

Community Forest Management: A Case Study of Nagaland, India

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Abstract:

Nagaland, a tribal state located in the North-eastern part of India is comprised of eighteen tribes with almost 80% of the natural resources under the control of the communities. It has a rich biodiversity with abundant forest resources.

Agriculture has been the main economy and forest the main source of livelihood for these communities. The different Naga communities according to their own specific administrative and institutional structures manage these resources. In recent years, however, there has been a gradual shift in the role of community forest management (CFM).

As a result of several structural and socio-economic changes in the region, the significance, importance, relevance and implications of CFM are major issues that need to be addressed urgently. The introduction of modern institutions for the management and control of natural resources and the shift from a traditional self-affluent economy to a market oriented economy make this 'commons' untenable. The 'commons' which has been managed by vibrant traditional socio-cultural institutions has gradually become ineffective for the above reasons. The current trend depicts an increasingly shrinking role of the community forest management hinting at an undesirable and uncertain future. It also threatens the sustainability of the forest resource and has raised adverse sustainable livelihood issues for these communities.

In this context, this paper attempts to explore CFM in Nagaland. It engages three major issues related to CFM. Firstly, it explores the role of the village/community institutions vis-à-vis forest management—centering on the structural differences and changes. Secondly, it investigates the relationship between CFM and sustainable livelihood of the rural communities in the context of rapid socio-economic changes. Finally, it examines the sustainability of forest resources in the face of market economy and globalisation.

Key Words: *Forest, Community*

Introduction

The marginalization of communities as managers of forestland has contributed to deforestation and environmental degradation in many parts of the world. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, indigenous institutions came under increased pressure as new government sponsored organizations and agencies were formally empowered to oversee resource management. Cultural change has also disrupted the values, beliefs, leadership patterns, and institutional mechanisms that guided resource use in the past. Economic transitions have played an important role in altering resource use practices, especially as cultures that were once predominantly subsistence-based move towards more cash oriented economies. Finally, demographic expansion has contributed to increasing pressure on community-based natural resource management systems, both from internal needs for agricultural land, as well as competition from migrant families.

Unlike other regions of India, administrative control of forest in Northeast India is predominantly by community with much of the forests listed as “unclassified”. Two thirds of the region’s forests are controlled and managed by the rural people. As in other parts of India, the state forest departments administer Reserved and Protected forests. Indigenous Cultural Institutions (ICIs), such as village councils, chieftainships, and councils of elders have been protecting their forest resources, based on small and homogenous village that supports collective needs and interests.

According to an official estimate based on satellite images (Report of Forest Survey of India), the Northeastern region has 163,799 km² of forest, which is about 25 percent of the total forest cover in India. The forest cover is approximately 64 per cent of the total area of the region. Within the region again the extent of forest cover varies across the states, in comparison to 19.4 percent for India as a whole. In some Northeastern states, such as Nagaland and Meghalaya, over 90 percent of the forests are under direct control by traditional village institutions, communities and private individuals, a sharp contrast from other parts of India where state forest departments retain legal and territorial control of the vast majority of forests areas for decades.

Nonetheless, this community based forest management systems are under growing external pressure from national and state governments and the private sector, as well as being internally undermined by cultural change and commercialization. As traditional institutional authority is diminished, indigenous forest conservation mechanisms weaken, leading to forest fragmentation, degradation, and loss. The privatization of once “communally” held forests and watersheds typically leads to their deforestation and conversion to agriculture. As the landscape of the uplands of the Northeast is denuded of forest cover, much of the unique flora and fauna disappear. The region’s forests are experiencing an extensive degradation, and outright deforestation and forest conversion. The

management of the forest has suffered in the recent past due to pressure on land, decreasing cycle of shifting cultivation, exploitation of forest for timber and lack of scientific management strategy. Shifting cultivation has been an important factor responsible for much of the forest being classified as “open forest” ,especially in states like Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland, where much of the land designated as “unclassified” forest are part of the jhum or swidden pool.

This paper focuses on one of the state of Northeast India, viz., Nagaland. Nagaland, a tribal state located in the North-eastern part of India is comprised of eighteen tribes with almost 80% of the natural resources under the control of the communities. It has a rich biodiversity with abundant forest resources. Agriculture has been the main economy and forest the main source of livelihood for these communities. There are more than 32 tribal groups in Nagaland with their specific traditional customs and land tenures. Given the diverse land practices and traditional customary laws of the different tribal communities in Nagaland, this paper studied three tribal communities viz., Aos, Sumis and Angamis of Nagaland.

In recent years, there has been a gradual shift in the role of community forest management (CFM). As a result of several structural and socio-economic changes in the region, the significance, importance, relevance and implications of CFM are major issues that need to be addressed urgently. The introduction of modern institutions for the management and control of natural resources and the shift from a traditional self-affluent economy to a market oriented economy make this ‘commons’ untenable. The ‘commons’ which has been managed by vibrant traditional socio-cultural institutions has gradually become ineffective for the above reasons. The current trend depicts an increasingly shrinking role of the community forest management hinting at an undesirable and uncertain future. It also threatens the sustainability of the forest resource and has raised adverse sustainable livelihood issues for these communities.

This paper attempts to explore CFM in Nagaland. It engages three major issues related to CFM. Firstly, it explores the role of the village/community institutions vis-à-vis forest management—centering on the structural differences and changes. Secondly, it investigates the relationship between CFM and sustainable livelihood of the rural communities in the context of rapid socio-economic changes. Finally, it examines the sustainability of forest resources in the face of market economy and globalisation.

Governance and local institutions

The aim of this section is to provide a details account on the socio-political institutions that deals with the management of natural resources (forest). It is an attempt to study the relationship between man and nature and the use, control and management of natural resources. It also highlights the similarities and contradictions in the management patterns of the different communities of Nagaland. It explores the role of the village/community institutions vis-à-vis forest management—centering on the structural differences and changes. Traditionally, there were different forms of village institutions and different systems of governance existed among the Nagas. The difference have been observed and documented by the colonial administrators in their ethnographic works and official reports. Traditional village institution of some of the major tribes may be mentioned here. Ao tribe has a ‘republic’ form of village institution, where the elected or selected members formed the decision making body of the affairs of the village. Angami tribe has a more ‘democratic’ form of governance, where the village elders decide the affairs of the village. Sumi tribe has a chieftainship system of governance, wherein, the chief is the supreme authority in all matters. Konyak tribe also has a chieftainship system, here, the *Ang* or king of the group act as the supreme head in the governance of the village. In particular, this section deals with the role of the Village Council in the management of natural resources among the Aos, Sumis and Angamis groups of Nagaland.

To understand the management of natural resources in the case of Nagaland, it is important that the *land* and *forest* are not treated as separate categories. This is because the people do not necessarily differentiate these two resources in their use-value and control. The land is thus, also the forest and vice versa. Keeping this in mind, this section methodologically does not differentiate these two categories separately. Rather, the two terms are use interchangeably and with a same meaning and value.

Land is the most valuable natural resources that provide livelihood and subsistence for the rural population in Nagaland. Most rural and semi-rural populations are directly or indirectly dependent on the land for subsistence and livelihood. Thus, their relation with the land is not merely for material and economic purposes, it is a social and religious one. In the pre-modern times, the human activities are intrinsically link with the land or nature. Historically the land remains under the control of the people through constitutional provisions. As a result, the ownership of land in Nagaland is quiet different from the other states of India. This is one of the important features with regard to the ownership of natural resources. The traditional system of ownership of land still exists and formed a vibrant tradition in the management and control of natural resource.

Traditional community-based governance and ownership of land is one of the significant features of Nagaland. The village community owned and regulated the land and its resources according to the traditional customs and practices. The

pattern of ownership of land is complex and diverse. Every village has their peculiar system of ownership of land and the laws that regulates it. There are variations in the forms or patterns of traditional institutions and practices vis-à-vis the management and ownership of land among the different groups or tribes.

In general, the traditional system of ownership of land in Nagaland is fundamentally of three types, village land, clan/khel land and private land. In recent time, the state government also owned land for the construction of government institutions and for developmental and conservation purposes. Traditional system of ownership of land is highly complex and elaborate on the one hand and highly diverse among the different groups on the other. In the case of the some groups, there are village councils or elected representatives of elders who regulate the village affairs and control the village and its resources. In most cases, there are village land, own and regulate by the village, there are clan land, owned and manage by the clan, and the individual land, owned and cultivate by the individuals. This form of land ownership is common among these groups or tribes.

The traditional practice of the Semas, Changs and Konyaks is quite different from the other groups of Nagas. Traditionally the right of ownership of land among these groups is solely in the hand of the chiefs. The chiefs own the land and its resources and therefore, act as the guardian of the land and its resources. He allocates the land for cultivations to the members of the village according to the needs of the member concerned. He maintains the laws of the village and thereby determines the rights and privileges of the people. The other groups or tribes such as the Aos, Angamis, Lothas, Rengmas etc. have a more democratic practice in the ownership of land. Most individual own a piece of land for cultivation and have the control over the use of the products of the land. The management is in the hand of the village council or elders with a village headman. This is because all matters concerning the land disputes and use for cultivation are done by the village council. The village council decides the site for cultivation in the case of the Aos and enacts laws relating to the use of land and its resources.

In the attempt to codify and bring a uniform law in the administration of the village, the Government of Nagaland passed the Nagaland Village and Area Council Act in 1978. It was through this Act that a Village Council was established in every village in Nagaland. According to the Act, "Village Council shall consist of members, chosen by villagers in accordance with the prevailing customary practice and usages." This provision of the Act is important, in the sense that it allows the Village Council to practice their specified customary laws in the village administration. The Village Council will also choose a member as Chairman and a Secretary of the council. The Village Council were given the administration Power and Duties at the local or village level. This change in the administrative structures has little impact so far, and this paper argues that it is

because of the well established and age-old traditional customary practices of the tribal villages.

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The Case of Ao Nagas

Among the Ao Naga, the pattern of the distribution of land(forest) for cultivation is an elaborate and complex and is regulate by *Putu Menden*. Around 75% of village populace still practices the traditional system of agriculture i.e, Jhum or shifting cultivation and there is no terrace system of cultivation. The jhum is the chief form of agricultural practice of the villages and it involves complicated customary laws to regulate the practice of Jhum cultivation. The village land is called *Yimli*, *Yim* means 'village' and *li* means 'land' and this word applies to all the Ao inhabited areas. The land pattern in the village can be divided into cultivable land, forestland and inhabited land. An accurate area of the village and extent of the land pattern is not available since survey being not conducted so far. The cultivable land formed the largest area of land and is own by the clans, khels and individuals. The ownership pattern is imperative in order to understand the land dynamics of the village. The clans land is a common property for the all members of the clan. All members of the clan have equal rights and privileges of the use and products of the land. Like wise, the khel land is a common property for all members group of a particular khel, and the each member have equal rights and privileges in the use and products of the land. In the case of the individual land, the individual has rights to use the land but his rights are not exclusive, the Village Council has the rights to impose certain rules in the use of the land. In the case of the Aos, the *Putu Menden* or the Village Council regulates the clan, khel and individual land in accordance with the traditional customs and laws.

Putu Menden/Village Council decides the site or plot for cultivation every year. After the selection of a particular site the villagers are informed and all the villagers are required to cultivate only in the selected site. No villager is allowed to cultivate in other site or land even in his or her individual land. The decision of the Village Council is final and any one failing to abide by the Council's decision entails serious fines and penalty. Such measures are taken keeping in mind the

fertility of the soil in a rotational practice of cultivation and to protect the forest for future use. After a particular site selected, the Village Council requests the *Ao/a* (the traditional religious head of the village) to perform the customary rites to cultivate in the selected site. Unless the *Ao/a* give his consent or performs the necessary customary ritual no villager is permitted to cultivate the land.

This particular site is cultivated for two consecutive years after which the entire process of selecting a new area or site begins all over again. In the olden days the cyclic process of cultivation was 11 years but today the cycle has increased to 12 years. This trend is widespread in the Ao region and reflects interesting socio-economic changes in the region. This increase in the year of fallow of land for cultivation is an irony given the increasing population. One of the reasons for this irony is the changing professions of the people. More and more people are migrating to Kohima (the capital of Nagaland) and Dimapur (the hub of the Nagaland's economy) as government servant and other professions and thereby abandon their traditional practice of cultivation in their village.

Every village has their peculiar system of ownership of land and laws that regulates it. In the case of Chuchuyimlang village, there are two types of land, viz., the clan land and the individual land. One of the peculiar features of Chuchuyimlang village is the case of landless villagers. These landless villagers are those who settled late in the village. These latecomers were given land to cultivate by the landowner clans if they request the particular clan landowners who give them permission. The late comers who cultivate on the land provided by the early settlers call them 'father.' The nature of the management of the land (forest) can be examined through the nature of the traditional ownership of the land and customary laws attached to it. According to the Village Council the villagers are not allow to cultivate any land apart from the land allotted by the Village Council. This customary practice not only protests the random cutting of forest in the village but also reduce pressure on land.

In Waromong village there are no landless villagers. Each villager owned a plot of land and satisfied their basic needs. There are also village land, clan land, and individual land. Like all the surrounding villagers, the main pattern of cultivation is jhum cultivation. Village Council decides the site for cultivation after consulting the Unger Menden/Upper House and lays down the rules and regulation of the village. The village cultivates in two sites every year. The selection of two sites is basically because of the large population of the village (four khel). One site is cultivated by two khels each and the other by other two khels. The cyclic process of the jhum cultivation is two years in one site. The exact cycle of cultivation is not known in this case because of the complex two khels and two site processes. Nevertheless, it is known that the number of households under cultivation has decreased considerably in the recent years. Around 70% of the village households still practice the traditional system of agriculture i.e., jhum or shifting cultivation and there is no terrace system of cultivation. The jhum is the chief form of agriculture practice of the village. Following the traditional customary laws

and regulation the *Putu Menden*/Village Council regulates the practice of jhum cultivation i.e., a particular site is selected each year for all the villagers to cultivate and even individual landowners has no say once the decision is taken by the Village Council. The main crops cultivated are rice, ginger, yam, potato, chilly, etc. The jhum cycle in the bygone days was 10 years but now the cyclic process of jhum cultivation has increased to 14-15 years. The reason is the migration of the villagers to the nearby towns.

In most cases, especially the communities that practice on shifting cultivation the distribution of land for cultivation have strict customary laws and socio-political institutions to regulate it. The practice and customs of the land distribution for cultivation reflects their indigenous knowledge of conservation of natural resources. One of the examples of conservation may be mention here, the Village Council or the chief of the village decide the site or land for cultivation in a village every year based on the tradition and customs of that village. No individual cultivators would be allows to cultivate in a separate plot of land even in his or her own individual land. This practice has much significance with regard to the conservation, ecological balance and livelihood of the people. The purpose of selecting one site of the entire community is important because of the following reasons:

The traditional practice of selection of site or plot for cultivation is closely link with the village administration. The relation in the selection of site for cultivation and the village institution is not difficult to understand. As mention above, the importance of selection for cultivation for livelihood and conversation requires a strong and vibrant village institutions and customs to regulate the system. The pattern of land distribution therefore involves the question of livelihood, subsistence, and ecological balances.

The Case of Sumi Nagas

Given the traditional system of chieftainship pattern of administration, the dynamics of the ownership of land(forest) is quite different from the other tribes of the Nagas. To understand the ownership of land, therefore, a critical consideration of the administrative system is important.

In the case of the Sumi group, the Akukao (Village Chief) owns and controls almost the entire village land, though there are other individual lands also. In Lumami village, the Chief owns about 60% of the land and the 40% are owned by a handful of other villagers. Under this system, there are many landless villagers, who depend on the chief for their livelihood. Every year the Akukao (Chief) allocates his land for the landless villagers to cultivate. The landless villagers call him 'father' as a paternalistic head of the village. They cultivate the land and in return give some of the produce to him. This system reflects the feudal mode of production, where the feudal lord acts as the guardian and 'father' of his subjects. The right of ownership of land, apart from the Akukao, would

depend on the clans who first formed the village along with the then Akukao. The Chief along with his Chochomi or Council members decides the site of cultivation. The Akukao also enjoys free labour from the entire village twelve (12) times a year and fine imposed on those failing to do so. Like land pattern in other Naga communities, the village land pattern can be divided into three major segments viz., the cultivable land, the forestland and the inhabited land. The cultivable land constituted the large area of land with some large forestland also.

There is only one type of ownership of land in Awotsakilimi village i.e., individual land. One of the peculiar features of this village is that there is no village or clan land. There are a few landless villagers and most of the land is own by the *Akukao*. The ownership of land in the Sumi community reflects the extent of the powers of the *Akukoa* in the social structure of the village. Like the other landless villagers of the Naga society, these villagers depend entirely on the *Akukao* for their livelihood. The landless villagers are either the late comers or those who sell off their land. The existence of landless villages is not indicated in most of the writing on the Naga society. This is probably reason, why the Naga society is understood as an egalitarian society till today. There is both terrace cultivation and jhum cultivation in the village, but jhum is the major form of cultivation.

According to the Council, the village terrace cultivation was practiced by few villagers and was popular in bygone days. The practice died out with the problems of irrigation. The terrace lands are now under fallow. Jhum cultivation is carried out in one site for two years. The cyclic process of the site is ten or eleven years but, in recent years, there is a decrease in cultivation and therefore, the period of fallow is more then before.

The pattern of land ownership in Sutemi is completely individual land ownership. Landowners are those who had settled in the village first along with the *Akukao*. There are also others landowners those who have bought land from the first landowners. Like most the Sumi villages, Sutemi village also have landless villagers who depend entirely on the *Akukao* of the villages. There are around 20 landless households. This in a way reflects the *Akukoa* structure of land ownership as a relation of the subject and lord. There are both terrace and jhum cultivation. The site for the jhum cultivation is decided by the Village Council and is cultivated once a year.

The Case of Angami Nagas

In the case of the Angamis the land of the village is individually own and rarely clan or village land. The land is distributed into forest land, terrace fields, land of jhum cultivation and village occupied land. The ownership of land may be classified as common land (this land refers to the Reserve forest), the village land, clan land and individual land. There are two village forest and is managed by the Village Council. And the clan land is managed by the clans. There are no landless people in the village and the each household cultivates two acres of

land. The main occupation of the people of Sechuma village is agriculture and the people practice both terrace and shifting cultivation. According to the village council, 90% of the population is totally dependant on agriculture even today. Other sources of income for the villagers are gardening and cutting of stones or bowlers.

There are no landless people in Mima village and there is no village/community land in the village. The land which is the main resources for the livelihood of the people can be divided into three types, Khel land, Clan land and individual land. The people practice both terrace and jhum cultivation and they cultivates in their own individual lands. As stated above, the rampant cutting down of trees for commercial purpose is a major degradation of environment and though the effects are not yet felt by the people. Nearly, 600 truckloads of firewood are sold in the village reflecting the rapid disappearance of forest. Village Council attempted to stop this activity to conserve the forest but failed since they have no power to regulate the land which is owned by individuals.

The main occupation of the people of Mima village is agriculture and $\frac{3}{4}$ of the population are engaged in agricultural activities even today. There are more than 300 households who are totally dependant on agriculture and relations economy. Some other economical activities that are practice in the village are making of charcoals, cutting of firewood and the production of honey. All these commercial activities are done for their livelihoods and subsistence. According to the villagers, these are the only sources through which they support their children's expenditures and firewood and charcoal business are the main sources of income for the entire villagers. Some 40% of the population is totally dependant on the income generates from honey produced. The people also produced crops and fruits and sale in the Kohima markets.

Village Council and the Management of Forest

In Nagaland local communities have their own specific institutions and laws according to their traditions in the management of natural resources. A comparative analysis of the local institutional structure and functioning in the state of Nagaland reflects that forest as an important resource is recognized but the measures and regulations taken by the local institutions are diverse. Sometime, the Village Councils fail to fulfil the desired goals for the specific property rights among different communities. Take the case of the Mima village, an Angami tribe of Nagaland, the Village Council fails to curd the people for cutting-down the trees because the land is individually own by the villagers. Here the Village Council has no power stop the individuals. While in the case of the Aos and Sumis, the Village Council has the power to regulate and decide the land for cultivations and the villagers and no individuals are allow to cultivate at other site, going against the decision of the Village Council invites fines or punishments.

Firewood extraction is another major factor in the degeneration of forest in Nagaland. Among the communities studied there are no much regulations in the firewood extraction. In the case of all the communities, the firewood extraction is done during the specific period and apart from the collection of fallen dry twigs and dry leaves, indiscriminate cutting down of trees is prohibited. However, there is no mechanism to regulate firewood extraction for the individuals in their own land in the case of the Angamis group. This is also because of the fact that it involves individual property rights and the Village Council has no power to curd the individual ownership rights. Excessive cutting-down of trees for the production of charcoal for commercial purpose is a major factor to the degeneration of forest in Mima village. But in the case of the Sumis and Aos, the Village Council has the power to imposed restrictions on the individuals even the private land, overriding the individual property rights.

Most of the Village Councils have adopted measures to check forest degeneration through the setting-up of Forest Committees, whose responsibility is to protect the forest. We find in the Sechüma village, the Forest Committees under the Village Council, who protest and manage the two village forests. The Council prohibits the cutting down trees in the village forest and punished who violates the rule. The Village Council also regulates indiscriminate livestock grazing, prohibition for grazing in specific periods and areas are also designated for the villagers. The setting-up of Forest Committees within the Village Council for the protection and management of forest is a significant innovation of the local institutions towards the protection of forest in Nagaland.

From the above analysis we may conclude that local institutions (Village Councils for this paper) act as an important forest management institutions in Nagaland to promote and protect the forest. Given the specific political history and the recognition of the traditional local institutions by the state as the managers of the natural resources and the sensitization of the degeneration of forest among local people seems to proof that local traditional institution can be more effective then the state in the management of natural resources provided with legal and managerial powers. But not all is well with the local institutions or Village Council as mentioned above. For this certain external intervention has to be adopted in tune with the local socio-economic situations to protest natural resources.

CFM and sustainable livelihood

Now, this section investigates the relationship between CFM and sustainable livelihood of the rural communities in the context of rapid socio-economic changes. As pointed out earlier, agriculture is the mainstay of the rural communities in Nagaland, this reflects the importance and close relation of the forests and livelihood. The economic activities that revolve round their agricultural activities produced specific forms of social and cultural institutions and customs to regulate and manage the land(forest). Industrialization and

urbanization are two important phenomena that have transformed the human relationship with land or nature.

A clear example of the impacts of the CFM with the changes socio-economic changes is the case of Mima village, an Angami village. Though there are no landless people in Mima village and there is no village/community land in the village. The land which is the main resources for the livelihood of the people can be divided into three types, Khel land, Clan land and individual land. The people practice both terrace and jhum cultivation and they cultivate in their own individual lands. The rampant cutting down of trees for commercial purpose is a major degradation of environment and though the effects are not yet felt by the people. Nearly, 600 truckloads of firewood are sold in the village reflecting the rapid disappearance of forest. Village Council attempted to stop this activity to conserve the forest but failed since they have no power to regulate the land which is owned by individuals.

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This case exemplified the problem of sustainable livelihood of rural villagers in future. Given the increasing consumptions and without any other sources of income the people are forced to cut-down trees for there needs and subsistence.

One main reason is to maintain a sustainable land and forest for the livelihood. This is particularly so given the rotational nature of cultivation and the productivity of the land. It is also because of the limited cultivable land for the community upon which they depend for livelihood. In previous days, the selection of one site or plot for the entire community has other practical advantages and also it was closely linked with the notions of conservation and sustainable livelihood. The practical reason that they see is to avoid the burning of the forest and leads to the devastation or degradation of the fertility of the soil for cultivation. One of the reasons for cultivating in a common plot of land provides security because the entire village men folk guarded the field from threats of wild animals. Another practical reason may be for assisting labour for one another in clearing the forest, guarding the field, carrying the grains after harvest etc.

Conclusion

Today the rich natural resources of Nagaland, which were once under the communities, are fast becoming commercialized. Now, the government had also become a chief agent in commercialization of the natural resources. All these market forces coupled with the increasing consumption level raises many questions regarding the community ownership and control of natural resources. For a sustainable forest resource in the face of market economy and globalisation decentralization of power to the village level is an important factor in the case of Nagaland. Among the traditional tribal societies, there are various value systems attached to the forest. However, the rapid socio-cultural changes and the market forces have little care for the traditional values that has preserved the resources till today. One of the answers for the effectiveness of management system, the preservation of forest and sustainable livelihood is the decentralization of power and providing legal rights and power to the communities.

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