articulated:

- The gap between scheme availability and scheme accessibility: bureaucratic conditions, bank dependencies, and complex documentation requirements deter eligible farmers from applying for government benefits, even when they are aware of them.
- Contamination of the Amba River by industrial effluents, with direct consequences for drinking water quality and public health across Pali town and surrounding villages.
- Large-scale land sales to outside investors, driving deforestation, groundwater depletion, and the erosion of the community's agricultural base.

- Recurring forest fires, which require sustained community-level prevention mechanisms, not just reactive firefighting.
- The gap between tree plantation and tree survival: the need for post-planting care, fencing, and water provision to ensure that reforestation efforts actually produce forests.
- Migration-induced documentation gaps: children born outside the village cannot access Aadhaar cards, blocking their access to education and government schemes.
- Full and practical implementation of Forest Rights Act entitlements for tribal communities, including access to forest produce and land rights.
- Local and Taluka-level employment creation to reduce forced out-migration to hazardous industrial work.
- Women's employment and home-based income opportunities, particularly for non-tribal village women without local livelihood options.
- Cultural preservation for tribal communities, including intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge and practices.
- Greater cooperation between the State Climate Action Cell, TISS, WaatavaranFoundation, and block-level administration in preparing and implementing the Raigad Climate Action Plan.

8.3 Session III: Breakout Groups: PRI Representatives on Forests, Water, Gender and Livelihoods

8.3.1 Overview

Session III was the heart of the Sudhagad COP, held from 1:30 PM to 4:30 PM. This was where the day's conversations moved from listening and responding to deliberating and co-designing. PRI representatives from 15 Gram Panchayats across the block came together in six structured breakout groups, each organised around one or more of the four intersecting thematic pillars of climate vulnerability in Sudhagad: Forests, Water, Gender and Women, and Agriculture and Livelihoods.

The format was deliberately structured to move beyond passive participation. The goal was not to produce a list of complaints, but to work collectively through the complexity of each challenge: to narrate experience, diagnose cause, identify existing community assets and knowledge, and then distil all of this into concrete, actionable demands that could be presented to block-level administration. By the end of the session, each group had produced a set of priority action points representing their community's negotiated agenda for engagement with the BDO, district administration, and state government.

8.3.2 Methodology and Structure

Each breakout group was guided by a trained resource person and followed a four-step process. The first step was Issue Mapping, in which participants shared their lived experiences of climate impacts across water, forest, agriculture, and gender dimensions, building a shared picture of the challenges their communities face. The second step was Root Cause Analysis, in which the group moved from symptoms to causes, identifying the structural, governance, and ecological drivers behind what they were experiencing. The third step was Indigenous and Community Solutions, in which traditional practices, local resources, and community aspirations were documented as the foundation for solutions. The fourth and final step was Action Point Formulation, in which the group distilled everything into concrete, implementable action points for presentation to block officials.

8.4 Group Activity



8.4.1 Group 1: Chive Adivasi Wadi

Participants: Subhash Bandu Jadhav, Laxman Bakka Pawar, Anant Rajaram Waghmare, Santosh Suresh Hilam

Water and Environment

Participants began by identifying the absence of rainwater harvesting infrastructure as their most urgent crisis. Sudhagad receives substantial seasonal rainfall, but for Chive Wadi, almost all of that water is lost to runoff. Without earthen bunds, contour trenches (locally called shoshkhadde), or forest ponds, the land cannot hold on to what the rains bring, and the community ends up water-stressed for most of the year. This scarcity extends beyond people: wildlife in the surrounding forest area also relies on shared water sources, and the absence of forest ponds leaves animals without water during the dry months.

The group raised a practical question that reflects a real governance gap: which government departments are actually responsible for creating this infrastructure, and how can communities access them? This question alone points to the need for better awareness about the roles and responsibilities of different line departments at the block level.

Agriculture and Seed Sovereignty

Participants described a slow but profound erosion of traditional agricultural knowledge that has left the community more exposed to climate stress. Historically, virtually every household in Chive Wadi grew drought-resilient millets: Nachni (finger millet) and Vari (little millet), with sesame planted in alternating seasons. These crops were well adapted to local conditions, required less water, and provided a reliable source of nutrition even in years of irregular rainfall. Farmers preserved their own seeds from season to season, maintaining a living bank of locally adapted, climate-resilient varieties.

Today, only about 10% of farmers in the area continue these practices. The rest have shifted to more market-oriented, water-intensive crops that require chemical inputs and are far more sensitive to rainfall variability. The knowledge of how to cultivate traditional varieties, and critically, the seeds themselves, is disappearing with the older generation. The group saw this not just as an agricultural problem but as a cultural and ecological loss that directly increases the community's vulnerability to climate change.

Forest Livelihoods

The forest is not just a backdrop to life in Chive Wadi; it is an active part of the household economy and food security system. Wild vegetables including Shevali, Kartoli, Bharanga, Koli Dighdi Tel, pods of Kudya, and flowers of Phapadi are gathered seasonally. Wild fruits such as Mango, Karvanda, Toran, Jamun, Tembhuni, and Alu provide nutrition and some income. Medicinal plants from the forest serve healthcare needs that might otherwise go unmet. The group noted that preserving this traditional knowledge is itself a form of forest conservation: when communities know the forest's value, they protect it. But deforestation and recurring forest fires are shrinking this resource base, and with it, the seasonal safety net that protects the poorest households.

Gender and Traditional Knowledge

Women in Chive Wadi carry a disproportionate share of the burden of daily water collection and forest resource gathering, while simultaneously being the primary keepers of the community's traditional ecological knowledge, particularly around forest vegetables, seasonal foods, and medicinal plants. This knowledge is at genuine risk of being lost, because the settings in which it was naturally transmitted from generation to generation, through work in the forest, through seasonal cycles of cooking and foraging, are disappearing. The group proposed that structured meetings be organised with elderly women to document this knowledge, and that younger women and girls be brought into these sessions as learners. Self-Help Groups, the group noted, already exist as a network; what is needed is a programme that gives them a clear mandate and support for this kind of knowledge work.

PROPOSED ACTION POINTS

1. Construct rainwater harvesting infrastructure including continuous contour trenches (shoshkhadde), earthen bunds, and community-managed forest ponds to address year-round water insecurity for both people and wildlife.
2. Establish a Seed Sovereignty Programme to revive and scale cultivation of traditional drought-resistant crops (Nachni and Vari), including community seed banks, farmer training, and market linkage support.
3. Develop a Community Forest Protection Plan with dedicated resources for fire prevention — including firebreaks and community fire watch committees — under the CFRMC framework.
4. Implement a Traditional Ecological Knowledge documentation and transmission programme, facilitated through SHG networks, to record elder women's knowledge of forest foods, seeds, and ecological practices for younger generations.

8.4.2 Group 2: Vandroschi Adivasi Wadi



Water Access and Governance

Vandroschi presented some of the most acute and multilayered water challenges of any group in the Sudhagad COP. Residents have no piped tap connections. There is no formal community ownership or governance rights over local water sources. Some individuals claim ownership over the water that flows into the settlement, creating an inequitable and contested system of access. The water that is available is often contaminated, having run through drainage channels before it reaches users. Wastewater flows onto roads. Monsoon water does not percolate into the ground. Women carry water on their heads from the river, often covering long distances. There is no pond for storage, no mechanical pumping infrastructure, and no community governance structure with the legal authority to manage water resources.

The community's demands from this session were specific and technically grounded: filtered water supply systems; solar-powered pumps to reduce dependence on unreliable electricity supply; internal drainage systems to prevent surface contamination; new storage tanks for both drinking and agricultural use; and formal community ownership rights over water governance. These are not aspirational wishes; they are the minimum conditions for dignified and healthy living.

Women's Rights and Health

The group surfaced a set of gender-specific concerns that go to the heart of what structural inequality looks like in practice. Child marriage continues to be a reality in Vandroschi, reflecting the way economic vulnerability and gender inequality reinforce each other. Women give birth without adequate medical support because ambulance services are not reliably available and health facilities are remote. Girls' educational aspirations beyond primary school are constrained by safety concerns, financial barriers, and the simple absence of local options. Vocational training for young women is largely absent, foreclosing the economic independence that might otherwise break cycles of dependence. The group called for violence against women to be actively addressed, for women's employment opportunities to be created, for Self-Help Groups to be formally established and connected to government schemes, and for women to receive business training and access to small-scale industries.

Forests Rights Implementation

Forest rights have been formally granted to Vandroschi's community under the Forest Rights Act, but the group's experience of those rights is starkly different from what the law envisions. Entry into the forest is restricted in practice. Collection of forest produce, including wild fruits, edible plants, and medicinal herbs, is not permitted. Traditional tools used by Adivasi community members for forest-related work are confiscated by forest officials. During field visits, community members encounter harassment and threats rather than cooperation. The result is a community that holds rights on paper but cannot exercise them on the ground, a gap that creates economic loss, conflict, and a deep erosion of trust in the institutions that are supposed to serve them.

Agriculture

Farming in Vandroshi is characterised by extreme difficulty and limited resources. There is almost no water available for agriculture. Cultivable land is scarce, and many residents have no formal ownership of agricultural land. There are no agricultural tools or equipment available, and no irrigation infrastructure of any kind, which means farming is entirely rain-fed and physically exhausting. Agricultural productivity is low, expenses are high, and government schemes for agriculture are not reaching the community in any meaningful way. The group described a situation in which farming, theoretically the backbone of rural life, offers almost no viable pathway to income or food security.

PROPOSED ACTION POINTS

1. Install solar-powered filtered water supply systems and construct dedicated storage tanks across the wadi, with formal community ownership over water governance and two new borewells.
2. Strengthen full implementation of Forest Rights Act entitlements: stop confiscating tribal tools and equipment, enable unobstructed access to forest produce, and complete all pending land rights claims.
3. Establish comprehensive healthcare services including a village ambulance for maternity emergencies, secondary and higher education access for girls, and livelihood-oriented vocational training and small-scale industry opportunities for young women.
4. Provide irrigation infrastructure (wells, check dams) and appropriate agricultural tools to enable profitable and sustainable farming, with effective implementation of government agricultural schemes.

8.4.3 Group 3: Apatavane and Siddheshwar

Water Storage

Apatavane and Siddheshwar experience a paradox that is becoming increasingly common across Sudhagad: high seasonal rainfall coupled with a severe post-monsoon water crisis. Both villages are entirely rain-fed, with no horticultural farming possible because water simply runs out within a few months of the monsoon ending. Water is available until approximately March, after which groundwater levels drop sharply and communities are without water for three months or more. The fundamental problem is not the quantity of rainfall but the complete absence of infrastructure to store it. Not a single farmer in either village currently practises irrigated farming, regardless of how much they might want to diversify into more reliable or higher-value crops. The solutions the group proposed are practical and well-understood: the deepening of existing ponds, and the construction of earthen Vanrai bunds through community labour, known as Shramdaan, to retain monsoon runoff for use through the dry season.

Forest Access and Tribal Rights

Like the communities in other groups, Apatavane and Siddheshwar have legally recognised rights under the Forest Rights Act that are not honoured in practice. Community members face restrictions on entering the forest. They cannot collect wood, crabs, tubers, wild vegetables, medicinal plants, or fish from ponds, all resources they are constitutionally entitled to gather. Their agricultural and forest tools are seized by forest officials. Pending housing land rights leave families without a secure legal claim to their own homes. The group also called for the right to cultivate traditional crops such as Nachni in forest areas, as had been practised historically, and for road access to be extended to Adivasi hamlets and forest areas.

Women's Health and Energy Poverty

Women in these villages face a cluster of interconnected challenges around health and energy access. The widespread use of firewood for cooking exposes women and young children to indoor air pollution every day, contributing to respiratory illness and long-term health costs. Menstrual health awareness is low. Access to higher education for women is limited. Ambulance services are not reliably available. Women's workload has measurably increased as environmental conditions have worsened: fetching water from greater distances, cooking without gas, collecting firewood further afield. The group noted that smoke-related health problems and malnutrition among women are direct consequences of this daily burden. They called for the provision of solar stoves or LPG connections as a practical intervention that would address both women's health and their daily workload simultaneously.

Agriculture and Environmental Degradation

Agricultural productivity in both villages has been significantly degraded by soil erosion, poor land-use planning, the unregulated sale of land, and the additional pressure of wildlife crop raids. Excessive chemical fertiliser use, adopted partly to compensate for declining soil fertility, creates a worsening cycle: the more chemicals are used, the more the soil degrades, the more chemicals are needed. The group called for a comprehensive, integrated response: tree plantation with real survival support, water storage and groundwater recharge infrastructure, desilting of wells and ponds, and a shift to organic and agroecological farming approaches that rebuild rather than deplete the soil.

PROPOSED ACTION POINTS

1. Construct water storage infrastructure including the deepening of ponds and construction of earthen bunds through Shramdaan to address the three-month post-monsoon water crisis and enable horticultural farming.
2. Implement full and immediate Forest Rights Act entitlements: stop confiscating tools and equipment from tribal people, grant unobstructed forest access, expedite pending housing land claims, and permit cultivation of traditional crops in forest areas.
3. Launch a women's health and energy programme distributing solar stoves or LPG connections and conducting community awareness campaigns on menstrual hygiene and nutrition.
4. Implement integrated soil conservation measures including contour bunding, vegetative barriers, and promotion of organic and agroecological farming to reverse soil degradation and reduce dependence on chemical inputs.

8.4.4 Group 4: Thanale

Forest Fire Crisis

Thanale's group began their discussion with the issue they felt most urgently: the recurring and devastating loss of forest resources to fire. These fires do not just destroy trees; they wipe out the entire ecosystem of medicinal plants, wild fruits, and forest vegetables that families in Thanale rely on for nutrition and supplementary income, often for weeks or months at a time. The community's CFRMC (Community Forest Rights Management Committee) wants to prevent fires and respond to them when they break out, but it currently has no fire-fighting equipment whatsoever. Community members do what they can: warning each other, working together to control fires through whatever means are available. But without formal equipment and resources, their efforts are limited. They need tools, formal protocols, and legal frameworks that recognise and support their role as forest stewards.

Land Access and Agricultural Viability

A major barrier to agricultural viability in Thanale is the pending status of land claims under the Forest Rights Act. In practice, there is almost no farming happening in the village: agricultural land is not available for cultivation in a secure and legal sense, and no income is being generated from farming as a result. Without legal land tenure, communities cannot access agricultural credit, crop insurance, or government scheme benefits. They have made claims on ancestral land they have farmed for generations and are waiting for recognition of those claims. Without this, the cycle of poverty and vulnerability is very difficult to break.

Post-Diwali Water Crisis

The primary river serving Thanale dries up each year after the Diwali festival, creating a water crisis that lasts approximately five to six months. This affects everything: domestic water supply, the health of livestock, and any possibility of winter or summer cropping. The community needs proper planning for drinking water through the construction of RCC bunds that can hold water through the dry season. This is a known, predictable crisis that occurs every year, and yet remains unaddressed by infrastructure.

Women's Livelihoods

Women in Thanale lack access to any local employment opportunities, which means economic dependence is structurally entrenched. There are no vocational training programmes, no small-scale enterprise development initiatives, and no pathways to income generation within the village. The community called for training programmes specifically designed for women, covering skills in food processing, handicrafts, and agro-based activities, so that women can generate income locally without having to migrate or remain entirely dependent on household income from agriculture.

PROPOSED ACTION POINTS

1. Provide fire-extinguishing equipment for the Thanale CFRMC, with formal community protocols for forest fire prevention, early detection, and rapid response.
2. Prioritise and expedite approval of all pending Forest Rights Act land claims in Thanale, enabling households to access cultivable land with legal tenure and associated scheme benefits.
3. Construct river-fed water storage infrastructure (RCC bunds, check dams, percolation tanks) to address the five-to-six-month post-Diwali water crisis and enable year-round domestic and agricultural water security.
4. Establish vocational training and small enterprise development programmes for women, including skills in food processing, handicrafts, and agro-based industries, to create local, dignified livelihood pathways.

8.4.5 Group 5: Kavelawadi and Dudhani

Climate Change and Migration

This group opened their deliberation by naming what they experience as the most visible and painful consequence of climate change in their villages: the disruption of agricultural calendars that families have followed across generations, and the out-migration that follows when crops fail. Rainfall patterns have become erratic, making it impossible to plan reliably for sowing, transplanting, or harvest. When agricultural income falls, families leave. The migration that results is not just an economic loss; it reduces the workforce available for farming, weakens the social fabric, and creates a demographic imbalance that accelerates the decline of agricultural activity. The communities of Kavelawadi and Dudhani see this as a cycle, and they want it broken.

Forest Degradation

Recurring forest fires have caused a measurable decline in tree cover and the availability of forest produce in these villages. The combination of fire and agricultural failure is especially damaging: when a family loses its crop income due to erratic rainfall, it normally turns to the forest as a secondary source of food and income. But when the forest has been burned, that safety net disappears too. The community described this as a compounding vulnerability, where two crises arrive together and reinforce each other, leaving families with fewer and fewer options.

Water Scarcity

After Diwali, the river in these villages runs dry. There is no water storage infrastructure capable of retaining monsoon runoff for use through the long dry season, so even in years of adequate rainfall, communities cannot hold on to the water they receive. When the river runs dry, families fetch water from wells, which are themselves depleting year by year. The group called for RCC bunds and percolation tanks at strategic watershed locations as the primary infrastructure solution, combined with rain gauges in each Gram Panchayat to enable real-time monitoring and evidence-based planning.

Women's Governance Participation

Women's participation in Gram Sabha meetings in these villages is low. This is not for lack of interest: women have views, needs, and priorities that are directly affected by the decisions made in these meetings. But the structure of Gram Sabhas does not accommodate women's schedules, communication styles, or concerns in any systematic way. The group called for deliberate structural interventions: dedicated agenda sessions focused on women's issues, facilitation support during meetings, and formal mechanisms to ensure women's voices become central to climate planning rather than incidental to it.

PROPOSED ACTION POINTS

1. Install rain gauges in each Gram Panchayat to enable real-time rainfall monitoring, supporting evidence-based agricultural planning and early warning systems for climate variability. Increase the number of wells in the village.
2. Construct RCC bunds and percolation tanks at strategic watershed locations to capture and store monsoon runoff, addressing the post-Diwali water crisis for domestic and agricultural use.
3. Provide climate-resilient and high-yielding seed varieties to all farming households, with preference for drought-tolerant and early-maturing varieties, accompanied by training in agroecological cultivation practices. Approve pending agricultural land claims.
4. Mandate and resource women's participation in Gram Sabha meetings through structural interventions: dedicated women's agenda sessions, facilitation support, and formal mechanisms ensuring women's voices are central to climate planning processes.

8.4.6 Group 6: Pachhapur

Water Scarcity and Livestock Impact

Pachhapur experiences a water crisis that arrives with predictable regularity every April and continues until the monsoon arrives. Well levels drop steadily as the dry season progresses, placing a growing burden on women, who bear primary responsibility for sourcing water for the household. Livestock also suffer, with health and productivity declining as water availability drops. The community is clear that the problem is not rainfall but storage and groundwater recharge: Pachhapur receives rain, but without the infrastructure to hold it, the community is left dry for months. They called for community-led development works on water storage and bund construction, with financial support from government schemes matched by community labour contributions.

Agriculture and Climate-Induced Migration

Farming in Pachhapur is entirely rain-fed, making it acutely sensitive to both the timing and the amount of rainfall. When the monsoon arrives early, before fields are prepared, it causes crop damage. When it arrives late, it triggers drought stress. When it arrives in the right window but in excess, it floods crops that are almost ready to harvest. This climate unpredictability has directly eroded confidence in agriculture as a reliable livelihood, driving seasonal and permanent out-migration. Crop insurance schemes exist, but they do not fully compensate for losses or restore the confidence farmers need to keep investing in their land. The group called for skill training and local employment creation as a structural response to the migration pressure.

Forest Degradation and Tree Survival

Recurring forest fires continue to degrade the forest and reduce the availability of the non-timber forest produce that supplements household income. Meanwhile, the Forest Department's annual plantation drives face a specific and preventable problem: trees planted during the monsoon frequently die during the April-May water shortage period, when no one provides water or fencing for the newly established saplings. The community made a direct observation: the plantation that fails every April could succeed if it were supported through that critical period with water provision and fencing. Without that support, the exercise is repeated annually at significant cost with limited long-term benefit. Community awareness programmes are also needed to reduce the incidence of fires.

Women's Participation and Health

Women in Pachhapur face educational and social barriers that compound their exclusion from governance processes. Low educational attainment limits their ability to navigate formal settings, and low attendance at Gram Sabhas means their priorities remain structurally invisible in village planning, even when their Gram Panchayat is led by a female Sarpanch. Environmental changes are increasingly affecting women's health through water collection burdens, nutritional insecurity from crop failures, and the physical demands of agricultural and forest work in worsening heat. The group called for equal wages for men and women in government and community works, adult education classes, and enterprise training linked to SHG networks to strengthen women's economic independence and their ability to participate in governance.

PROPOSED ACTION POINTS

1. Mobilise financial support for community-led development works including water storage, bund construction, and watershed activities, through participatory funding mechanisms that match village labour contributions with government resources.
2. Establish local employment and vocational training programmes specifically designed to reduce climate-induced out-migration, equipping youth and women with income-generating skills in agro-processing, forest produce value addition, and other locally viable activities.
3. Implement a sustained community awareness and behaviour change programme on forest fire prevention, complemented by plantation drives timed and resourced to ensure tree survival through the April-May water scarcity period.
4. Improve access to basic health infrastructure; equalise wage rates for men and women in all government and community works; and establish adult literacy and women's SHG-linked business training programmes to strengthen women's participation in Gram Sabhas and governance.

CONSOLIDATED ISSUES, DEMANDS, AND SOLUTIONS FROM ALL GROUPS



This section brings together and analyses the issues raised, demands articulated, and solutions proposed across all six breakout groups. The aim is to provide an integrated picture of the communities' collective agenda, revealing patterns, shared priorities, and areas where cross-village and cross-sector coordination is both possible and necessary.

9.1 Water: A Crisis of Retention, Not Rainfall



Across all six groups, water emerged as a deeply felt and structurally urgent concern. What is particularly significant about the way communities framed it is this: in every case, the problem was not identified as a rainfall deficit. Sudhagad block receives substantial seasonal rainfall. The problem is a failure of retention infrastructure. Without the means to capture, store, and recharge groundwater from monsoon runoff, communities face water scarcity for three to six months every year, regardless of how much rain falls.

The specific manifestations differ by location. In Apatavane and Siddheshwar, the entire village is rain-fed with no horticultural farming possible after the monsoon ends. In Thanale and Kavelawadi-Dudhani, the river dries up entirely after Diwali. In Vandroshi, even the water that exists is contaminated, running through drainage channels without filtration, posing direct public health risks. In Pachhapur, the crisis begins in April and continues to the monsoon onset, with well levels dropping to critical points. In Chive Wadi, the absence of earthen bunds and soak pits means that monsoon water simply runs off the sloped terrain without entering the soil.

The solutions communities articulate are consistent and technically grounded: earthen and RCC bunds, deepening of existing ponds and lakes, check dams and percolation tanks, soak pits at sloping locations, solar-powered pumping, filtered water supply systems, community-owned storage tanks, and formal governance rights over local water resources. Across all groups, communities also emphasised that water interventions should be designed with genuine community participation, not imposed as technical solutions from outside.

The gendered dimension of the water crisis was named by multiple groups. Women bear the primary burden of water collection, spending hours each day fetching water from rivers, wells, or distant sources. The water crisis therefore translates directly into a loss of time, physical health, and educational and economic opportunity for women.

9.2 Forest: Rights, Fire, and the Limits of Restoration

The forest emerged as the second most widely discussed theme across groups, and the one in which the gap between legal rights and lived reality is most stark. Communities in Vandroshi, Apatavane-Siddheshwar, and Chive Wadi all described the same fundamental situation: they hold legal rights under the Forest Rights Act, but those rights are not respected in practice. Forest officials continue to restrict access to forest produce, confiscate traditional tools and equipment, and treat the collection of food, medicine, and materials from the forest as if it were criminal activity. For communities that have lived in and managed these forests for generations, this is not merely a governance failure. It is an affront to their dignity and a direct economic harm.

The economic impact is severe. In all groups, more than half of community members were described as depending on forest produce for a significant portion of their nutrition and income. Wild vegetables, wild fruits, medicinal plants, crabs, tubers, and fuelwood are not luxuries. They are the subsistence safety net that makes the difference between food security and hunger, particularly during the agricultural off-season when no other income is available.

Forest fires were the second major forest issue raised across groups. All communities reported that fires are a recurring and devastating phenomenon, destroying not only trees but the entire ecosystem on which people depend. The Thanale CFRMC operates without any fire-fighting equipment. In Pacchapur, fires have burned for two to three consecutive days. In Kavelawadi-Dudhani, the combination of fire and climate-driven agricultural failure eliminates both the primary and supplementary income sources of affected households at the same time.

A third dimension, raised in multiple groups, is the failure of government plantation programmes. Trees are planted annually, but the survival rate collapses during the April-May water shortage when no one provides water or protection for newly planted saplings. Communities are calling for a shift from quantity-focused planting to quality-focused cultivation, with the water, fencing, and sustained care needed to actually grow a living forest.

9.3 Agriculture: Sovereignty, Soil, and the Seeds of Resilience



Agriculture was identified as the most urgent priority in the collective mapping exercise, and the breakout group discussions filled in the structural complexity of that crisis with striking consistency. The picture that emerges is of farming communities caught between climatic unpredictability and the loss of the traditional knowledge, seed systems, and ecological practices that once made their agriculture genuinely resilient.

The traditional agricultural system of Sudhagad's tribal communities was built around drought-resistant millets: Nachni (finger millet) and Vari (little millet), grown without irrigation, on knowledge refined over many generations. These crops required less water, were ecologically adapted to local conditions, and provided nutritional security even in years of irregular rainfall. Seeds were preserved by farmers themselves, maintaining diversity and resilience from season to season.

Today, only roughly 10% of farmers in communities like Chive Wadi continue traditional millet cultivation. The displacement of these crops by market-oriented varieties has increased dependence on water, chemical inputs, and volatile market prices. Soil quality has declined significantly due to excessive chemical fertiliser use, creating a cycle in which farmers use more chemicals to compensate for declining fertility, further degrading the soil that feeds them.

Climate change compounds these structural vulnerabilities. Unseasonal rain destroys sown crops. Early monsoon arrival, before fields are prepared, causes crop damage. Late monsoon creates drought stress. Wildlife crop raids add a further layer of unpredictability. Insurance schemes exist but do not adequately compensate or restore farmers' confidence in agriculture as a viable livelihood.

The solutions communities articulate combine the revival of traditional agricultural wisdom with the strategic deployment of modern agricultural support: seed banks and seed sovereignty programmes to preserve and distribute traditional drought-resistant varieties; agricultural mechanisation support for communities that cannot access equipment due to terrain or cost; irrigation infrastructure to reduce total rain dependence; technical support on organic and agroecological farming that rebuilds soil health; and the full implementation of Forest Rights Act land claims, so communities can formally cultivate land they have historically farmed.

9.4 Women: Intersecting Vulnerabilities and Structural Exclusions



Women's issues were raised by all six groups, and in every case, the framing was one of intersecting vulnerabilities rather than isolated concerns. Women are simultaneously the primary managers of household water and food security, the bearers of the heaviest physical labour burdens, the holders of irreplaceable traditional ecological knowledge, and the most systematically excluded from the governance and economic spaces that could help address their situation.

Water collection falls primarily on women across all groups. In Vandroschi, women carry water on their heads from the river. In Pachhapur, women manage the household through the long April-to-monsoon water crisis. In Apatavane-Siddheshwar, women's increased workload, fetching water, cooking without gas, collecting firewood from further away, is directly linked to smoke-related respiratory illness and malnutrition. In all cases, the time and energy spent on water collection is time and energy unavailable for education, income generation, civic participation, or self-care.

Health concerns specific to women were raised by multiple groups. In Vandroshi, the absence of ambulance services means women give birth without adequate medical support. In Apatavane-Siddheshwar, menstrual health awareness is low and higher education access is limited. In Pachhapur, rising temperatures are causing heat-related conditions including high blood pressure and dizziness among middle-aged women. In Kavelawadi-Dudhani, women's health issues are linked directly to their climate-related workload.

Child marriage remains a concern in Vandroshi, reflecting the intersection of economic vulnerability and gender inequality. Girls' access to secondary and higher education is obstructed across multiple groups by financial barriers, safety concerns, and the absence of local facilities. Vocational training for young women is almost entirely absent from the block.

On governance participation, multiple groups noted that women's attendance at Gram Sabha meetings is low. Not because women are disinterested, but because meetings are not structured to accommodate their schedules, concerns, or communication styles. The proposed solutions include dedicated women's agenda sessions, facilitation support, formal mandates, and the creation of safe, welcoming spaces for women to speak and be heard.

Traditional ecological knowledge, held disproportionately by elder women, is at acute risk of intergenerational loss. Women in Chive Wadi are the primary repositories of knowledge about forest vegetables, medicinal plants, and seasonal food sources. Without structured mechanisms for documentation and transmission, this knowledge will be lost within a generation.

9.5 Health and Culture: Cross-Cutting Dimensions



While health and culture were not among the top three priorities in the collective mapping exercise, they emerged as important cross-cutting dimensions in the group discussions. On health, communities made clear that the impacts they are experiencing are increasingly climate-linked: rising temperatures causing heat-related illness, indoor air pollution from firewood affecting respiratory health, water contamination causing gastrointestinal disease, and the physical toll of increased labour burdens on women. These are not separate from the water, forest, and agricultural crises. They are the health consequences of those crises.

On culture, Ashika Pawar's contribution was particularly significant: her observation that tribal communities are increasingly leaving behind their own cultural practices and knowledge systems in favour of dominant cultural norms is not a peripheral concern. It is directly connected to the loss of indigenous ecological knowledge, traditional seed systems, forest stewardship practices, and community governance structures that form the foundation of climate resilience. Cultural preservation and climate resilience are, in this context, not separate agendas. They are the same agenda.

POTENTIAL ACTIVITIES, TRAINING MODULES, AND COMMUNITY INTERVENTIONS



Drawing directly from the demands, aspirations, and resources identified by community groups throughout the day, this section outlines concrete activities, training programmes, and community-led interventions that could be implemented in Sudhagad block. These are grounded in what communities themselves have asked for, structured to build on existing capacities, and designed to be implementable through a combination of government schemes, civil society support, and community labour.

10.1 Water Conservation and Management

Community Water Mapping and Infrastructure Planning

Conduct village-level water mapping exercises to identify existing water sources, seasonal availability, loss points, and opportunities for storage and recharge. This participatory process builds local ownership and generates the evidence needed for infrastructure applications. Communities in Chive Wadi, Apatavane, and Pachhapur are particularly well-placed to lead this activity, having already identified specific technical interventions they need.

Shramdaan Bund Construction Programme

Organise community labour campaigns (Shramdaan) for the construction of earthen Vanrai bunds and contour trenches across the block. Apatavane and Siddheshwar communities explicitly requested this approach, and the model of community-contributed labour matched by government material support is both culturally resonant and programmatically viable under MGNREGA. Training in bund construction techniques, site selection, and maintenance should accompany the physical work.

Soak Pit and Groundwater Recharge Training

Train community members, particularly in Chive Wadi and Pachhapur, in the construction and maintenance of soak pits at sloping locations for groundwater recharge. This is a low-cost, community-manageable technology that directly addresses the problem of monsoon water running off without entering the soil.

Solar Water Pumping and Filtration Training

In villages where water sources exist but reliable pumping or filtration is absent, particularly Vandroschi and Apatavane, organise training on solar-powered water pump installation, operation, and maintenance. Link this with the Farm Pond Lining Scheme and other available government subsidies for water infrastructure.

Rainwater Harvesting Awareness Module

Develop a community awareness module on rainwater harvesting, covering roof catchment, tank construction, and seasonal management, and deliver it through Gram Sabha meetings and SHG networks across the block.

10.2 Forest Stewardship and Fire Prevention

Community Forest Rights Literacy Programme

A structured training programme for community members on their rights under the Forest Rights Act, covering: what rights have been granted; what steps to take when rights are violated; how to document and report confiscation of tools or restriction of access; and how to file complaints with the Gram Sabha, CFRMC, and district authorities. This programme should be accompanied by legal support for pending claims.

CFRMC Strengthening and Fire Prevention Training

Support existing CFRMCs in Thanale and other villages with equipment, training, and formal protocols for fire prevention, detection, and response. Training should cover: identifying fire-risk conditions; establishing community fire watch systems; creating and maintaining firebreaks; and coordination protocols between neighbouring villages. Thanale's CFRMC explicitly requested fire-fighting equipment: this should be the starting point for any support.

Forest Produce Documentation and Value Chain Workshop

Facilitate a workshop, particularly for women's groups in Chive Wadi and Apatavane, to document and map local forest produce, including wild vegetables, wild fruits, and medicinal plants. Follow this with practical sessions on seasonal availability, sustainable harvesting, processing, and potential market linkages, creating an economic case for forest conservation that community members themselves can articulate.

Tree Survival Programme

Reframe tree plantation from a single-event activity to a multi-season cultivation programme. This includes: site-specific planting plans that account for available water sources; community water provision schedules for newly planted trees during April and May; fencing training to protect saplings from livestock; and a monitoring system that tracks survival rates rather than planting numbers. This directly addresses the concern raised by Ashika Pawar and Moro Nirgude about the futility of planting without follow-through.

10.3 Agricultural Resilience and Seed Sovereignty

Traditional Millet Revival Programme

Establish a block-level seed sovereignty programme anchored in Chive Wadi, where the tradition of Nachni and Vari cultivation is remembered even if not widely practised. The programme should include: collection and propagation of traditional seed varieties from elder farmers; establishment of community seed banks managed by SHGs or Village Development Committees; training in traditional cultivation techniques; and farmer-to-farmer knowledge exchange visits between villages where traditional agriculture is more active.

Organic and Agroecological Farming Training

Drawing from the '10-drum theory' introduced by the Agriculture Officer and the community's own experience with organic fertilisers, develop a block-level training programme on organic farming that covers: vermicompost preparation; home-made plant-based pest management solutions; soil health assessment and restoration; and transition planning from chemical to organic inputs. The programme should begin with demonstration farmers in each village, as Moro Nirgude suggested, leading by example so others can see and follow.

Agricultural Scheme Accessibility Facilitation

Address the scheme accessibility gap raised by Sneha Bhoir by creating a dedicated facilitation service, managed by trained community youth or SHG members, to assist farmers in accessing government agricultural schemes. This includes: application preparation for Farm Pond, mechanisation, plantation, and other programmes; Aadhaar seeding and PM-Kisan registration support; and liaison with the Taluka Agriculture Office. The aim is to eliminate the bureaucratic friction that causes eligible farmers to give up on schemes they are entitled to use.

Wildlife Crop Raid Migration Training

In Apatavane-Siddheshwar and other villages facing crop damage from wild animals, facilitate training in low-cost, community-manageable deterrent methods, including solar-powered lighting systems, acoustic deterrents, and community watch arrangements. Explore insurance scheme options specific to wildlife crop damage alongside these practical measures.

10.4 Women's Empowerment and Livelihood Development



Traditional Ecological Knowledge Documentation Project

Facilitate a structured, intergenerational knowledge documentation project, particularly with elder women in Chive Wadi and other communities. This should involve: facilitated meetings to document knowledge of forest vegetables, medicinal plants, and traditional agricultural practices; creation of accessible materials in local languages owned by the community; and structured sessions to transmit this knowledge to younger women and girls. SHGs can serve as the institutional home for this project.

Women's Enterprise Development Module

Develop a tailored enterprise development training module for women in the block, based on the specific resources and market conditions of Sudhagad. Viable livelihood areas identified by communities include: forest produce processing; food processing using traditional grains like Nachni and Vari; handicrafts incorporating traditional tribal art forms; and home-based agro-processing activities. The module should cover enterprise planning, basic financial literacy, SHG-linked micro-credit access, and market linkages.

Gram Sabha Women's Participation Programme

Design a practical intervention to increase women's meaningful participation in Gram Sabha meetings. This should include: timing meetings to accommodate women's schedules; establishing a dedicated women's agenda item in every Gram Sabha; training female Sarpanchs and members in facilitation skills; creating safe physical spaces for women to speak; and piloting crèche facilities during meetings. Link this to the broader SDG 5 framework the Raigad COP is operationalising.

Maternal and Reproductive Health Intervention

Work with the health system to improve maternity services in Vandroschi and other remote communities: advocate for dedicated ambulance access; conduct community health awareness sessions focused on reproductive health, menstrual hygiene, and maternal nutrition; and support the documentation of newborns born outside the village to resolve the Aadhaar card gap identified by Asmita Bailkar.

LPG and Solar Cooking Access Programme

Facilitate access to LPG connections or solar stoves for women in Apatavane-Siddheshwar and other villages where firewood dependence is causing respiratory illness and adding to the daily burden. Link this with available government schemes and conduct awareness sessions on the health benefits of cleaner cooking fuels.

10.5 Governance and Cultural Strengthening

Forest Rights Act Implementation Monitoring

Establish a community-led monitoring system to track the implementation of Forest Rights Act entitlements across the block. This should involve: maintaining village-level records of all pending and approved claims; documenting instances of rights violations; and creating a clear escalation pathway to the Gram Sabha, district administration, and legal support organisations. This directly addresses the gap between legal rights and ground reality that communities in Vandroschi, Apatavane, and Chive Wadi described.

Climate Justice Awareness and Advocacy Training

Build the capacity of community representatives, particularly Sarpanchs, SHG leaders, and CFRMC members, to engage with climate governance processes at the block, district, and state level. This includes: understanding the Raigad Climate Action Plan preparation process; articulating community demands in governance forums; using SDG frameworks as advocacy tools; and connecting local issues to state and national climate policy.

Cultural Documentation and Tribal Knowledge Archive

In response to Ashika Pawar's concern about the erosion of tribal cultural identity, facilitate a community-led cultural documentation project: recording oral traditions, tribal art forms, community rituals that regulated resource use, traditional ecological knowledge, and intergenerational stories of community life and adaptation. This documentation serves both cultural preservation and climate resilience goals, ensuring that the indigenous wisdom embedded in culture is not lost with each passing generation.

THE RAIGAD CONFERENCE OF PANCHAYATS: FULFILLING OF AIMS, PHILOSOPHY, AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS



11.1 Fulfilling the Aims and Objectives of the Conference of Panchayats



The Sudhagad block-level COP represents a significant and concrete fulfilment of the objectives with which the Conference of Panchayats was established. Below is an examination of how the platform's stated objectives played out in practice on 29 April 2026.

Enhancing the Role of Panchayats in Climate Governance

The Sudhagad COP made this objective tangible in an unusually direct way. By convening Sarpanchs and PRI representatives as the primary deliberating body, rather than as passive listeners to expert presentations, it positioned Panchayats as producers of climate knowledge rather than recipients of it. The four female Sarpanchs who spoke in the panel discussion did not merely describe problems; they diagnosed structural failures, challenged scheme conditions, and articulated demands backed by lived evidence. The breakout group process generated community-owned action points: a governance document that Panchayat representatives can carry into their engagements with the BDO, district administration, and state government. This is what enhanced Panchayat governance authority looks like in practice.

Documenting and Promoting Local Practices of Resilience

The breakout groups produced a remarkable body of documentation on local resilience practices that would not otherwise find their way into formal governance records. The knowledge of traditional millet cultivation in Chive Wadi, the traditional water-harvesting 'Davra' method, the forest produce calendars held in women's memory, the organic farming experiments in Mahagaon: all of these are examples of locally-held resilience knowledge that the Sudhagad COP surfaced, named, and began the process of validating. The proposed Traditional Ecological Knowledge documentation programme is a direct continuation of this work.

Catalysing Locally Relevant Climate Solutions

The proposals from all six breakout groups are not generic demands for 'more government support'. They are specific, technically grounded, and locally calibrated: earthen bunds through Shramdaan at particular locations, solar-powered pumping for specific communities, CFRMC fire-fighting equipment for Thanale, rain gauges in each GP, seed banks for traditional crop varieties. These are the outputs of communities who know their ecology, their infrastructure gaps, and their governance context, and who were given a structured platform to articulate this knowledge into actionable form.

Creating Inclusive Spaces

The Sudhagad COP made deliberate and meaningful efforts to create inclusive spaces. The presence of four female Sarpanchs in the panel discussion was a structural design choice, not an accident. It ensured that women's voices were heard not as an afterthought but as governance voices with authority. The breakout groups included both elected representatives and community members across tribal and non-tribal communities. The use of Marathi throughout, the facilitation by trained community volunteers, and the choice of a local venue all contributed to an atmosphere in which participants felt they were in their own space, not a formal government setting.

Building Interface for Exchange Across Levels of Governance

Perhaps the most innovative feature of the Sudhagad COP was the panel discussion format: a structured, facilitated dialogue between community representatives and block-level officials that was genuine rather than performative. Nakul Polekar acknowledged land sales and Amba River pollution as serious structural problems. Ashok Mahamuni engaged honestly with questions of scheme accessibility. The Sarpanchs pushed back on scheme conditions and implementation gaps. The Nayab Tehsildar's assurance of full Tehsil Office cooperation with the COP process, and the commitment to incorporate community demands into the Raigad Climate Action Plan, represent a meaningful governance exchange, not merely a courtesy visit.

11.2 The DIL Philosophy in Action

Decolonisation in Practice

The decolonisation principle was visible in how the COP structured authority throughout the day. Officials presented information and left for other commitments; the communities deliberated and produced their own governance documents. The Sarpanch of Rabgaon challenged the conditions attached to government schemes. The communities of Vandroschi demanded not just water infrastructure but formal ownership rights over water governance, a fundamentally decolonising demand. The recognition that Panchayats are knowledge producers and not just scheme implementers was enacted rather than simply stated.

Indigenisation in Practice

The breakout group discussions produced a rich body of indigenous ecological knowledge: the millet cultivation sequences of Chive Wadi, the forest produce calendars held by elder women, the traditional Davra water harvesting method, the community-based forest fire prevention systems. The COP created the conditions for this knowledge to be surfaced, documented, and validated as the basis for climate solutions. The proposed Traditional Ecological Knowledge documentation project is a continuation of this work, ensuring that indigenisation is not confined to a single event but becomes a sustained programme.



Localisation in Practice

The SDG framework came alive in Sudhagad in the concrete form of community demands. SDG 6 (Clean Water) was embodied in the demand for filtered water and community water governance in Vandroshi. SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) was visible in the seed sovereignty programme proposed by Chive Wadi. SDG 5 (Gender Equality) was present in every group's demands for women's employment, health, education, and governance participation. SDG 15 (Life on Land) was expressed in the communities' demands for full Forest Rights Act implementation and community-led forest stewardship. Localisation was not a rhetorical exercise. It was the actual substance of what communities demanded.

11.3 Policy Implications and Recommendations

Block Level: Gram Panchayat Development Plans

The action points produced by all six breakout groups should be formally incorporated into the Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDPs) of the respective Gram Panchayats. This would give community-produced demands the institutional standing of formal government plans, making them eligible for funding under MGNREGA, the 15th Finance Commission, and other scheme frameworks. The Block Development Officer should convene a follow-up meeting within three months of the COP to review each GP's action points and identify implementation pathways through existing schemes.

District Level: Raigad Climate Action Plan

The Raigad Climate Action Plan, being developed with TISS and the State Climate Action Cell, should incorporate the demands from the Sudhagad COP as its baseline community evidence. The priority mapping result (agriculture, water, and forest as the top three priorities) should structure the plan's thematic framework; the action points from each group should be reflected in the plan's intervention matrix; and the specific demands for Forest Rights Act implementation, water storage infrastructure, and women's governance participation should be translated into plan commitments with timelines and responsible agencies.

State Level: Forest Rights Act Implementation

The consistent pattern of Forest Rights Act violations documented across multiple groups in Sudhagad, restriction of access, confiscation of tools, and pending land claims, points to a systemic implementation failure that requires state-level attention. The State Climate Action Cell and the Department of Tribal Development should be presented with the evidence from Sudhagad as a case study in the gap between legal provision and ground reality. A specific review of pending claims and a protocol for addressing ongoing violations in Raigad district should be sought as a matter of urgency.

State Level: Agricultural Scheme Accessibility

The observation made consistently by Sarpanchs and community representatives, that scheme conditions and bureaucratic requirements deter eligible farmers from accessing government agricultural support, points to a design problem in how schemes are delivered. The Department of Agriculture should consider simplifying application processes, reducing documentation requirements for small and marginal farmers, establishing block-level facilitation services, and improving scheme awareness through Panchayat channels rather than relying on farmers to self-navigate complex systems on their own.

National level: The COP Model as a Policy Framework

The Sudhagad COP demonstrates that block-level, community-led participatory climate governance is feasible, productive, and scalable. The format, encompassing pre-COP issue mapping, structured breakout deliberations, a panel discussion with officials, community-produced action points, and formal presentation to the BDO, can be replicated across blocks in Maharashtra and adapted for other states. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj and the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change should consider the COP model as a framework for operationalising the constitutional mandate for Panchayats as environmental governance institutions.

The Meso Tier as a Policy Innovation

Perhaps the most significant policy contribution of the Sudhagad COP is its demonstration that the block level, the meso tier, is the optimal scale for integrated, multi-GP climate governance. Block-level COPs can identify issues that are shared across multiple Gram Panchayats but invisible at the individual GP level, generate solutions that require cross-GP coordination (shared watershed infrastructure, block-level seed banks, CFRMC networks), and create a governance interface between communities and the BDO that does not bypass either the GP or the district administration. The Raigad COP's commitment to holding block-level COPs across all blocks in Raigad, followed by a district-level COP, represents a genuine institutional innovation that deserves recognition and replication.

CONCLUSION

The Sudhagad block-level Conference of Panchayats, held on 29 April 2026, was not simply an event. It was the first articulation of a new architecture of participatory climate governance, one that works from the community outward, from the heart upward, and from the village to the district and beyond.

The communities of Sudhagad block came to this COP carrying the weight of converging crises: water they cannot retain, forests they cannot freely access, land they are losing, agriculture that is becoming unreliable, and a governance system that has historically offered them schemes without sovereignty and consultation without real authority. What the Sudhagad COP gave them was a platform to say all of this clearly, specifically, and on the record, in the presence of the officials responsible for addressing it.



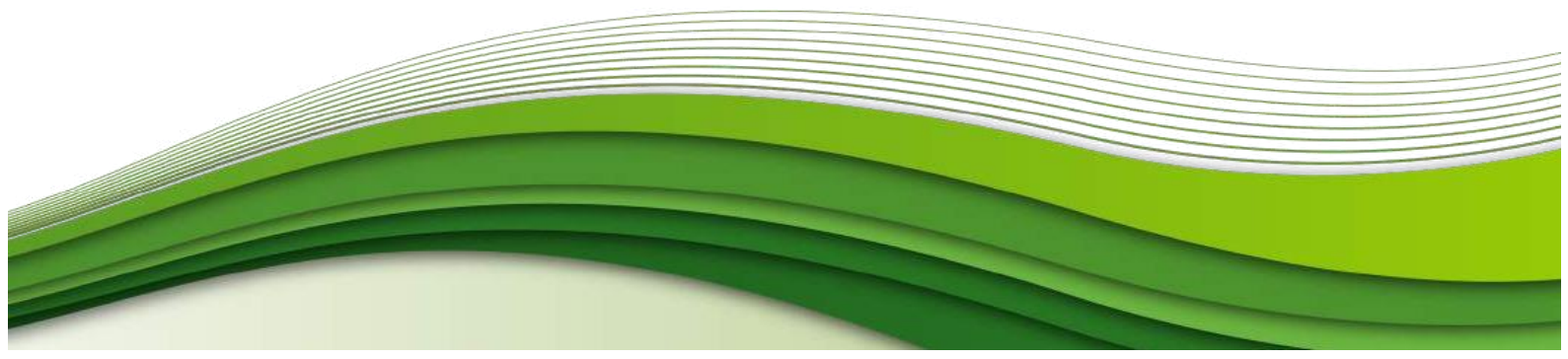
CONCLUSION

The demands produced by the six breakout groups are not aspirational statements. They are the distilled output of community deliberation, grounded in decades of lived experience, indigenous knowledge, and a precise understanding of local ecology and governance realities. Earthen bunds through Shramdaan. Solar-powered filtered water. Forest Rights Act implementation, not just on paper. Seed banks for Nachni and Vari. Equipment for the CFRMC. Rain gauges in each GP. Women in Gram Sabhas as a structural requirement, not an afterthought. These demands are specific, actionable, and implementable. They deserve to be treated as a governance mandate.

The Sudhagad COP also produced something less tangible but equally important: a demonstration that communities and administrators can speak to each other as genuine partners, rather than in the usual relationship of scheme provider and scheme recipient. The Nayab Tehsildar's acknowledgment of land sales and river pollution as structural problems, the Agriculture Officers' willingness to engage with questions of scheme accessibility, the Sarpanchs' insistence on being heard as equals: these are the early signs of a governance culture that the COP is designed to cultivate and sustain.

The Sudhagad COP is the first in a series of block-level COPs that will unfold across Raigad, ultimately feeding into a district-level COP that brings together the voices, demands, and solutions of an entire district's communities into dialogue with district and state administration. Each edition will deepen what this one began: the practice of deliberative democracy in the service of climate justice.

Dil se, from the heart, the communities of Sudhagad have spoken. The responsibility now lies with governance at every level to listen, respond, and act.



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