COMMON GROUNDS
Developing a Shared Language for Inclusive Energy Transition

CEEP
CENTRE FOR ENERGY, ENVIRONMENT & PEOPLE

Index

INTRODUCTION

As India accelerates its energy transition, aligning renewable energy (RE) development, both solar and wind, with community well-being and environmental sustainability is vital. To explore these dynamics, a dialogue was convened in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, on 21st & 22nd March 2025 with stakeholders from the Thar region of Rajasthan and Kachchh (aka Kutch) region of Gujarat. The idea was to examine the impacts of large-scale RE projects on the social, cultural, and economic landscape of adjacent communities. The dialogue also sought to build consensus and common ground towards shaping and negotiating an inclusive and people-centric development of renewables.

Participants included members of the community residing in the vicinity of large RE projects and community organisations working on issues of common lands, rural livelihoods, environment conservation, pastoralism, and other sustainable development domains. The voices and experiences of these stakeholders grounded the discussions and findings presented in this report.

The convening focused on four core areas of concern: land, livelihood, gender, and biodiversity. It served as a platform to bridge perspectives, deepen insights, and collaboratively shape inclusive and equitable approaches to clean energy development. Crucially, the convening sought to identify actionable recommendations toward inclusive and sustainable solutions, ensuring the outcomes align with local priorities and advance justice for marginalised groups through direct collaboration with participants.

1. Procurement of Private Land

Acquisition of large tracts of land is a key towards the success of India's renewable energy ambition, particularly in the states of Gujarat and Rajasthan. Private one-to-one negotiations, mediation by middlemen, and leasing of land (instead of direct purchase) have emerged as a common practice for the acquisition of desired tracts of land. This section highlights the concerns and perspectives voiced by various stakeholders in the context.

1.1 Determination of Rates

Issues with rates for long-term leasing of land were flagged by many stakeholders. An expert providing impact assessment services to renewable energy developers informed that while circle rates exist for the sale and purchase of land, no such standardised rates are in place for land leasing. An ecosystem of land aggregators has mushroomed around renewable energy hotspots, approaching farmers with *khatedari* land on behalf of the companies.

While a participant highlighted that in cases where a small parcel of land in a large plant is left to be acquired

by a developer (via a leasing model), the owner of such land gains an upper hand in the negotiations. However, this was refuted by a local elected representative from Gujarat who shared that the price for leading land parcels is almost determined by the 'market' and that the farmers do not have any such power in their hands. This was also affirmed by a Rajasthan-based lawyer who mentioned that neither the government nor the farmer has any role to play in determining the rate at which land is leased. He mentioned that while the sub-divisional magistrate (SDM) is involved in this process at some steps, the involvement is limited.

1.2 Dilution of Safeguards

A few participants raised strong reservations regarding land governance and renewable energy development. A former politician from Gujarat called the entire model a land-grabbing exercise. He shared that as companies do not have to abide by land ceiling laws, they have amassed a massive land bank, noting that a major Indian corporate group has acquired nearly five *bighas* of land.

An impact assessment expert working with multiple renewable energy developers noted that these developers prioritise land due diligence, with a primary focus on establishing clear land title status. She highlighted that "many land transfer laws, such as those governing transfer of land between marginalised and dominant communities, were being diluted" following the introduction of the RE policy and the land-leasing model.

1.3 Skewed Balance of Information

Poor awareness and information asymmetry across stakeholder groups is a prevalent phenomenon across big development projects, especially in remote rural regions. As per participants, renewable energy development in the Thar region of Rajasthan and the Kachchh region of Gujarat suffers from the same. The issues range from community awareness about their rights, consequences of long-term land leasing for renewable energy projects, and legal platforms to secure their rights, amongst other things.

A pastoral farmer and respected community leader from Rajasthan informed that farmers are often unaware of the terms they have agreed to, and they do not have any clarity about what will happen to their land at the end of the lease term. Some participants also raised concerns about general awareness of rights and benchmark of compensation for transmission towers erected on the privately-owned agricultural land.

1.4 Skewed Balance of Power

While concerns and contestations are a natural phenomenon for large projects, it is the muted role of the State and absence of redressal mechanisms that perturbed the communities, as per some of the participants. This was made evident in various ways, and

not just because of the absence of a government-notified framework for the determination of leasing rates. Beyond this, participants also raised serious concerns about the involvement of local police and other forces in subduing their voices. For instance, a community representative from Rajasthan reported that three farmers were arrested for protesting the installation of transmission towers on their land and asserting their rights.

A lawyer from Rajasthan also highlighted that renewable energy developers incentivise local aggregators with money, offices, vehicles and promises of contracts in the development and operation of the projects. Consequently, even local members of the community activistly work to further the interests of their benefactors, often at the cost of the farmers and the local community. He also highlighted that "other than the court of laws or protesting in the streets, people have not been given any platform for raising their concerns".

1.5 Long-term Impact on Agricultural Land

Quite a few participants from grassroots communities and civil society organisations expressed their uncertainty and concerns about the long-term effects on agricultural land. A respected pastoral leader commented that even arable land is being given away by farmers who are unaware of the long-term consequences of leaving land uncultivated. He explained that "if agricultural activity ceases for extended periods, the land loses its fertility and eventually becomes unsuitable for cultivation."

Another participant added that post leasing, developers remove the trees and extensively use weedicides and pesticides to treat the acquired land. He argued that this alters the natural characteristics of the soil and "it is impossible for the developer to return the land in its original state". A local political leader from Gujarat also reiterated the same, noting that the installation of towers was often followed by the spraying of pesticides, affecting the land cultivability.

2. Diversion of Commons

Apart from private land, large tracts of public 'wasteland' are being allocated for renewable energy development, reshaping the land-use patterns in select pockets across the Thar Desert. The deployment of 'wasteland' in India's renewable energy transition has drawn critique from scholars such as Baka (2013), Singh (2022), and Stock (2023), who argue that it functions less as a neutral descriptor and more as a political technology of land dispossession. Historically, these lands saw little state investment, and their ambiguous legal status allowed customary uses to persist without formal recognition or conflict. What unfolds in the Thar, then, is not simply a story of energy transition, but one of territorial reordering in the backdrop of sustainability. The introduction of renewable energy infrastructure, framed as a green imperative, has triggered a new spatial politics, wherein the absence of prior contestation is recast as implicit consent for the diversion of public wasteland.

This section briefly highlights some of the cultural and historical contestations on public land and the role of various institutions in mediating them.
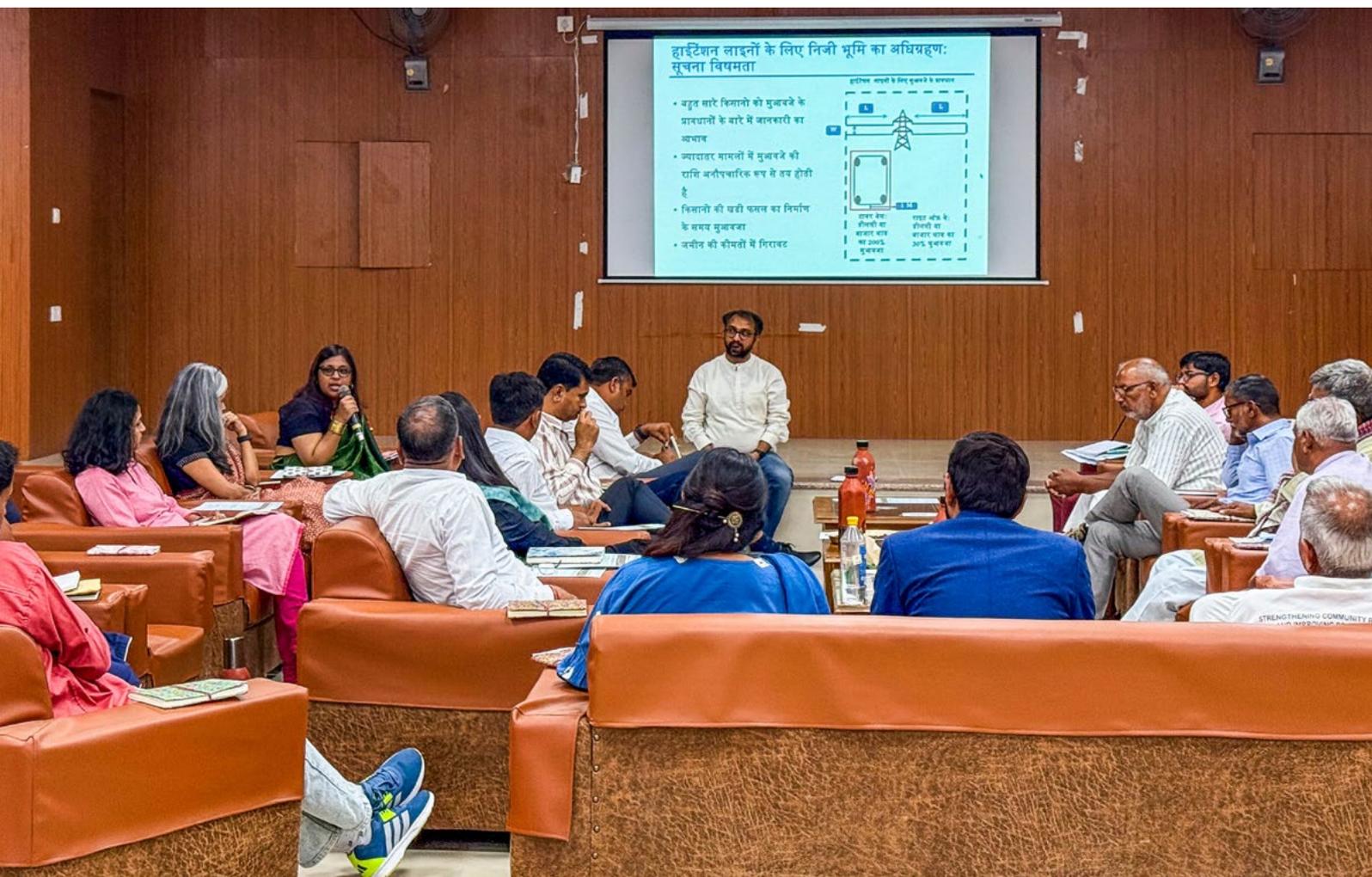
2.1 Historical and Cultural Contestations

Local community participants from Rajasthan strongly contested the idea of barren land, with one community member simply stating, "There is no such thing as barren land". Many members reflected on this by discussing how the so-called wasteland plays a critical role in the preservation and regeneration of vegetation, wildlife, water resources, and food systems.

Commenting on historical issues, a participant shared that the summary settlement of unsettled land (under the Rajasthan Lands Summary Settlement Act, 1953) was primarily for the land held by the kings of the region. People did not hold much land as they were pastoralists who moved with their livestock. Consequently, the rights of communities over pasture lands and *Orans* were never formally recognised in many cases.

Community members observed that *Orans* in the Thar region are regarded as forests. They are not planted by anyone; rather, they appear naturally. With much humility, they articulated that local communities merely assume the responsibility of preserving the *Orans*. Further, they lamented that their ancestors never anticipated that the government or other agencies would encroach upon their sacred lands. As a result, not all *Orans* were officially recorded during the land recording exercise conducted by the government several decades ago – making them vulnerable to appropriation in the current context.

2.2 Institutional Apathy and Limitations

While conflicts and contestations are normal to large-scale projects, it is the absence or lack of accessible and fair redressal mechanisms that enables skewed violation of the rights of the disadvantaged. This section highlights institutional apathy towards contestations of community members and related issues.

An environmental researcher working with communities in South India highlighted how the absence of commons hampers the design of policies, regulations, and rules for their protection. They further indicated manipulation of data, often infringing the rights and interests of local communities. For instance, they illustrated how the livestock numbers are often under-reported, reducing the parcel of pasture lands to be reserved for grazing and livestock sustenance purposes.

A legal practitioner from Kachchh said that they don't have much expectations from the judiciary, as their experience with the courts has been poor. The proceedings are quite expensive, making them unaffordable for the community members. Members from pastoral communities of both regions further expressed reservations regarding the role of police. A participant lamented, "People have no platform to raise their concerns other than the court of laws or street protests".

The local political leader from Kachchh discussed the role of Gram Panchayats in the matter. He informed that preservation of environment and biodiversity are part of the Directive Principles of State Policy in the Indian Constitution. He shared, "While constitutional provisions exist to empower local administration and Gram Panchayats, these bodies remain largely ineffective due to the lack of actual 'subject devolution'. Although 29 subjects have been designated for local governance in practice, these remain largely theoretical." Consequently, he lamented the alienation of local bodies and grassroots governance institutions from local issues.

3. Impact on Local Communities

Social and economic systems in arid regions, historically, have been deeply integrated with natural ecosystems and climatic conditions. Consequently, major shifts in land-use patterns threaten indigenous social, economic, and cultural systems. Further, the unique ecological ecosystems of the desert regions, which are often poorly understood, face an existential threat. This section provides a summary of the discussion that highlights the impact of large RE development on local communities.

3.1 Livelihoods

Renewable energy development is shaping a significant shift in land-use patterns, curtailing access of communities to public wasteland, commons, pasturelands, water resources, and traditional mobility pathways for pastoral communities. Since vegetation and ecological reserves are typically concentrated in the immediate vicinity of the village in arid regions, when large tracts of land are enclosed for RE development, the local wildlife and livestock lose access to their natural food and water resources. A member from the community shared that as their livelihoods decline, there are few opportunities available for alternative livelihoods.

3.2 Natural Ecosystems and Biodiversity

Community members from that region shared how land use is intricately related to the regeneration of water sources and natural ecosystems. Since groundwater is highly saline, the region is dependent on the few centimetres of annual rainfall. *Khadeens* – natural or manmade depressions in land are a source of accumulation of rainwater which serve as pockets of moisture suitable for agriculture. *Orans* are naturally located in a manner that rainwater flows towards them – enabling decomposition of vegetation, enriching the soil.

These ecological and regenerative processes are threatened by major shifts in land-use, because of disruption of water flows as the land is levelled for RE development. Further, removal of vegetation from project sites, rise in hyperlocal temperature in case of solar PV

projects, and continuous noise is said to disrupt insects, reptiles, wildlife and avian species – further disrupting food chains and rejuvenation cycles.

3.3 Gendered Impact

The dialogue offered some nuanced insights into gendered impacts of renewable energy development, although the same are far from comprehensive because of poor and unbalanced gender representation amongst the participants, especially when it came to women from grassroots communities.

Although it is rare for women in the region to hold formal land titles in their names, they derive strong economic security when the household has a land title in their name. Particularly, the sale of produce from commons contributes to women's income in many households and lends a sense of financial security in a region highly prone to droughts and environmental adversities. The erosion of women's land-based livelihoods has also had a cascading effect on household dynamics. A conservationist from Gujarat observed that in regions like Kachchh and

Saurashtra, women previously relied on seasonal agricultural work during the rains to support their children's education and healthcare. The disappearance of these jobs due to environmental changes and land acquisition has left them financially dependent on male relatives, re-entrenching gender hierarchies.

The political leader from the Kachchh region of Gujarat added that some women have been forced to take up domestic work to make ends meet. However, these roles are often informal and poorly paid, exposing women to exploitative conditions. This transition from self-managed, land-based livelihoods to insecure labour has weakened their economic standing.

Several participants underlined that the financial autonomy women once exercised had allowed them a say in household savings and expenditure. The displacement of land-based livelihoods, therefore, is not just about loss of income but also about the erosion of women's influence in family-level decision-making.
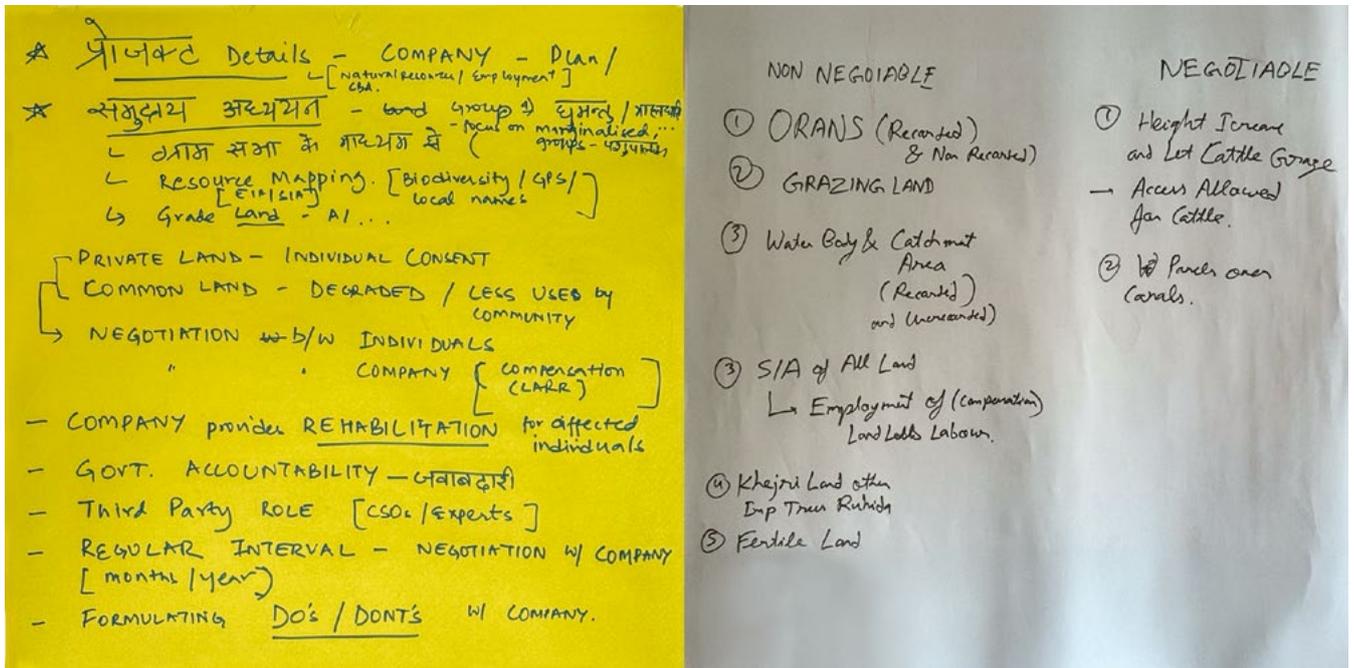
4. Way Forward

Evidently, renewable energy deployment strategies and mechanisms for land acquisition need a rethink if India is to achieve a clean energy transition while catering to the development needs of households and communities living on the margins. The dialogue offered some insights into the same, although comprehensive solutions and strategies that can effectively navigate the political economy of the systems may have remained elusive. Here, we attempt to summarise some solutions that emerged during this convening.

A. Implementation of safeguards and prudent process that protect the environmental and community rights was universal.
B. Facilitate the settlement of historical claims of communities for the commons.
C. Provide instruments and support to communities for short- and long-term impact assessment.
D. Leverage CSR funds for ecological restoration and remediations – including rejuvenation of water commons, plantation of native trees, etc.
E. Enable women to negotiate for themselves across spatial, economic, and ecological dimensions in the back drop of shifts triggered by RE development.