



**TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH CONSULTANCY ON
“UNDERSTANDING FUNCTIONALITY OF JOINT FOREST MANAGEMENT
COMMITTEES FOR INDIAN SUNDERBANS CONSERVATION”**

28 January 2025

Background

Landesa’s [Coastal Livelihoods and Mangroves](#) project that started in 2022 aims to secure gender-equitable land and resource rights that establish incentives to protect mangroves over the long-term. With our local partners, Landesa is addressing laws and policies regarding mangrove forest tenure, land use planning, as well as climate mitigation and adaptation within the six project countries. The focus in India is on the Sundarbans where Gram Niyojan Kendra (GNK) together with support from Landesa launched the “Mangrove Forest Programme” (MFP) that works together with the West Bengal government. The Sundarbans is the world’s largest contiguous area of mangroves. The main goal of the programme is to empower local communities to protect and restore the mangroves through an inclusive approach and address the impacts of climate change. The MFP programme has multiple components focused on such aspects as strengthening mangrove tenure and governance among communities, improve ability to support household livelihoods options, and engage in policy dialogues with the government.

Overall, the Sundarbans has not experienced significant overall levels of mangrove loss. This is because there is poor accessibility, remoteness and topographical difficulty across most of the Sundarbans. Much of the disturbance in recent years has been from non-anthropogenic factors: climate change that has led to such transformations as rising sea level, intensified soil erosion, increasingly frequent cyclones and salinization (that reduces agricultural productivity). As a result, people have greater difficulty fishing, crabbing, and farming. These dynamics are push factors that encourage out-migration from the area. At the same time, there have been improvements in open forest cover in areas with village-led restoration activities (where proper site selection has been carried out). That said, most anthropogenic-induced degradation has occurred around the densely populated settlements that are very poor. It is in these densely populated areas of the buffer zones fringing protected areas that the Forest Department (FD) has sought to establish Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs) starting in 1993 in order to promote mangrove and biodiversity conservation as well as restoration while building a mangrove buffer against intensified climate change events. According to the government’s established rules, 33% of the positions of the JFMC governance body must be filled by women, and 40% of the positions must be filled by some combination of Scheduled Caste (SC) members, Scheduled Tribe (ST) members and women.

Evaluating the functionality of JFMCs helps the MFP identify specific gaps where capacity-building can improve mangrove tenure and governance. Capacity can be improved through training activities to develop resource management skills (for e.g., improving governance rules and implementation approaches, supporting collaborative relationships with the FD, developing

forest management plans, identifying access areas for women and men, creating nurseries and planting saplings, implementing any relevant silvicultural practices, and determining any protection zones) and also support any needed conflict resolution strategies for SCs, STs, women and other marginalized households. Addressing these gaps would enhance the effectiveness of mangroves management and conservation efforts in the Sundarbans while strengthening the resilience of local communities against the negative impacts of climate change. Ultimately, this study would help the project build a knowledge base of JFMC “good practices” that can be replicated elsewhere for sustainable conservation and community-led efforts in mangroves.

The MFP therefore aims to analyze the functionality level of JFMCs and the factors that explain the effectiveness of JFMCs in terms of how well they are able to meet key objectives in practice. These include not only conservation and restoration, but also livelihoods and income generation (through harvesting of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) in order to encourage local communities to carry out much needed forest restoration in areas damaged by cyclones. Earlier research on the effectiveness of current rules in Sundarbans JFMCs demonstrated that while the rules help to create incentives for forest conservation, there remain core issues such as restrictions on accessing economically valuable mangrove resources, and lack of trust between government officials and community members. These stand in the way of achieving good mangrove management and restoration.

In this context, there is a need to examine the details of how the prevailing mangrove tenure and governance arrangements in JFMCs are able to build an integrated set of effective incentives for community members to engage in sustainable management and restoration of mangrove ecosystems. These incentives need to support poverty alleviation, livelihoods and income generation of the very poor households who live in the Sundarbans so that households are further incentivized to support conservation and restoration. In addition, the assessment will address whether the tenure and governance arrangements support gender equality and social inclusion, and if so, it will identify the benefits and empowerment implications of such interventions. All in all, the assessment should be able to examine the socio-economic and institutional pathways of transformation that support good mangrove conservation and restoration. A comparative assessment across the selected villages will identify which factors explain good and medium functionality, and what challenges exist in those villages with low functionality. Ultimately, a set of good practices can be identified from the assessment, and a solid understanding of the challenges that need to be addressed will emerge. The assessment will focus on six villages (two with good, medium and weak functionality each) in South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. It is the largest district in West Bengal by area and accounts for almost 42% of India’s national mangrove cover.

Landesa is an international nonprofit dedicated to ending global poverty by securing land rights for rural communities around the globe. We are committed to a future in which all women and men who depend on land have secure, legal land rights – one of the most powerful tools for lifting oneself, one’s family, and one’s community out of poverty.

To achieve our vision, we partner with governments, civil society, and companies to develop pro-poor and gender-sensitive laws, policies and programs that have helped strengthen land rights for more than 720 million people in the last 5 years. Since our founding in 1981, we have worked in more than 65 countries throughout the world, with central office staff in the U.S.

(Seattle, Washington and Washington, DC) and regional programming in China, India, Liberia, Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Thailand.

Consultancy Scope of Work

Anticipated Period of Performance March to September 2025.

The assessment will aim to assess three key dimensions of JFMCs (see Figure 1 below): a) what are JFMCs aiming to achieve? b) what is the system of governance at work in JFMCs including their relationship with the FD and village panchayat? and c) what are the rules that are implemented by the JFMCs and how are they enforced? Across the six selected JFMCs, there will be an assessment of how the tenure and governance arrangements have changed in time, why they have changed, and what are the implications for both the various types of households who are part of JFMCs and for the mangrove forests they manage. Some contextual information on population, population density, socio-cultural and religious dynamics, poverty levels, agricultural and mangrove resource use patterns, fishing activities and migration patterns will be collected for each JFMC. Attention will be given in the assessment to how tenure rights are allocated to women, the very poor and the marginalized such as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs).

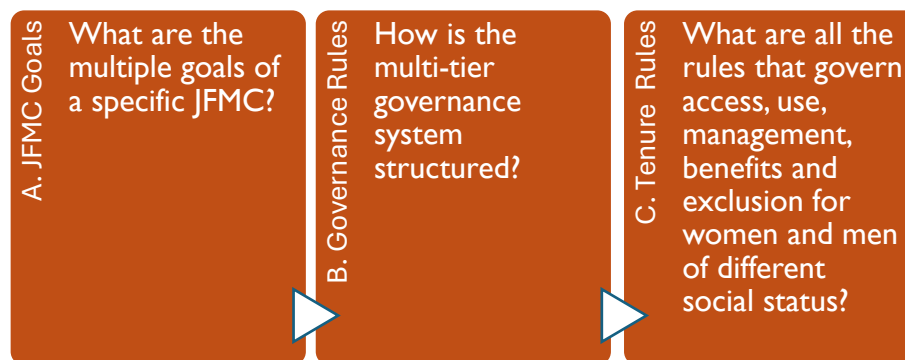


Figure 1: Three dimensions of JFMC tenure and governance

The following set of themes and associated questions will be addressed to achieve the consultancy objectives:

- A. **Multi-tier JFMC Governance.** When and how were these particular JFMCs first constituted? What is the term length of a JFMC? How can their relationship with the FD be characterized? How do they relate to other state or union government institutions? What relationship does the JFMC have, if any, with the Panchayati Raj institutions? Are they part of a multi-tiered governance arrangement? How are JFMC governance body members selected? What role do village members have in JFMC governance? How well does the JFMC represent the forest communities who depend on the mangroves?
- B. **JFMC Multiple Goals and Governance at Community Level.** How are the goals of the JFMCs established for e.g., on mangrove conservation, restoration, sustainable use, blue carbon and so on? How well do village members of the JFMC understand the purposes and functions of the JFMC? Are there members of the Executive Committee who hold significant authoritative power? Who is marginalized on the Executive

Committee? How well do they know who the Executive Committee members of JFMCs are? Specifically, how well do women members, the very poor, as well as SCs and STs understand all the governance dimensions of JFMCs? At what intervals are committee meetings convened, proceedings recorded in minutes and circulated? Do JFMC general members approve the rules? How does the committee monitor that the rules are implemented, carry out its actions and how does it ensure whether actions have been completed? How does the committee take follow-up decisions? Are any FD, NGOs or experts (academics) involved in the JFMC governance body? What training do JFMC Executive Committee or general members receive? What other support does the JFMC receive? How does the JFMC liaise with the FD? Is the JFMC relationship with the FD (or other government departments) a productive one? Does the FD review the rules created by the JFMC Executive Committee? What other forms of support (such as financial, nurseries or in-kind materials) does the FD provide? Is there any other government office or organization providing guidance on mangrove rehabilitation and restoration?

- C. **JFMC Operational Rules.** How does the JFMC Executive Committee develop various tenure rules for use, access, management, benefit-sharing (individual and collective) and exclusion? Are there different rules for women, the very poor or SC/STs? Can any mangrove (or mangrove-derived resources such as honey) be sold in markets? What is the duration of the tenure rights that JFMCs can assert? How secure are they? Will they be renewed over time? What are those specific tenure rules? Is there a formal mangrove forest management plan approved by FD? Does the formal management plan include plans to zone areas for full protection (from human use) and areas for mangrove rehabilitation and restoration? What process does the JFMC follow to change these rules? Who implements and monitors them? Are there patrolling groups with men and women? How are grievances and conflicts addressed? What financial resources are available to the JFMC for implementing the governance rules? If there are sales of NTFPs, does the income go to the JFMC or individual village members?
- D. **JFMC Level of Women's Inclusiveness, the Very Poor and SCs/STs.** How active are women and other marginalized groups in the management of the JFMC? How active are they in carrying out the activities of the JFMC? In what way are they beneficiaries of the JFMC rules? Do women and men carry out different types of JFMC activities? How do men characterise the relations between men and women in the JFMC? How do women characterise relations between men and women in the JFMC? Are there any stresses between women and men in the functioning of the JFMC? Can anything be done to improve the participation of either women or men in the JFMC? What suggestions do the various stakeholders have?
- E. **Climate Change Knowledge and Perception.** How do members of the JFMC committee learn about the types of climate change and how it affects their mangrove forests? From the government or experts? From direct observation? What is their understanding about how various types of climate change (e.g., slow increases in temperature or sea level rise, or incidence and intensity of cyclones, or changes in rainfall patterns) are affecting mangrove forest health, forest loss, restoration activities, biodiversity and wildlife conditions, livelihoods sustenance, and effects on men and

women in meeting household food security? Do women experience climate change impacts differently from men? How are decisions about mangrove rehabilitation and restoration (planting) affected by recent climate change events?

- F. Mangrove Conservation and Blue Carbon.** How well are mangrove forests, and the various wildlife (fisheries, tidal shellfish or mudskippers, birds and larger mammals) dependent on them, being protected and conserved through the JFMC's activities? What are the positive lessons? What challenges do the JFMCs face? What challenges do the mangrove forests and wildlife face? What is the community's perception about the condition of the forests, the biodiversity and wildlife? Has the condition of these improved or gotten worse, and what is the scale and speed of change?
- G. Iterative Improvements and Innovations.** What suggestions do the JFMCs committee members and village residents have for improving the functioning of the JFMCs? What suggestions do they have for improving JFMC engagement with local communities and grassroot-level institutions to promote climate-resilient practices? What suggestions do they have for the relationship with FD or Panchayati Raj Institutions? How could such suggestions be implemented in practice? Have the JFMCs tried to initiate innovative approaches, and what are examples of these? What are examples of work that the JFMCs are proud of? What could be done to encourage the village members of the JFMCs to become more active? In what way could the FD better support the JFMC?

The consultant will be expected to oversee all aspects of the assessment, including but not limited to:

- Prepare an inception report
- Regular meetings with the Landesa lead person(s) every two weeks (together with email updates)
- Prepare a report on review of all relevant published literature (peer-reviewed journal articles, grey reports) and project documents
- Develop a methodological design (including interview instruments for a range of stakeholders)
- Organize all field visit logistics and obtain any necessary permissions to collect information
- Carry out field interviews (with notetakers and recordings with consent) among range of stakeholders in the six JFMCs (likely June to July 2025 due to weather conditions)
- Transcribe and analyze all data
- Virtual powerpoint presentation of initial findings to Landesa team
- Draft and revise deliverables until report is finalized
- Organize travel arrangements and expenses

Location and Data Collection Methods

The assessment will be carried out by a consultant who will be working with GNK and Landesa. The study will include desk research drawing upon published reports of the FD, journal articles, and other studies of Sundarbans JFMCs mangroves management. This will not only provide contextual information for the final report but also guide methodological design. The assessment will primarily be based on qualitative information collected through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in South 24 Parganas with key

stakeholders. The consultant will develop the qualitative data collection instruments in consultation with GNK and Landesa, and Landesa will approve the instruments. Depending on different levels of engagement and range of stakeholders, the survey tool will be different for each category of stakeholder (such as GNK and Landesa staff, DFO/ADFO, Range Officer, Beat Officer, JFMCs' executive committee members (both men and women), Gram Panchayat Pradhan and elected members, community members (both men and women), SHG leaders and others). Prior to the field work, GNK will facilitate a one-day discussion to enable the consultant to have an overall understanding of the field issues involved.

The consultant will seek informed consent from participants in the qualitative research and protect any personally identifying information, especially from participants in community-based activities. The consultant will not sub-contract any or all parts of the scope to another firm or consultant.

Deliverables

There will be a set of deliverables:

- a. Inception report (with detailed work plan including overall qualitative methodology approach that will be used, sampling approach as to criteria for selecting JFMCs and stakeholders, and interview techniques)
- b. Report of literature and document review to understand previous research on JFMCs
- c. Methodological design with interview instruments (all questionnaires and notetaking protocols should be included)
- d. Powerpoint presentation to Landesa team of initial findings (noteworthy trends, significant quotes)
- e. Draft report (analysis and recommendations, with transcripts and quantitative data)
- f. Final report (to be approved by Landesa)
- g. Two-page brief from report

The final comprehensive report will document the assessment objectives, literature review findings, qualitative research methodology, set out the findings by category of JFMC functionality, identify good practices and challenges, set out recommendations with practical suggestions for how to improve coordination and effectiveness of JFMCs, and provide a conclusion that sums up the report. Once finalized, a 2-page brief will be prepared from the report for circulation with key stakeholders such as the FD.

Tentative Timeline

The assessment will involve about 64 days LoE. In terms of tentative timeline, it is anticipated that the assessment will be completed according to the following schedule:

Sl. No.	Deliverables	Responsible Agency	Days LoE for each stage
1	Submission of Inception Report and inclusion of feedback provided by Landesa	Hired consultant (and team)	2
2	Submission of research review report (including review of project documents, journal	Hired consultant (and team)	6

	publications, and grey literature), and address feedback provided by Landesa.		
3	Provide document with methodological design including all interview instruments and notetaking protocols, and address feedback provided by Landesa.	Hired consultant (and team)	4
4	Collect relevant qualitative data from sampled respondents (6 villages and related stakeholders).	Hired consultant (and team)	21
5	Virtual presentation (with powerpoint slide deck) of initial findings, and address questions raised by Landesa.	Hired consultant (and team)	6
6	Transcription, analysis and submission of draft report (with copy of transcripts and quantitative data) and address feedback provided by Landesa.	Hired consultant (and team)	18
7	Submission of the final report (40 pages not including appendices) for final approval.	Hired consultant (and team) and approval by Landesa	5
8	Submission of two-page brief, and address feedback from Landesa.	Hired consultant (and team)	2
TOTAL			64

Selection Process

Landesa will evaluate the proposal submissions on the basis of alignment with the qualitative research consultancy goals, the merits of the technical approach and budget merit, and the qualifications of the consultant and/or the consultant team using the following criteria:

- Based in India with experience in joint forest management approaches in Sundarbans mangroves;
- Understanding of gender equality and social inclusion issues;
- Proficiency in Bengali language
- Technical merit of the proposed methods of data collection and analysis;
- Team qualifications, including experience collecting similar data, strong skills in qualitative research, and university degree in relevant discipline;
- Proposed budget.

During the review process, applicants may be contacted by Landesa for more detailed information.

Guidelines for submitting proposals

A copy of the proposal should be sent to Pinaki Halder (pinakih@landesa.org) and to Nayna Jhaveri (naynaj@landesa.org) by Friday 21 February 2025. Please include "Qualitative Research Consultancy: Assessment of JFMC Functionality in Indian Sundarbans" in the subject line.

Please provide the following information in the proposal packet:

1. A statement of the consultant and/or consultant team qualifications for the assignment, demonstrating its expertise in qualitative research (maximum 1 page).
2. Descriptions of previous projects related to the assignment, including client contact details for at least one project (maximum 2 pages).
3. CV of consultant and/or consultant team.
5. Broad description of logistics for carrying out project evaluation.
1. An estimated budget in USD. The budget should include a breakdown of all costs related to the consultancy such as person-days, travel and lodging, data collection and analysis, and draft and final report. A maximum of 20% of the total budget can be paid upon signing contract. The remaining funds will be transferred according to a schedule that is structured around Landesa's approval of all deliverables.