

CASE STUDY

India: The EGREE Grievance Mechanism Building Trust through Participation

OVERVIEW

Submitting Organization	Motherhome Welfare Society motherhome.1ngo.in
Type of Grievance Mechanism	Innovative and Hybrid Mechanisms
Level of operation	Municipal
Geographic Scope	India – Andhra Pradesh, East Godavari District (Coringa Wildlife Sanctuary and surrounding coastal and mangrove areas)

SYNOPSIS

The Environment Protection and Sustainable Management of East Godavari River Estuarine Ecosystem (EGREE) Project (2012–2019) in Andhra Pradesh, India, established a grievance and accountability mechanism to address community concerns related to land use, resource access, and conservation in and around the Coringa Wildlife Sanctuary. Designed as a participatory and inclusive process, it provided local institutions and communities with structured channels to voice concerns, seek redress, and engage in collaborative problem-solving. The EGREE mechanism shows how community-based grievance processes, when embedded in local institutions and supported by legal frameworks, financial resources, and sustained capacity-building, can serve as an effective tool for conflict prevention—fostering trust, accountability, and long-term sustainability in conservation landscapes.

BACKGROUND

The grievance and accountability mechanism emerged within the framework of the Environment Protection and Sustainable Management of East Godavari River Estuarine Ecosystem (EGREE) Project, implemented between 2012 and 2019 in the Coringa region of Andhra Pradesh, India. The initiative sought to integrate biodiversity conservation into productive coastal sectors while supporting local livelihoods through eco-restoration of mangrove areas within the Coringa Wildlife Sanctuary and adjacent reserve forests.

Communities in the East Godavari delta depend heavily on mangrove and estuarine ecosystems for fishing, firewood, fodder, and small-scale agriculture. Yet, a series of structural land-tenure and resource-governance challenges had intensified pressure on both ecosystems and livelihoods:

- Expansion of aquaculture and related infrastructure frequently encroached upon sensitive mangrove zones, generating disputes between private operators, conservation authorities, and traditional users.
- Absence of formal recognition of customary use rights created tenure insecurity and constrained access to traditional resource bases.
- Overlapping administrative claims among protected areas, community-use zones, and private concessions complicated land-use planning and enforcement.

- Marginalization of vulnerable groups, especially women and landless fisherfolk, limited participation in land and resource-related decision-making.

MECHANISM

To address these risks, the EGREE Project introduced a grievance and accountability mechanism as part of its participatory conservation and livelihood programmes. Rather than adjudicating property rights, the mechanism was designed to provide structured, accessible channels for communities to voice concerns, seek clarification, and resolve disputes—thereby improving transparency and trust between local users and public authorities.

The mechanism was the result of collaboration among institutions at international, national, state, and community levels:

- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) – provided technical guidance and international best practice.
- Global Environment Facility (GEF) – offered financial support for eco-restoration and livelihood diversification.
- Government of India, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) – ensured policy backing and regulatory oversight.
- Government of Andhra Pradesh, Forest Department – served as the executing agency, leading implementation, monitoring, and community engagement in the Coringa region.
- EGREE Foundation – acted as a coordinating and implementing body linking government, NGOs, the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), educational institutions, and community organizations.
- Local communities and Vana Samrakshana Samithis (VSS) – engaged directly in mangrove plantation, eco-restoration, and grievance redressal, ensuring ownership and sustainability.

The mechanism was backed up by a mix of national, state, and international frameworks guiding conservation and land governance:

- National: The *Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972* and *Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980* established the statutory basis for conservation; the *Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) Notification* under the *Environment (Protection) Act, 1986* governed coastal land use and recognized participatory conservation as a guiding principle.
- State: The Andhra Pradesh Forest Department implemented participatory forest management through VSS; state protocols on eco-restoration and community-based conservation ensured local livelihoods were integrated with environmental protection.
- Project/International: GEF and UNDP safeguard policies reinforced transparency, accountability, and stakeholder engagement; the EGREE Foundation institutionalized consultation, awareness, and grievance handling in accordance with international best practice.

Stakeholder engagement was integral from the outset. Consultations during the project immersion phase involved local land users, Indigenous and fishing communities, women's groups, and other vulnerable households. Emphasis on women's empowerment through alternative livelihoods (eco-tourism, handicrafts, and dry-fish processing) enhanced incomes and participation in decision-making. These participatory approaches made the mechanism responsive to community priorities and grounded in local ownership.

To enhance effectiveness, the grievance mechanism was complemented by financial, institutional, and capacity-building measures addressing root causes of conflict:

- Financial support for alternative livelihoods, eco-restoration, and value-addition programmes reduced dependence on mangrove resources.
- Skill development and training for women's SHGs and VSS members covered sustainable resource management, eco-tourism, fish processing, handicrafts, and other income-generating activities.
- Institutional capacity-building strengthened local organizations in participatory decision-making, grievance management, and monitoring.
- Continuous awareness and empowerment programmes promoted understanding of rights, responsibilities, and the ecological importance of mangroves, contributing to reduced conflicts and improved compliance.

This combination of social, economic, and institutional support made the grievance mechanism not only reactive but also preventive and developmental in its impact.

Over time, the mechanism evolved to become more responsive to local needs and conservation goals. It expanded from a communication tool into a participatory governance mechanism, strengthening:

- Community participation, through VSS, SHGs (self-help groups), and fisherfolk associations;
- Livelihood support and empowerment, especially for women and vulnerable groups through value-addition and income diversification; and
- Awareness and capacity building, ensuring continuous engagement in mangrove protection and sustainable resource management.

These adaptations were guided by a multi-stakeholder governance structure composed of the Project Steering Committee (PSC) (MoEFCC, Forest Department, UNDP, GEF), the EGREE Foundation, and community institutions. This participatory model strengthened community ownership, reduced conflicts, and fostered collaboration between state agencies and local users.

Stakeholder Access to the EGREE Grievance Mechanism

While the grievance and accountability mechanism established under the EGREE Project was designed to be inclusive and accessible to all affected stakeholders, particular attention was given to groups most dependent on coastal and mangrove resources. These included fishing communities from 44 surrounding villages, whose livelihoods rely heavily on the estuarine ecosystem; women's groups and self-help groups (SHGs) engaged in alternative livelihood and value-addition activities; and local institutions such as Vana Samrakshana Samithis (VSS) and eco-development committees, which served as primary entry points for consultation, monitoring, and grievance redress. The mechanism also engaged pastoralists and other resource users reliant on mangrove areas, ensuring that a broad range of local perspectives was reflected and that grievance channels remained equitable, community-driven, and responsive to those most closely connected to the ecosystem.

PROCESS

The grievance and accountability mechanism provided a cost-free, transparent, and inclusive process for communities to raise and resolve concerns related to land use, resource access, or conservation restrictions.

1. **Submission:** Grievances were first submitted at the village level through VSS, SHGs, or fisherfolk associations, which acted as the first point of contact and ensured accessibility for women and resource-dependent households.
2. **Recording and Review:** Field staff and community facilitators recorded complaints during consultation meetings or project monitoring visits. These were reviewed by the EGREE Foundation in coordination with the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department.
3. **Resolution and Escalation:**
 - Simple disputes—for example, access to mangroves or fishing restrictions—were resolved locally through dialogue, awareness sessions, and community consultation.
 - Complex cases—such as aquaculture encroachment or regulatory violations—were escalated to the Forest Department or the PSC, where relevant legislation (the *Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972*; *Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980*; and *CRZ Notification*) provided the legal framework for decision-making.
 - If unresolved, complaints could be referred to environmental courts or tribunals under the *Environment (Protection) Act, 1986*, or to administrative authorities such as the Fisheries Department, Andhra Pradesh Pollution Control Board (APPCB), or the Andhra Pradesh Coastal Zone Management Authority (APCZMA).
4. **Feedback:** Decisions and outcomes were communicated to affected communities through their representative institutions, reinforcing transparency and accountability.

Although no binding timelines were defined, indicative timeframes were observed based on experience:

- Community-level issues: typically resolved within 18–24 months;
- Cases requiring departmental coordination: 3–6 months;
- Complex or legal cases: 6 months or longer, depending on enforcement procedures.

OUTCOMES

The mechanism operated primarily as a dialogue and prevention platform, focusing on cooperation and livelihood security rather than formal restitution. By promoting participation, awareness, and alternative livelihoods, it contributed to a measurable decline in land-related conflicts in the Coringa region.

Key impacts included:

- **Strengthened awareness and compliance:** sustained campaigns on mangrove protection, sustainable fishing, and eco-restoration improved understanding of environmental laws and reduced unintentional violations.
- **Promotion of livelihood alternatives:** SHGs, women's collectives, and fisherfolk associations developed new income streams—eco-tourism, fish processing, handicrafts, crab farming—reducing direct dependency on fragile ecosystems.
- **Improved trust and cooperation:** participatory engagement through VSS and consultations built confidence between communities and authorities, replacing confrontation with collaboration.
- **Policy influence:** the experience demonstrated how participatory grievance mechanisms can inform state-level policies and institutional practices for managing coastal and mangrove resources.

LESSONS LEARNED

The mechanism's success was underpinned by a strong enabling environment, built on a combination of legal, institutional, and community support that ensured both legitimacy and effective implementation. A robust legal framework—the *Wildlife (Protection) Act*, *Forest (Conservation) Act*, *Environment (Protection) Act*, and *CRZ Notification*—provided the statutory basis for grievance handling.

Strong institutional oversight by the Forest Department, PSC, and EGREE Foundation ensured accountability and coordination. Community institutions (VSS, SHGs, fisherfolk associations) served as accessible local entry points, while donor support from UNDP and GEF provided technical and financial continuity. Complementary capacity-building and awareness activities aligned conservation objectives with community priorities, embedding the mechanism within both legal and participatory governance systems. Despite its effectiveness, several factors constrained performance.

- The absence of land rights limited the mechanism's scope to access, conservation, and livelihood issues.
- Awareness gaps in the early stages required sustained outreach.
- Power imbalances sometimes discouraged communities from challenging restrictions, and women and landless fisherfolk remained underrepresented despite inclusion efforts.
- Administrative delays affected escalated cases, particularly those requiring enforcement against aquaculture violations.
- Continued dependence on project funding threatened long-term sustainability, while political and external pressures linked to competing land uses occasionally complicated resolution.

The EGREE Project's grievance and accountability mechanism has proven effective in fostering dialogue, participation, and conflict prevention in a sensitive conservation setting. To consolidate these gains and ensure long-term sustainability, several measures could strengthen its structure, accessibility, and institutional anchoring.

Improvements include establishing clear procedures and timelines for grievance handling; creating village-level help desks or registers managed by VSS/SHGs; using multilingual tools (radio, posters, digital media) to enhance accessibility; and ensuring public sharing of outcomes through community meetings and tracking systems. The participation of women and vulnerable groups should be strengthened through leadership roles in grievance committees.

Closer integration with formal legal systems (district legal aid, environmental tribunals, state portals) and training for local institutions would improve credibility and escalation pathways. For sustainability, responsibilities should be institutionalized within the Forest Department and EGREE Foundation, supported by state budgets and independent monitoring. Adoption of technology—mobile-based reporting, SMS updates, and online tracking—would increase efficiency and transparency.

Finally, the preventive function of the mechanism should be strengthened by maintaining ongoing awareness campaigns, participatory eco-restoration, and livelihood diversification. Documenting and disseminating successful cases—such as those addressing aquaculture encroachment or mangrove restoration conflicts—can provide replicable models for other coastal and estuarine contexts. Together, these measures would help embed the EGREE grievance mechanism within mainstream conservation governance as a durable, inclusive, and adaptive system for environmental accountability and social equity.