

The Forest Department and the Forest Rights Act in Madhya Pradesh, India: learning at State and Village levels

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Abstract

The perception study conducted among the officers of Madhya Pradesh Forest Department (MPFD) at State and local level on their attitude towards the community forest management rights (CFMR) of Forest Rights Act (FRA) has revealed that **organisational learning of MPFD on advantage of joint working with communities, following the joint forest management (JFM) program, has inculcated positive attitude towards forest governance approach.** However, **embedding the organisational learning in Forest Department working, is hampered by the organisational resistance mainly at local level officers** owing to hierarchical working culture and risk averse behaviour of MPFD. Thus, **organisational reforms for decentralisation of decision making power to local officials and administrative reorientation to changed paradigm of work is essential for promoting forest governance in India besides suitable policy environment.**

Introduction

The Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 enacted in India has empowered the forest dependent communities to protect and manage forests which are owned by State Forest Departments (SFD).

Since the implementation new policy provisions entails attitudinal change and appropriate management climate (Rao and Kerr 2002; Whisnant 1980) a perception study was conducted among MPFD officers working at central (State) and local (district and village) level on these counts.

Research question

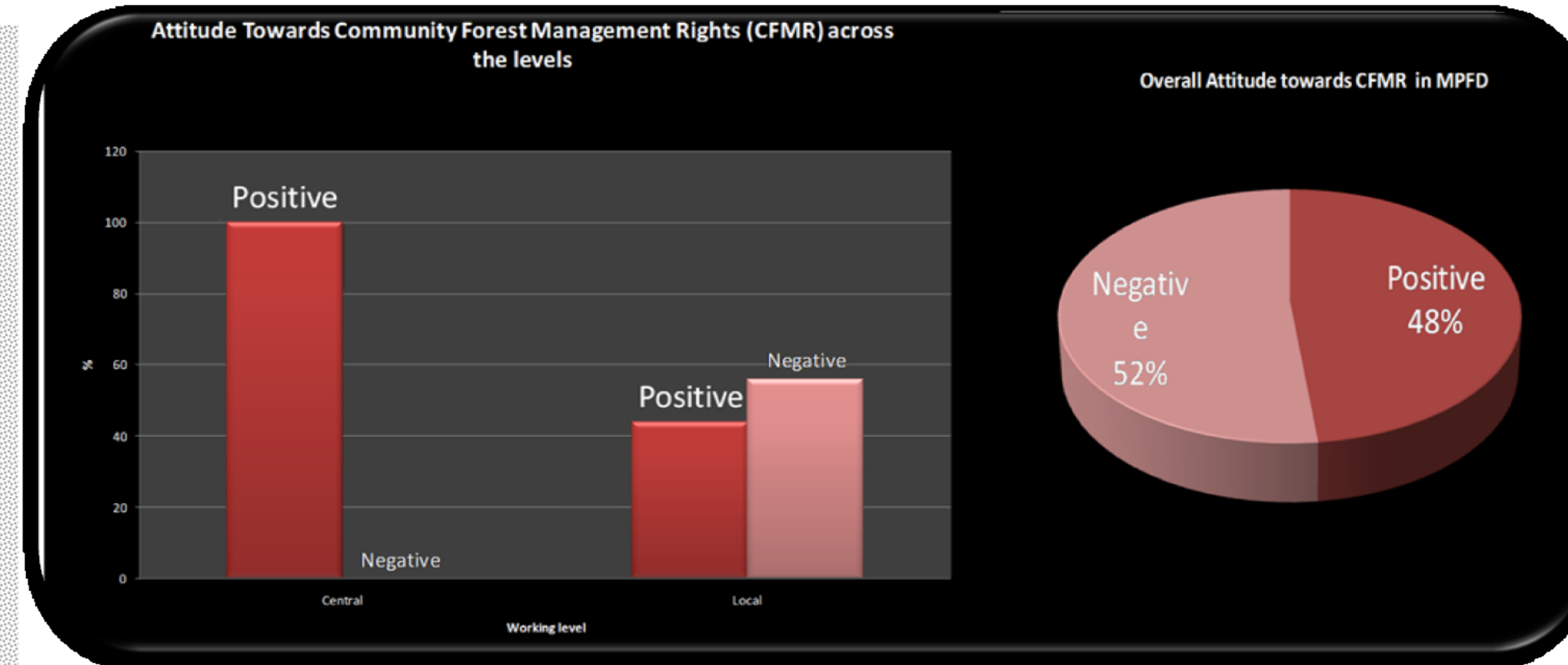
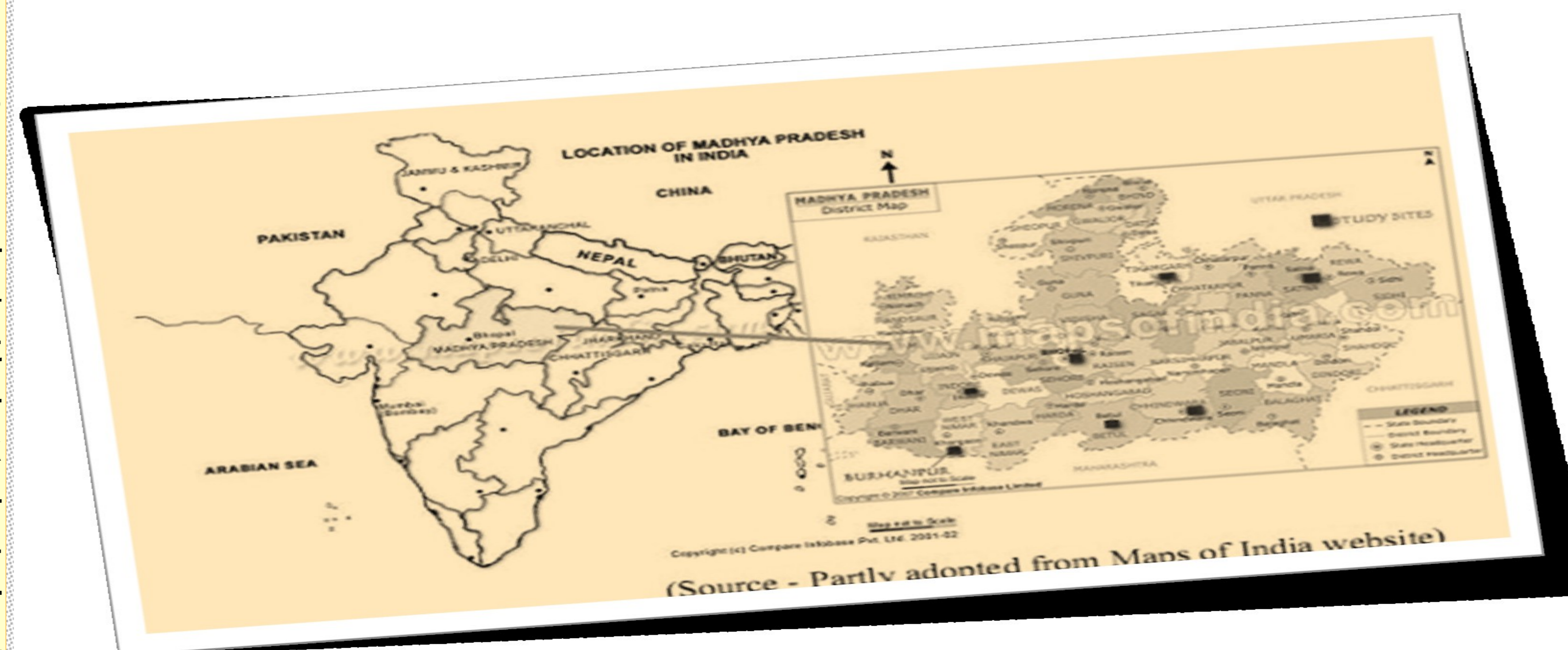
How do forest officers working at central and local levels in Madhya Pradesh Forest Department, view the Community forest management rights (CFMR) of Forest Rights Act and propose to deal with it?

Approach and Methodology

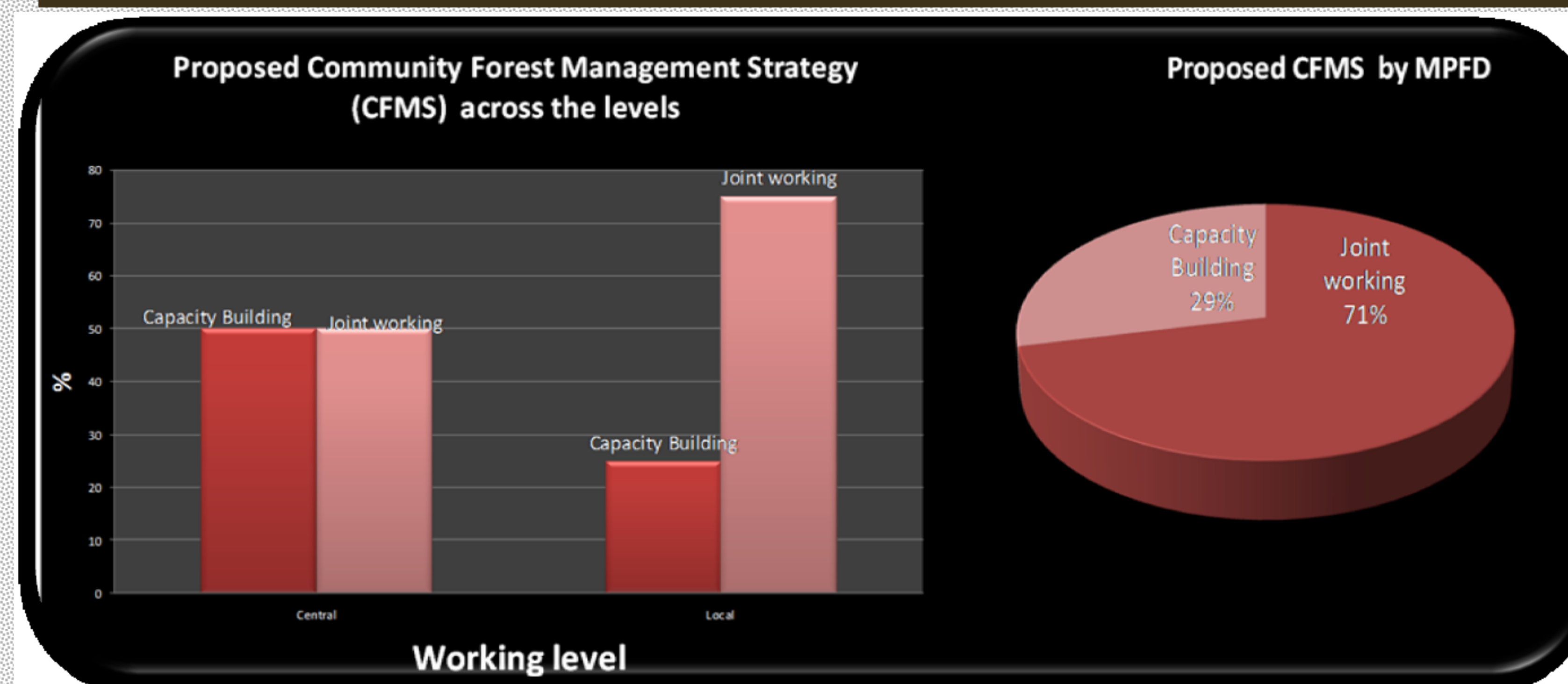
Ethnographic study, maximum variation sampling, key informant selection method was adopted.

Data gathered through semi structured Interview and open ended questionnaire from 33 officers working in central and local levels in 7 districts in Madhya Pradesh and analysed by discourse analysis, typology study and across the stage mixed model research techniques (Bliss 1999; Creswell 2002; Creswell 2008).

Study area & Results



The overall attitude towards the CFMR was 52% positive and 48% negative. However, it was predominantly positive among the officers working at central level and predominantly negative at local level.



About 71% of the officers preferred joint working with communities and 29% preferred capacity building of communities (to enable them to manage community forests on their own) for the community forest management strategy.

Discussion

Organisational learning of Madhya Pradesh Forest Department, on advantage of involving local people in forest management (following the intensive training on joint working with communities under the joint forest management regime since 1990), and benefits reaped by joint working such as reduced forest offences, forest fires, law enforcement costs and improvement in forest cover and relation with people etc. (Chaturvedi and Godbole 2005), are appears to be the prime driving factors for positive attitude and proposed strategies (joint working and capacity building) for implementation of Forest Rights Act.

However, the reduction in positive attitude at local levels appears to be the outcome of the nature work of local level officials relating to custodianship responsibilities (forest protection & maintaining productivity), fear of losing authority on resource control, risk averse behaviour of organisation and hierarchical working culture.

The fear of possible loss of forest resources (by injudicious exercise of rights by some resource users) and likely domination of village elites in resource management decision at village levels for quick gains, also contribute to negative attitude at local level and preference for joint working.

Thereby, irrespective of the positive organisational learning, its translation into forest management approach is affected by the organisational resistance and risk avoiding behaviour prevalent in forest department (Baumann 1998; Kumar and Kant 2005, 2006; Matta and Kerr 2007)

Conclusion

Mere organisational learning and environment favoured by benign policy shift appears insufficient to promote forest governance in India. In addition to that, decentralisation of decision making power and administrative reorientation to changed working scenario is also essential to promote forest governance.

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