Interview with Jagdeesh Puppala (Padraka Foundation/Living Landscapes + Common Ground)

Ambika Samarthya-Howard

July 1, 2025

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You're working with Common Ground and a few other climate organizations. Please talk about how everyone's connected.

Jagdeesh Puppala: Yes, the Common Ground is an initiative of Padraka which we started some three years ago, a group of 23 organizations. We realized that the pace and scale at which this climate vulnerabilities are happening — and for that matter, biodiversity losses, groundwater depletion, inequalities or rural economic distress — had to be addressed meaningfully. One big ship is not enough; you need a flotilla of boats.

The capacity of the ecosystem is weak, and the solution ecosystem is fractured. How can we bring the sense and capacities of several organizations to see that the village people in rural India determine their aspired future, and take concrete nature-related and people-related action towards them? That's how Common Ground came into being.

Padraka is the backbone organization to serve the collaboration of these 23 organizations. It means village, and in Sanskrit, it's common land. I'm the Chief Executive and the convenor for the collaborative. Over the last one and a half years, they have become 66 organizations.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's a huge scale-up. Are you all working with climate, or is Common Ground the only climate thing you're doing?

Jagdeesh Puppala: Most of them are into what you would call livelihoods. Some come from nature-related, ecological work. Some from governance, local governance, centering the human rights elements. It's a group of organizations with different backgrounds, all concerned with the connection between nature and people.

In this 66, we also have enabler organizations, the people who are good at designing market or policy instruments, data, tech tools, algorithms, and analytics.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Whenever I speak to people in India, it almost always comes back to work around livelihoods and not specifically climate. Could you talk about the climate landscape in India versus other parts of the world?

Jagdeesh Puppala: Brazil, Indonesia, and Congo are the favorite spots for tropical forests. India is a subtropical country, and we have the Western Ghats. If funders could broaden their thinking into other geographies, we would have more lessons to exchange with one another. Most of the funders focus only on these areas, and many organizations are mushrooming in that.

The civil society that has grown up in India in the last 30-40 years has been around the human development part, livelihoods, the production area, production systems, agriculture, livestock, and non-farm kind of livelihoods. In India, conservation was essentially the forest department's game. Many of the non-profits were left out of this domain.

Except for four or five that started in the mid '80s, focusing on both ecology and people together. Growth in India around conservation has been mainly in research and think tanks, that's solid and well-organized in the country. Unfortunately, only five or six national organizations translate it into action on the ground. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and most of the international conservation organizations focus on the charismatic species, the tigers and the butterflies.

My previous organization grew to a reasonably big organization from the mid-80s to the 2020s, saying that the connection between nature and people is important. There are several small organizations, but they could not achieve scale.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When I'm talking to the people in Brazil or looking at the landscape, it's a lot of work on the quilombolas, the Indigenous people, and the bioforestry economies. How do we sell oils? How do we sell beauty products? How do we sell medicines? What are the primary concerns or the primary strategies that are happening in the Indian landscape?

Jagdeesh Puppala: Let's go to the land rights part of it. I worked on three kinds of so-called communal lands in India. In Tamil Nadu, they call it poramboke, and Mandurai has many such revenue wastelands. You will find wastelands in several parts of the peninsular of India; in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh. It's the colonial remnant; the land was considered unproductive for taxation and labeled by the queen as wasteland. Unfortunately, even after 75 years of freedom, we still have that wasteland as the nomenclature, and this is sizable land.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Is wasteland exactly as the word labels it?

Jagdeesh Puppala: Yes, it's community land that's used for firewood, fodder, medicine, and hunting. Scrub lands that are valuable for the ecosystem because of the hydrologic and carbon cycles. They host a range of spiders, pollinators, pest-controlling insects, including mammals, and so on.

Unfortunately, it became a wasteland because of the non-taxing part of it, and the government's attention has been on making it productive through mining, special economic zones, or urban sprawl. The typical village life is not considered village life, and the ecological economy is not considered productive enough.

The second kind of land in India has been given to the lowest form of governance, called Gram Panchayat. These are left aside, particularly for grazing. In Rajasthan, it's called Karada Gram

Panchayat, which vests gauchar land, land for grazing. A portion of 5% or, depending upon the livestock population, a certain portion has been set aside for village grazing purposes. They have local languages associated with grazing, gauchar, and karada. In Karnataka, it's gomal land. Different names are given for cattle purposes, and they are managed collectively.

The third one is forest lands. It's been a historical injustice where forest inhabitants, tribal people, our Indigenous people, have not been assigned those lands.

After negotiations in 2006, the historic Forest Rights Act (FRA), was supposed to undo the historical injustice by giving these lands to the villages. It's a dramatic development in the Indian policy space, to recognize the association of tribal and forest together, and not only give individual lands but also community lands.

These are the three big things happening in India. We have played a role in all three. Regarding the revenue wastelands, we were the first ones to bring in a lease arrangement where the government leases this land to the village collective.

It was a big struggle, but in five states, the government started leasing more than 100 acres, renewable for 20 to 99 years.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How did you make that happen?

Jagdeesh Puppala: Negotiation. Making them see that these lands are degraded and the government's assumption that they would manage it from state capitals doesn't work on the ground. If village people were given these lands, they would capably manage them. Governments have historically had little faith in the capabilities of local people to manage their resources. It happens all over the world. Elinor Ostrom got the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 2009 for disproving this idea. She says that village people can manage their resources if the enabling conditions are there.

This important Nobel Prize recognized the unnecessary control that governments exercise in managing village resources. We had to negotiate with the government, which was unproductive, and there was an energy crisis during the rounds of the policy circle. To meet the small timber, firewood, and fodder requirements, these lands are good, and we should hand them over to the village people. One government agreed, and subsequently six governments agreed.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I know in India that every state government is different and that negotiations and doing political stuff is not a one person's full-time job. It's like 40 people's full-time job. Do you have any tips or advice for people trying to do that work?

Jagdeesh Puppala: You have to cultivate relationships without any expectation. Evidence matters. Show them good work that pays off in the long run. You have to be persistent. Sometimes they ask for data, and you have to go almost the very next day, travel 300 kilometers, and collect the information. In those days, we didn't even have photocopiers.

The way we went back to them immediately with the relevant information was a big gain. Similarly, my colleagues did it in many other states. We also had the National Dairy Development Board backing us, which is behind the milk cooperatives.

Milk cooperatives were promoting people's institutions in these geographies. We could say we are coming from the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB), which had credibility in the eyes of the government, so they were willing to get into an agreement. You need credibility, good relationships, solid evidence, and heavy professionalism in being punctual and getting back to them.

The Forest Act became an act. There was good evidence. Its translation into reality on the ground is taking time, but like any other act or policy, it follows its course, and we are doggedly working on it. In terms of lease, what we imaginatively did…

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Is lease the same thing as land rights?

Jagdeesh Puppala: Lease is not total alienation. The government leases it to you for a period of time for certain purposes.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Why would anybody want to do that as opposed to just getting full land rights?

Jagdeesh Puppala: Because you don't have enough trust in the other party. You want to test it out. You will give it for 20 years and see if they are managing well, and then give it away.

To give away the land requires going right up to the chief minister and getting the whole act changed. Whereas these interim steps were possible through executive orders by the minister himself rather than the whole cabinet. Lease is an inferior form compared to the Forest Rights Act, but it was good enough to start with. When you have that foothold, you can say, the village people have managed well, now extend it by 99 years instead of just 20 years every time.

The other part is to increase the size. In the 1970s, when grazing lands were assigned to the panchayat, they did it based on the livestock census. Typically, if you have five cattle heads, you are allowed one acre or half an acre, and, depending upon the cattle census of that particular village, that much portion of land was given to them. In the early 2000s, we went back to the government and asked to increase the livestock in the census, and they agreed.

At that time, the census was only for cows and buffaloes, cattle, and not for sheep and goats, but your state's Gross State Product (GDP) from sheep and goats is so much, you have to include its population in the census. The land went from 100 acres to 200 acres. That much of the land was diverted to the village.

Land is a highly contested issue. We are the state, and yet governments have a stronghold on it, unless you sit at the negotiating table and keep pushing them. If I look at my professional background from the mid '80s to now, there's considerable acceptance of looking at communal property as good as individual private property. People recognize private individual property or corporations, but never look at collective property.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How does the funding model work? Is there a need for funding, and if so, where, and does that come from the government?

Jagdeesh Puppala: India is different. We have the Right to Employment Guarantee Act. It's a God sent for us. Any village person, man or woman, can register and claim for a hundred days of wages.

It initially started in a few districts and spread across the country. It was a big success. Now, public money rightly goes to these degraded or neglected lands. A big chunk of it is available. Something like $5 billion every year gets diverted into these lands from the government. There's more reluctance to do that with the public policy mindset change, and everything is coming through as a direct benefit transfer.

India has a system where the money directly comes from New Delhi or Hyderabad into the person's individual account, to the right individual. It is a good step because it reduces leakages in the system. However, there's a big challenge. Previously, there was something called individual focus, where schemes were developed to focus on individuals. Like, if you are a woman, if you are a widow, you would get so much entitlement. If you have only one acre or less, you'll get so much. That was the individual-oriented approach.

The second half of it was area-based, which means these are drought-prone areas, and these are mountain areas. Area-based spending is to happen. With these direct benefit transfers, everything goes to the individual. It doesn't necessarily go into restoring the ecosystem. The money is there, and it's good money; however, we had to get imaginative about how individuals collectively plan for their whole village or landscape and restore that landscape rather than their backyard. That's what we are currently working on, but that is not enough. There are new instruments, carbon credits, carbon standards, and biodiversity.

The third set are new emerging financial instruments like outcome accelerators, blended finance, and a range of other new products. All these are important to address the ecosystems. A combination of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) money is also good in India. How do you bring in CSR money? How do you bring philanthropy money? How do you bring carbon biodiversity money? How do you bring these new financial instruments?

That is what we are working on so that you have a place-based investment happening; this particular landscape needs to be developed for forests or for pastures, what kind of products, and who could cover which part of that funding requirement? Philanthropy could fund the most untouched part of it because CSR takes the easy, quantifiable, doable things, and the government funds skills.

The financial instruments could also be used to generate economic activity in that area. The economy beyond carbon fixation. Carbon credits or biodiversity credits are too myopic.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: There is a big disparity between how fuel and financing are talked about in the global north versus the global south. We talk about methane, clean fuel, and carbon credits. I don't think that resonates with almost any of the organizations I have spoken to. I was curious if you could explain what's myopic about it?

Jagdeesh Puppala: Myopic because the way communities, particularly tribal communities, live in close association with their forests — their names and identities come from the forests and rivers — is not just one product. It's a combination of various cultural, social, and economic associations with a resource system. These market instruments are good, but they shouldn't be the only ones. The problem with carbon is that it's like the productification or commoditization of one part of an ecosystem. It's not the whole ecosystem. It's not looking at biodiversity, hydrological, or pollination services. Or the various other social interactions, like collective

decision-making, stewardship, rewards, and punishments, that the village people engage in to protect the forest.

By picking up only carbon, they're disregarding the various other ecological values that are associated with that.

Once they understand that they should also look at biodiversity, water, and so on, they call it co-benefits. The problem with the co-benefit is that if there is no carbon, they won't look at any of these co-benefits. It is carbon-centric and not the whole range of ecological functions and services that an ecosystem offers for human survival and thriving in that area. It is reductionism or tunnel vision for these products. Today it's carbon, tomorrow it's biodiversity, but you need a range of all of these to come together. That's how village people have been custodians and stewards of their forests for centuries. That is missing.

Secondly, the downside of this is that there is poor faith between the buyers and sellers. The buyers, typically corporations, do not have faith in the way the local stewards protect their forests. Similarly, the village people who are the sellers do not have faith in how those markets come in because they are very distant. How to improve the faith so that the village person can sit at the negotiation table as an equal?

Property or land ownership is not enough. Ownership of what grows above it and what is under it is equally important, because otherwise, you have the land, but what is growing on the land is sold by someone to someone else, and the village people are left hanging dry.

We are thinking about a place-based stewardship arrangement where a range of actors can come in and look at the whole rather than parts of it. This is only at a conceptual stage. There are many failures in the carbon trade. In Australia, China, and Uganda, carbon credit programs or offset programs have failed because the people who certify have made tall claims, and the reality on the ground is very different.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Let's shift to the signatories and the people in Common Ground. I want to understand the organizations that have signed on to the thing. What's similar about them? What are they signatories to?

Jagdeesh Puppala: This problem cannot be handled by one organization. The 66 organizations realize that together we can. Some people come to bring the voice of the local people. Some people bring friends on data and technology tools, and algorithms. Some people are good at improving the forest produce value chains. Others are good at negotiating with the government.

By joining the dots between these people, we can address it at a reasonable scale. As Sanjay Purohit says, "What works at scale is what we need to imagine, not just scaling what is working."

The second important thing is that in the organizations that I handle, we were good at certain elements, but we were not good at many other elements.

If we come together, we are distributing the ability to solve problems, so that many innovations happen across the geography with plural approaches rather than one blueprint, which typically organizations end up with.

Lastly, organizational entrepreneurship is necessary; you need ecosystem entrepreneurship.

It's that realization that has made me move on from the Foundation for Ecological Security (FES), my previous organization. It's a good organization, but we would probably be doing incremental changes. How do we imagine work at a population scale, and how do we see other partners as equal partners? Even in the NGO world, we don't get along with one another because of the ego-logos problem. The ego low-go problem, as Skoll awardee Tim Hanstad says.

We all know that we have probably not addressed the problem at all, or we are somewhat contributing to it in a small way. If you raise above yourself, you will contribute to addressing complex, wicked problems like climate change, biodiversity loss, water levels, or inequalities. We have to learn to work with many other people. That is the DNA of Common Ground.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Could you give me one or two examples of something you have all done together that changes structures or the system?

Jagdeesh Puppala: There are many things, like political acts, but two interesting ones that come immediately to my mind. Around summer, a good portion of Indian forests catch fire. Typically, people living on the fringes of the forest, tribal people, either face problems from forest fires, human-wildlife conflict, or invasive species.

One example in Jharkhand, where we had a communicators workshop for people into writing stories, like YouTubers, local story influencers, and some 20 to 25 Jharkhand partners. It was an exchange of telling stories to people who are good at writing or designing.

Several issues came up in those three days. One was around forest fires, and the village people effectively came up with rules of safeguarding the forest from the fire with their methods, rules, regulations, and technology. In the same workshop, there were government officials from the forest department.

One of the reporters picked up the story and put it in the local news. The forest department liked the approach because of the clear method and outcome, and issued orders for it to be spread to other forest fire-prone areas in the state. It's about joining the dots between organizations that have different purposes, functions, and strengths.

The other example is about the state of Orissa in East India, which has grown into an extensive way of spreading millets. Our partner organization, Watershed Support Services and Activities Network (WASSAN), has built up good evidence on the ground of how millet production is good for rainfed areas in terms of production, productivity, and for local nutrition. They worked with a few local NGO partners, and the state government program spread it across the state.

However, some unfortunate developments started happening. Certain people in the government started applying fertilizers and providing irrigation to further improve the productivity of millet cultivation. The local organizations did not feel confident or capable enough to oppose it at the local level. Some of the NGOs spoke to communicators and journalists and provided evidence of the pros and cons. The government started being responsive and taking corrective action.

You build on a sense of different organizations depending on the need that comes in. It's not just a working group that is all about words. You need five or six organizations that have complementary senses. Some people are good at algorithms, analytics, and tools. Others are good at making data stories or stories that are easily comprehensible by the local people. The

third organization is good at data privacy, informed consent, and good governance, and the fourth organization lateral communications.

Suppose there is a village lady who has done some wonderful work on the Right to Employment Guarantee Act. You would conduct a training program, do a trainer of trainers, and take it to some 5-10 other villages. It's going out of the village domain into a typical NGO, which transmits it. Reap Benefit creates communication channels between villages. A woman in, say, the eastern part of India in one district in Orissa, can talk to another woman and share what she did under the Right to Employment Guarantee Act, and how she earned 230 rupees by following a particular method. The other person will ask what she exactly did. The village-to-village, rather than many-to-many communication, improves, instead of everything going to an NGO or a government.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: The communication between these two women. Is that happening on WhatsApp, in person?

Jagdeesh Puppala: Chatbot, WhatsApp, and so on. The connection is made through a platform called Samaaja, which means society, that Reap Benefit manages. The village people are asked for their WhatsApp numbers.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I would love to hear how you're feeling about the future. What are you looking forward to in the next five years to see change, and what do you think about COP? What does the year look like for you in terms of the politics, in terms of it being a big climate year, and then the more long-term play?

Jagdeesh Puppala: The more we see the global developments, my faith and my energies will be devoted to ordinary citizens. Climate change can only be addressed if climate action can be shared by every citizen. Instead of excessively relying on government or some outside solution, I would focus on providing good knowledge and good information that leads ordinary citizens to determine their futures.

I intend to be at COP in Brazil. Governments are our governments. I'm just reluctant about the COPs because of the back-breaking journey; it's 36 hours of travel. We are in touch with certain groups to present the civil society voice on the capable handling of climate solutions and climate action. We want to mend this carbon, this undesirable behavior from certain sources, influence, and engage with them to see the climate finance part of it.

We also want to showcase how technology could be a powerful tool to enfranchise local people towards action, and influence other forms of capital into this. Not just government capital, but also philanthropists and blended finance. That's going to be my agenda at the COP.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's a very ambitious agenda. Excellent.

Jagdeesh Puppala: Every voice counts. We want to be a part of an ecosystem where we contribute to the solution. We challenge developments that are not so favorable to either nature or to the local people.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you were saying in the next five years, the real desire for you is to move this into communities, into citizens. How do you see your work changing?

Jagdeesh Puppala: I would not say the work changes dramatically but my level of effort and energy would increase. If I have to work on policy, markets, finance, data, and technology, all these three or four macro drivers are enhancing the voice of the local people. I would probably not be spending so much time, if at all, on some corporations that don't want to change their behavior.

Or if certain governments feel that it's only solar and windmills that will answer all the solutions, good, you're doing that. Someday, look at adaptation and issues concerning soil health, biodiversity, and so on. They are equally good infrastructure for our country and across the world. I would spend more energy tilting the solutions towards the local people, rather than spending more energy correcting or challenging their behavior.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What do you need?

Jagdeesh Puppala: What do I need? I wake up every morning feeling all the more charged up, knowing fully well the difficulties. We have chosen a very audacious, wicked problem of collaboration, bringing together several people. I've seen the phenomenal strength of this during COVID, where people from different walks of life came together to address issues of hospitals or ventilators, or even with migrants. It is from that energy that I rely on, of the goodness in each one, and how we make the best use of it. I wake up with that energy every day. Some days are bad, I agree, but most of the days are with that. I've spent 40 years in this domain, so I know what good energy is.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Knowing that, what is it that you feel like you need? Is it more diverse funding? Is it more unrestricted funding? Is it more like community support? Is it like better narratives?

On the funding side, it's very clear. I have been lucky in the last three difficult years to start a nonprofit, and all seven funders have given unrestricted funds. Funders are not very familiar with the systems change initiatives. They feel that it is all hot air. How do we improve the confidence amongst funders on the need for system-level entrepreneurship alongside organizational entrepreneurship? Both are equally important.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: A lot of what you're saying would be more about changing the narrative, showing the evidence-based, showing the stories.

Jagdeesh Puppala: Yes.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That I can help you with, so that's great. This was awesome, I hope to see you at COP. There's also been this very organic ask from a few people on the team, both from Asia and Brazil, to start doing some South-South coordination meetings just to hear what people are doing.

Jagdeesh Puppala: Excellent, we'll see that India is properly represented. Every degree or half-degree change in latitude is going to hit us differently. Climate change is not going to be uniform. Unless we see the whole system, we'll miss the point.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's a good place to end. Thank you so much for your time.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is the Solutions Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer: She leads on innovation and technology, leverages communication platforms for the network strategy and creates cool content. She has an MFA from Columbia's Film School and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, Praekelt.org, UNICEF, UNFPA, Save the Children, FCDO, Global Integrity and Prism.

* This interview has been edited and condensed.