Ecology, Economy and Society–the INSEE Journal 9(1): 41-50, January 2026

COMMENTARY

Unifying Human Well-being and Ecosystem Health: Future Directions for Civil Society

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1. INTRODUCTION

Anyone paying attention to scientific pronouncements on zoonoses can make the obvious connection between human well-being and ecosystem health. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an outpouring of voluntary action by civil society, philanthropy, and policy measures geared towards addressing its most urgent and manifest consequences. While the pandemic may have stemmed from a combination of factors—including degradation of natural habitats and global (and local) connectivity (Walsh *et al.* 2020; Alcántara-Ayala *et al.* 2021)—its effects were exacerbated by development models that neglected human well-being and environmental resilience, particularly among the massive populations of rural communities dependent on local ecosystems for secure livelihoods and well-being (if not survival). Little attention has been paid by advocates of pandemic relief and resilience to tackling the systemic sources of these issues.

There are also numerous other ways in which ecosystems have been degraded, which can have crippling consequences for humanity in general

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Dates: 1 Jan 2026 (submission), 13 Jan 2026 (acceptance), 31 Jan 2026 (publication)

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37773/ees.v9i1.1892

Published by Indian Society for Ecological Economics (INSEE), c/o Institute of Economic Growth, University Enclave, North Campus, Delhi 110007.

ISSN: 2581–6152 (print); 2581–6101 (web).

and for its most diverse and vulnerable segments in particular. Some of these pernicious effects—such as the effect of air pollution on lung function or the persistence of plastics, chemicals, and carcinogens from untreated waste and effluents in human bodies—are well-documented (Kurt *et al.*, 2016; Malyan *et al.* 2019). Various expert bodies have posited a strong link between human health and the environment. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005), for instance, acknowledged the range of ecological services that all humans depend on "nature" for, including the provisioning of food and raw materials, regulating services such as pollination, supporting services such as nutrient recycling, and cultural and aesthetic services.

In his recent report, "The Economics of Biodiversity", economist Partha Dasgupta (2021) outlines the institutional failures, lack of governance, and neglect of the value of "natural capital" that have led to the current crisis. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 reflect the idea that nation-states need to realign governance modes and acknowledge that their citizens' futures are fundamentally dependent on the planet's ecological processes and vice versa. Amartya Sen's (1992) "capabilities approach", developed from the mid-1980s onwards, argues that fulfilment of basic capabilities, such as health and food security, is a requirement for the fulfilment of other complex needs and aspirations, such as an improved environment. However, despite scholarly evidence and practical wisdom to the contrary, philanthropic and civil society initiatives across the world continue to promote a narrative of duality that features concern for human well-being on one side and the practice of environmentalism on the other—whereas, in real life, there need not be dissonance between them.

2. COLONIZED ECOLOGIES

The dissonance between reality and the duality narrative has been, however, especially stark in the conservation sector. For decades, the discipline was dominated by biologists who promoted the idea that "humans are separate from nature" and that the early twentieth-century ideal of pristine wilderness was the ultimate goal of this enterprise (Shanker and Oommen 2021). A critique of the "fortress conservation" approach in the early 2000s, by both social scientists and practitioners (Brockington 2002), led to the development of a more inclusive community conservation approach, with some emphasizing human rights issues while others privileged positive conservation outcomes. While conservation has become less "protectionist", widespread problems remain. Many recent critiques have focused on decolonizing conservation research (Baker *et al.* 2019;

Chaudhury and Colla 2021; Cronin *et al.* 2021; Rudd *et al.* 2021; Shanker *et al.* 2023) and practice (Trisos *et al.* 2021; Shanker and Oommen 2021; Mbizah *et al* 2026).

Though some non-government organizations (NGOs) with environmental or conservation objectives may recognize the importance of engaging communities, they have largely struggled to integrate human welfare issues into their agendas and actions. This is despite working in territories such as India, which has a rich history of grassroots people's movements and campaigns that have drawn attention to the links between environmental degradation and risks to community well-being. In many cases, this is simply due to the conservation NGOs' inability to change their vision or mission, which continues to operate in a framework that separates 'green' issues (nature preservation) and 'brown' issues (toxics and environmental issues). It is also probably on account of such organizations being composed entirely of the "wrong" set of staff, i.e., ecologists and conservation biologists lacking the ability or knowledge (or perhaps desire) to work with and for diverse peoples. In fact, a section of this constituency still views humans as intrinsically destructive and undesirable elements in nature (thereby cementing an artificial human–nature dichotomy) and demonstrates allegiance to the "Edenic sciences" and the myth of pristineness (Robbins and Moore 2013; Rivera-Núñez and Fargher 2021).

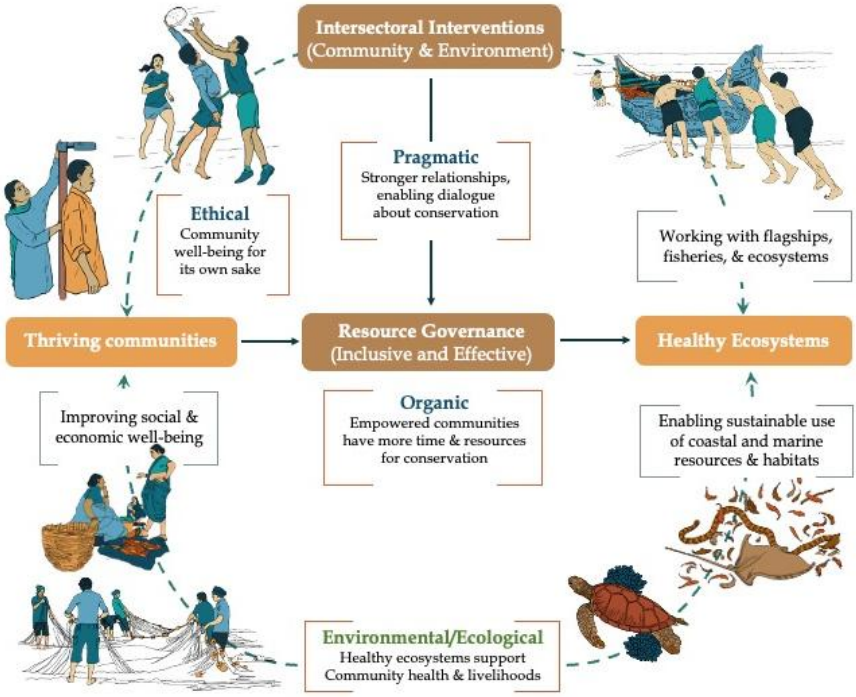
Where NGOs have engaged with communities, it has typically been with direct environmental outcomes in mind, often due to donor requirements, since funding is earmarked for environmental or conservation activities. Equally, rural development efforts have also not prioritized environmental concerns in their interventions. This disjunction between the obvious need to connect social and environmental issues and the internal (institutional) and external (donor–driven) inability of civil-society organizations to establish this connection has greatly hindered progress in this sector.

3. FOUR PATHWAYS BETWEEN WELL-BEING AND THE ENVIRONMENT

We believe that it is necessary for environmental NGOs to have a clear understanding of why they are engaging in social issues and choose pathways that best align with their own values and skills. We offer here an overarching framework that links actions aimed at human well-being with ecological and environmental resilience and health (Figure 1). This framework is centred on the idea that conservation and sustainability are best achieved by directly working with communities that use or depend on natural resources for their livelihoods and ways of life. We posit four

pathways—ethical, organic, pragmatic, and ecological/environmental—through which organizations can work with communities to achieve both improved human well-being and better environmental outcomes. Of course, many interventions will act through more than one pathway; we parse them here to better understand the process and justify these actions.

Figure 1: Four Pathways that Link Intersectoral Interventions with Thriving Communities and Healthy Ecosystems



Source: Authors

We believe that any agent of change in society must engage with (in)justice. For *ethical* reasons, we need to work towards human well-being as an act of solidarity with less privileged communities and not just as an instrument of environmental change—something separate from human life. We suggest that norms of equity and justice form the bedrock upon which larger transformations rest. We believe that NGOs should unapologetically undertake activities that support the welfare and dignity of the most disadvantaged in the communities they work with, without having to justify their actions by claiming environmental advantages. Of various possible pathways, this is the only one that is based solely on a "rights"

consideration, while the others have differing degrees of instrumentality in that they are all usually designed to lead to environmental outcomes.

While many of the Dakshin Foundation's community interventions have an ethical component, one stands out as having had little other (immediate) benefit along the other pathways. In March 2020, the Government of India abruptly imposed an extremely stringent lockdown, leaving migrant fishers stranded across the country. Following the announcement, Dakshin's staff started receiving calls from fisher community members and leaders across their sites of engagement. Dakshin's team of ~30 staff and 10 volunteers worked with civil society networks, fisher unions, government departments, and officials to provide aid to migrant and non-migrant fish workers and their families. The team was able to leverage these networks to support ~16,000 stranded migrant workers across various coastal states and raised funds to aid > 3000 of the most vulnerable households (~13,000 individuals) across different coastal states (Dakshin Foundation 2020). While these actions may have had reciprocal benefits in the long term, their impact extended well beyond the geographies the organization worked in and, more importantly, were not implemented with those benefits as the primary objective.

A second set of pathways is linked to the first, even if they are instrumental in design. Communities that are empowered to play democratic roles and sustainably govern the environmental spaces they depend on are better positioned to work towards alleviating local food insecurity, ill health, loss of livelihoods, and systemic poverty in the long term. This can *organically* lead to healthier ecosystems and greater resilience against external shocks, as healthy and empowered communities will have the time, resources, and opportunities to better contribute to resource governance and biodiversity conservation. Such interventions are often explicitly designed to include both rights-based and environmental outcome-based considerations.

An example comes from work done by the Timbaktu Collective, a non-profit based out of the drought-prone Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh. Its mission is to enable marginalized rural people to collectivize their strengths, realize their rights, secure sustainable livelihoods, gain social and gender equity, and take charge of their lives while reclaiming their cultural and ecological heritage. It primarily supports community members in creating their own farmers' cooperatives and business enterprises. Its other programmes focus on alternative banking, education for children and youth, legal aid and counselling for women and persons with disabilities, and more. Their work on community empowerment has also helped regenerate forests by involving local communities (Timbaktu Collective n.d.).

Another example is the Keystone Foundation's work on ecological and cultural conservation in the Western Ghats region. This organization works with Indigenous peoples and local communities to develop sustainable livelihoods, protect biodiversity, and preserve traditional knowledge and practices. Its work explicitly aims to balance ecological, economic, and social goals for sustainable development. One of its community well-being projects focuses on strengthening community-based environmental governance systems. The project's main goal is to ensure that tribal communities engaged in sustainable agriculture have improved access to water, the capacity to manage other natural resources, access to traditional seed varieties, and access to non-timber forest products through secure forest tenures. By securing forest tenures for tribal communities, the Keystone Foundation is also improving the management of the region's forest resources (Keystone 2025).

The Dakshin Foundation's project on community-based monitoring by the islanders of Lakshadweep is a co-created initiative to support the unique pole-and-line tuna fisheries here, which were facing various challenges. Community members and researchers jointly designed and co-created monitoring methodologies and systems that produced a better understanding of the constraints and opportunities for this fishery technique. A decade of work at the field site has generated a range of beneficial outcomes, including democratic decision-making that curbs unsustainable fishing practices; dismantling of knowledge divides, resulting in enhanced engagement across fishers, scientists, and government departments; and possibilities for co-management involving multiple stakeholders. In each of these cases, the activities fulfil ethical rights-based outcomes for local communities, which lead to better environmental outcomes in terms of better management of forests or fisheries.

NGOs can also help develop appropriate pluralistic practices that result in just and positive human and environmental outcomes by building strong, *pragmatic***,** and reciprocal collaborations with local communities. The community health programme instituted in Madagascar by Blue Ventures Conservation, a United Kingdom–based marine conservation non-profit, serves as an example. The programme is called "Safidy", which means "choice" in the local language, and provides healthcare—especially family-planning services—to isolated coastal communities deprived of access to basic facilities. The NGO's initiatives have enabled women from these communities to choose the number of children they want to have. Women who access these services earn a better income from engaging in discussions and activities related to their locally managed marine areas, as they now have more time at their disposal (Mohan *et al.*, 2013).

Finally, healthy ecosystems provide better services and functions to communities through ecological and environmental pathways. In addition to long-term benefits through supporting and regulating services, ecosystems provide immediate provisioning benefits such as food and water. Moreover, the UN Strategy (2021) outlines the ways in which ecological restoration provides obvious and immediate advantages for human health, including enhanced air, water, and soil quality, decreased disaster risk, and a decline in vector-borne diseases. The recognition of these benefits provides added incentives for communities, creating a link between healthy ecosystems and thriving communities.

4. CONCLUSION

As to the path forward, civil society in India and elsewhere has few choices. Whether it is termed "wild" or "disturbed", rural or urban, ecosystems are inseparable from humans. The path to their preservation and restoration is fraught with questions about goals, intent, and, in many cases, monitoring and evaluation. Hence, we provided a framework for engaging with communities through a multi-pronged (intersectoral) approach that holistically links ecosystem health and human well-being. Community interventions are often a combination of these pathways, but being explicit about them can provide clarity about what purpose they serve and how they bring about change. Healthy futures for humans and the environment depend on the degree to which agents of change—including government agencies, NGOs, community leaders, and philanthropists—adopt these integrative approaches.

Ethics Statement: This study complies with requirements of ethical approvals from the institutional ethics committee for the conduct of this research.

Data Availability Statement: No primary data was used for this paper.

Conflict of Interest Statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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