

# COMMON GROUNDS

## Developing a Shared Language for Inclusive Energy Transition

September 2025



# About Grid Advisory and Research

Grid Research is a public interest initiative working at the intersection of people, environment and systems. Our human- and ecology-centric approach seeks to facilitate transformative change in the domain of energy and climate governance. Our work focuses on providing support to state-level power sector institutions to enhance their performance and improve the delivery of services, advocacy for inclusive and climate-responsive governance reforms, and evidence-driven policy engagement.

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## INTRODUCTION

India is committed to achieving Net Zero emissions by 2070 (GOI, 2023), placing energy transition at the forefront of its national climate strategy. India has set an ambitious target of installing 500 GW of renewable energy (RE) capacity by 2030, out of which it has already installed 240 GW by June 2025 (MNRE, 2025). India has emerged as a global leader in clean energy development. However, this remarkable progress has come at significant social and environmental costs.

The RE expansion necessitated the diversion of more than 4,00,000 acres of land<sup>1</sup> for solar power development alone. This large-scale land conversion has led to widespread livelihood disruption, diversion of common properties including grazing land, obstruction of traditional pathways and pastoral tracks, cultural issues, and uneven distribution of benefits of new investments (Kiesecker et al., 2019; Shokrgozar & Girard, 2024; Singh, 2022a). As India pursues its 500GW target, a substantially larger area of land will be diverted from public, common and private holdings. This is leading to a silent rise in various conflicts around RE in India, which can derail its future ambitions to achieve Net Zero. Hence, aligning RE development (solar and wind), with social justice and environmental sustainability is crucial for a just transition.

India's RE deployment is concentrated in western arid

regions, particularly in Rajasthan and Gujarat, states often perceived as less-productive ecosystems, suitable for diversion without significant ecological impact. However, these desert ecosystems are complex, and local communities have developed a symbiotic relationship with them over the centuries. Therefore, it is necessary to meaningfully engage with the local communities to address the issues of social justice, ensuring their well-being, and to gain access to essential knowledge about local ecosystems, their functioning, and integrity.

This report is a synthesis of field work, consultations with stakeholders – particularly local communities from RE development epicentres in Rajasthan and Gujarat, and dialogues with a diverse audience consisting of farmers, pastoral leaders, lawyers, social activists, civil society organisations, and other experts. Based on our discussions, we have identified themes including private land and leasing practices, diversion of common land, impact on the livelihoods of local communities, impact on women, and environmental concerns. These themes may have been used for analysis, but they are intrinsically linked with each other. In fact, any intervention towards the just and equitable energy transition must be approached through systems thinking rather than isolating them from each other.

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<sup>1</sup> As per author's estimations





# 1. Procurement of Private Land

Land is at the centre of RE deployment in western parts of India, serving as a key driver of these regions' emergence as the epicentre of renewable energy development. State governments have facilitated unconventional leasing of agricultural land for RE plants by amending land revenue acts. However, the governments have left the land leasing open to private one-to-one negotiations, mediation by middlemen, and lopsided lease contracts between farmers and RE developers. This section highlights the concerns and perspectives voiced by various stakeholders in the context.

## 1.1 Lease Rent: A Black Box

Long-term lease rates have emerged as a major concern flagged by many stakeholders. The lease rates are often determined by the companies with opaque practices in the absence of standard methods. An impact assessment expert working with RE developers explained 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 RE hotspots, approaching farmers with khatedari land on behalf of the companies.

While one participant highlighted that in cases where a

small land parcel within large projects 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 lease prices are primarily market-determined, leaving farmers with limited bargaining power. A Rajasthan-based lawyer confirmed and further mentioned that neither the government nor the farmer has any role to play in determining the land lease rates. He mentioned that while the sub-divisional magistrate (SDM) is involved in this process at some steps, their role remains limited.

Determining fair lease rent is a complex process. The lease should consider the value of marketable produce from land, the value of non-marketable produce and services, including grazing ground for cattle, Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) from the trees, and other services. However, the current practices of lease rate determination are non-transparent and appear based solely on the value of marketable produce. Further, there is high information asymmetry in land transactions between farmers, land aggregators, and RE companies. Information asymmetry leads to exploitation of farmers by land aggregators and solar companies, which needs to be addressed through standardisation and taking steps to reduce information asymmetry.





## 1.2 Dilution of Safeguards

Land leasing is considered a transaction between private parties, without safeguards for farmers, landless agricultural labourers, and others dependent on these lands. Private leasing practices leave vulnerable groups without any safeguards or monetary compensations compared to standard land acquisition under the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 (LARR Act, 2013).

Several participants raised strong concerns regarding land governance and RE development. A political leader from Gujarat characterised the entire model as a land-grabbing exercise, noting that, as companies are not bound by land ceiling laws and have amassed massive land banks.

An impact assessment expert working with multiple RE developers observed that developers prioritise land transfer at the lowest cost and minimise risks of legal and other disputes. 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 adoption of land-leasing models.

The dilution of land laws regarding ceiling limits, homogenisation of land deals, and bypassing protections for landless families dependent on land have increased vulnerability among these groups. This erosion of safeguards, combined with opaque practices around it, has brought classical development injustices underneath the solar plate and wind turbines.





### 1.3 Information Asymmetry

Renewable energy planning operates as a largely top-down process, where communities receive minimal information about new solar plants, transmission lines, and associated infrastructure. Simultaneously, individuals with access to political and bureaucratic networks have an informational advantage over common people. Information asymmetry across stakeholder groups is a prevalent phenomenon in large development projects, especially in remote rural regions. As per participants, RE development in the Thar region of Rajasthan and the Kachchh region of Gujarat suffers from the same. The issues range from a lack of community awareness about their rights, the consequences of long-term land leasing for RE projects, and legal platforms to secure their rights, among other things.

A pastoral farmer and respected community leader from Rajasthan reported that farmers are often unaware of the contract terms they sign, and 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 the general awareness of rights and compensation benchmark for transmission towers erected on the privately-owned agricultural land. Consequently, many farmers are unable to claim the compensation they are legally entitled.

### 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 in the absence of a government-notified framework for the lease rates determination. Participants also raised serious concerns about the involvement of local police and other forces in suppressing the community's voices. 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 highlighted that RE developers incentivise local aggregators with money, offices, vehicles and promises of contracts in the project development and operations. Consequently, even local members of the community actively advance the benefactors' interests, often at the expense of their own community. He also highlighted that "other than the court of laws or protesting in the streets, people don't have any platform for raising their concerns".

## 1.5 Long-term Impact on Agricultural Land

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

Another participant noted 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 "makes it impossible for the developer to return the land in its original state". A local political leader from Gujarat also reiterated similar concerns, noting that the installation of towers was often followed by the spraying of pesticides, affecting the land cultivability. In the absence of a technical evaluation of land, the

difference in the conditions of land at the time of leasing and post-leasing remains unknown. In this case, the contracts stipulating land return with restoration to the 'original conditions' become elusive promises.

Solar panel deployment may significantly impact soil quality, including organic content and microbiomes. However, without a baseline assessment of soil quality and including it in the lease document, post-lease restoration is open to interpretation.

## 1.6 Return of the archaic practice of informality

Private land leasing is a relatively new land acquisition phenomenon that has become the primary practice in the Thar and Kachchh regions for acquiring land parcels for solar and wind projects. Leasing practices are informal, non-transparent, uneven, and governed by power asymmetries. Key issues in land leasing are the absence of standardised lease contracts, bypassing of land acquisition laws and related safeguards, and limited access to formal dispute resolution mechanisms.

The state government's presence remains surprisingly minimal despite the policy guidance and incentives rolled out for the promotion of RE. This absence, in lieu of ease of doing business, has increased informality in land-related transactions for RE projects. While a spectrum of middlemen exploits the governance gaps, developers suffer from undue price escalation, while farmers suffer from value extraction by the middlemen who benefit from information and power asymmetries.

## 2. Diversion of Commons

Common lands have been the primary casualty of development since independence. The state has an established practice that enables diversion of commons for developmental and industrial projects, declaring commons as 'wasteland'. The RE story follows similar patterns, with large tracts of commons and public land, including de facto commons, diverted for RE projects in Thar and Kachchh. Such diversions have been justified as 'appropriate' and 'efficient' use of wasteland for green transition.

Baka (2013) has shown the process through which the State produced wasteland and subsequently diverted it for the industrial production of renewable energy. The use of 'wasteland' – as it is ubiquitous for RE projects in Thar and Kachchh – negates the cultural, social, economic, and ecological values of common properties in desert ecosystems. The commons play an important role in the functioning of societies in arid regions and often play a vital role in sustaining life and livelihoods during droughts. Hence, developments in the Kachchh and Thar represent not simply a story of energy transition, but one



of territorial reordering in the backdrop of sustainability.

Further, the State unilaterally declares many common land parcels as state property despite contestations and historical discrepancies in land rights settlement. Such legal ambiguities allow the State to take over common lands and declare their customary users as “occupiers” Singh (2022b), and Stock (2023). The introduction of RE 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 waste land. This has led to new economic and livelihood concerns, large-scale cultural contestations and the disintegration of community-based governance of common properties.

Local communities have developed a symbiotic relationship with common properties and developed localised governance mechanisms in forms of customs and cultural practices to preserve their ecological integrity and services in the long run. Over time, these customs and rituals have trickled down into the everyday lives and folklore of local communities. Hence, the diversion of commons in desert regions often evokes emotional responses from local communities. Many of them find classifying commons as wasteland as an insult to their beliefs and customs.

The 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 reflected on this by discussing how the so-called wasteland plays a critical role in preserving and regenerating vegetation, wildlife, water resources, food systems, and their own life.

Unfortunately, communities lacked the legal and

bureaucratic awareness about land record formalisation until the state used those land records to disrupt their relationship with the common properties. One of the participants is the convening observed 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.”

The community members observed further that Orans<sup>2</sup> in the Thar region are regarded as natural deities. 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. Consequently, not all Orans were officially recorded during the government land recording exercise decades ago – making them vulnerable to current appropriation.

The legal scaffolding of common properties as government land and classifying as wasteland serve as key instruments for diversion of commons for RE. However, these policies of diversions of commons through legal and political scaffolds have resulted in both material and cultural anxieties among local communities. While communities experience anxiety, they lack political, organisational, and legal capability to resist large scale diversion of commons for RE.

### 3. Social impacts of Renewable Energy

Social and economic systems in arid regions are deeply integrated with natural ecosystems, especially common properties, due to climatic conditions. Communities shaped their lives and livelihoods around the natural ecosystems and fostered co-existence. Any change in land patterns threatens social, economic, and cultural systems developed over centuries. Hence, unilateral

classification of commons as wasteland has a significant impact on local livelihoods, social and cultural institutions, and other practices. While the land-use patterns shift, affect all desert communities, the impact vary significantly across groups and sub-groups. While a significant number of people have gained economic opportunities from investments in RE, the livelihood of vulnerable and

<sup>2</sup>Orans are scared grooves in western Rajasthan, which have higher tree density, biodiversity, and serves as oasis in the dessert.



marginalised social groups dependent on commons are either lost or under major threat.

### 3.1 Livelihoods

Rainfed agriculture and pastoralism are principal livelihoods in the arid regions. However, pastoralism becomes more important than agriculture for most of the families due to the seasonal nature of agriculture, low productivity of agricultural land, and the threat of droughts. Beyond these two, many families depend on collecting fruits and vegetables from common lands, wool making, weaving clothes and traditional livelihoods. The entire range of livelihoods in these regions is linked to the commons and agricultural land. RE development is shaping significant land-use patterns shift, curtailing access of communities to public land, commons, pasturelands, water resources, and pastoral tracks.

Land diversion creates multiple impacts on the livelihoods of marginalised groups. First, the landless farmers previously cultivated common and government land by obtaining a temporary permit from the revenue department. However, diversion of commons and

government land for RE plants leaves these farmers without any alternatives. Second, common, government, and private land is a major source of fodder required for cattle. Previously, local communities did not have to worry about the fodder, and their dependence on market fodder was minimal. As commons and other land were diverted for RE development, fodder availability became scarce, increasing their dependency on markets for the procurement of fodder.

Unfortunately, pastoral households have responded to the 'fodder crisis' by reducing their herd size significantly. It has a significant impact on dairying, wool, knitting and other activities associated with pastoralism, pushing many families into poverty. Third, many artists and communities in Thar were dependent on collecting NTFP and selling them in the market for their livelihood. But increased solar and wind plants have significantly impacted these collectors. Most importantly, the groups dependent on the collection of NTFP were mostly from marginalised communities, particularly women, who had to bear a disproportionate negative impact of RE.

Lastly, the solar and wind parks have severed traditional pastoral tracks and access to the common properties,





resulting in increased hardships, marginalisation, and income loss for women and marginalised communities. A community member shared that as their livelihoods decline, fewer alternative livelihood opportunities remain available.

### 3.2 Impact on Women

The dialogue offered nuanced insights into gendered impacts of RE development, although these remain far from comprehensive due to poor and unbalanced gender representation amongst the participants, especially grassroots community women.

While women in the region rarely hold formal land titles, they derive strong economic security when the households possess 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 added that some women have been forced into 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 emphasised that the financial autonomy women once exercised had allowed them a voice in household savings and expenditure. The displacement of land-based livelihoods, therefore, represents not just income loss but also the erosion of women's influence in family-level decision-making.

Increased penetration of 'money' and shrinking opportunities for women have led to further marginalisation of women both within the household and outside it. Women have become more dependent on men after losing their income from activities like collecting



NTPF, dairying, and knitting, while also losing shared spaces to socialise with other women, leading to their psychological isolation within homes. Unfortunately, women's issues do not appear on formal forums like convenings, requiring sustained engagement to empower them within a new economic paradigm.

### 3.3 Natural Ecosystems and Biodiversity

Renewable Energy often comes with a green veil, but the ground experiences show that it has a ruinous effect on local flora and fauna, water resources, land productivity and human-nature relationships. Community members from Kachchh and Thar reported a reduction in type of grasses and other local vegetation due to construction, transportation, and other RE-related activities in their regions. Further, they shared that there is a sharp increase in animal deaths due to road accidents, destruction of their natural habitats, and loss of their breeding grounds.

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

These ecological and regenerative processes are threatened by major shifts in land-use, due to water flow disruption as the land is levelled for RE development. Further, removal of vegetation from project sites, hyperlocal temperature increases in solar PV projects, and continuous noise reportedly disrupt insects, reptiles, wildlife and avian species – further disrupting food chains and rejuvenation cycles.

## 4. Informality, Opacity, and Hierarchy in Conflict Around RE

Conflicts and contestations are inherent to large-scale projects, and institutional and policy mechanisms evolve over time to address these conflicts. These institutional mechanisms represent a hard-won battle by communities and civil society over 70 years. However, most of these institutional safeguards do not apply to RE projects. Hence, RE projects do not need to assess their impact on the environment or communities. This implies that negative externalities of RE development are not identified before project execution, and when challenges arise, businesses are forced to rely on informal mechanisms to resolve conflicts and safeguard their investments and returns. An environmental researcher working with communities in South India highlighted how the absence of community participation hampers the design of policies, regulations, and rules for their protection.

The absence of institutional mechanisms to navigate conflicts often results in the violation of the rights of vulnerable sections of society. Further, these institutional mechanisms mandate the project developer to report data on various dimensions such as impact on the environment, livelihoods, biodiversity, and others. However, it is true that project developers often

manipulate data<sup>3</sup> and make unsubstantiated claims to justify that the benefits from projects outweigh the losses. Despite it, communities often contested such data at appropriate formal forums. However, there are no such opportunities for communities in the case of RE in the absence of institutional mechanisms to assess socio-economic and ecological effects, and project developer claims of substantial gains are assumed without any scrutiny.

In fact, community practitioners feel frustrated with the judiciary in the absence of laws around conflicts in RE. A legal practitioner from Kachchh said that they don't have much expectations from the judiciary, as their experiences with the courts have been poor. They claim that court proceedings are expensive, making them unaffordable for community members. Therefore, communities are left with no avenues to raise their concerns before the authorities. In this scenario, they are only left with the option of political manoeuvring through popular protests. A participant lamented, "People have no platform to raise their concerns other than the court of laws or street protests." Hence, the institutional vacuum is often filled by informal actors, opaque practices and information asymmetries, which

<sup>3</sup>For instance, the same researcher illustrated how the livestock numbers are often under-reported, reducing the parcel of pasture lands to be reserved for grazing and livestock sustenance purposes.

often result in more conflicts and unjust methods.

We argue that Gram panchayats can play a crucial role in navigating and mitigating these conflicts through their active involvement with solar developers within the framework of the Panchayati Raj Acts. A local political leader from Kachchh discussed the role of Gram Panchayats in these matters, arguing that,

*“Preservation of environment and biodiversity are part of the Directive Principles of State Policy in the Indian Constitution. 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.”*

Strengthening local governance structures, extending environmental and social safeguards, and ensuring accessible and effective dispute resolution mechanisms are key to addressing community concerns and environmental injustices in the process.





## 5. Way Forward

Evidently, renewable energy deployment strategies and land acquisition mechanisms require a fundamental rethinking if India is to achieve a clean energy transition while meeting the development needs of households and communities living on the margins. The dialogue offered insights into the potential solutions, although comprehensive strategies that can effectively navigate the political economy of the systems may have remained elusive. Here, we summarise the solutions that emerged through discussions during the convening and our fieldwork.

### 5.1 Reducing Information Asymmetry

Information asymmetries are inherent to large-scale projects, particularly in the power sector, which provides the long-term planning and execution horizon of 7-10 years for transmission lines, development of solar parks, and related infrastructure. In the absence of LARR 2013 safeguards, actively addressing information systems about future development prospects, benchmarks for compensation, and fair rights of transacting parties can address many of the inherent conflicts. Initiatives designed for awareness and capacity building may significantly reduce exploitation by economic and political elites, and the horde of agents or middlemen scavenging the communities for extracting monetary benefits. Consequently, information and legal support centres may play an effective role in checking the adverse risks of informality induced in the RE projects' land acquisition and leasing.

### 5.2 Coordinated, Transparent and Participative CSR

The epicentres of renewable energy development are typically occupied by multiple investors, public and private companies, and government institutions such as state nodal agencies for the promotion of RE. Many of these agencies carry mandates to invest in the development of communities under CSR. However, it is evident that such investments are sparse, lack coordination, and are largely non-participatory. Consequently, CSR investments fail to yield satisfactory development outcomes for the local communities. Often, interventions do not align with community needs and aspirations, resulting in

ineffective program spending that neither empowers the local communities nor builds their capabilities to navigate the complexities of an economic transition in the backdrop of RE development. Developing a governance framework that facilitates transparent and coordinated CSR investments guided by community participation may serve as a radical development strategy powered by corporate-public-community partnership.

### 5.3 Inclusive and Participator Renewable Energy Siting

It is evident that land is deeply interlinked with social, economic and cultural practices of communities in arid regions. Beyond that, communities also offer deeper insights on local ecosystems which can be pertinent for preserving critical biological links that can reduce risks for wildlife (including avian species), hydrological disruptions, and disruption of rejuvenate systems. Consequently, these insights can also aid in the preservation of social, cultural and economic systems - reducing contestations around RE development and associated conflicts. A collaborative RE siting exercise shall be required to look beyond the de jure status of land and recognise customary rights of people, including those who may lack land titles, to assert any rights over land. Particularly, collective community rights should gain precedence, enabling a sustained development of communities and renewable energy. Beyond community inclusive approaches, gender inclusive approaches shall ensure that marginalisation of women in the local communities can be prevented.

### 5.4 Gender Justice: Spatial and Economic

Women are, for the most part, the invisible citizens quietly navigating the adversities of India's clean energy transition. A transition from an agro-pastoral economy to a consumption economy against the backdrop of RE development marginalises the role of women across primary, secondary, and tertiary economic activities. These shifts further impound the agency of women by usurping their material and non-material space for socialising, exchanging ideas and information, and

building solidarity amongst themselves.

A gender-just RE transition would demand preserving material spaces through inclusive and participatory siting practices, while also enabling urbanisation of RE epicentres shaped by women's imagination and

aspirations. It is incumbent upon all stakeholders of the Indian RE story - including public policy, line departments, government bodies, and developers - to address and mitigate the erasure of women in the clean energy transition journey.



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