



Photo: Timbaktu Collective

PUTTING PEOPLE AT THE CENTRE OF DEVELOPMENT

Over the last five decades, India's Ananthapuramu district has been transformed from a mixed cropped area with great agro-biodiversity into the largest groundnut mono-cropped area in the country – with negative impacts on the food and income situation of the local population. The Timbaktu Collective has set itself the goal of reversing the negative effects of this development and, with the aid of a community-owned approach, making small-scale farming a viable alternative for income and livelihood security.

By C. K. Ganguly (Bablu)

The geographical position of the Indian Peninsula renders Ananthapuramu district, with a population of four million, one of India's driest areas and the country's second most drought-affected district. Once well-known for its dry deciduous forests, grasslands and rainwater harvesting tanks, its lands now are deforested and degraded, its underground water resources are depleted, and its famed tanks are in disrepair, while its rural population remains poor and in severe debt, with 45 per cent rural indebtedness against a state-wide 18 per cent. High rural debt, high seasonal migration, low literacy levels, rapid depletion of underground water resources, a high number of suicides among farmers and trafficking of women and children in certain areas of the district are direct pointers to the economic, social and political backwardness of Ananthapuramu district and its people.

Over the past 45 years, a model of agriculture development promoting monoculture and cash cropping has had serious repercussions on land, water, human resources and ecosystem health. The district has departed from being a mixed cropped area with great agro-biodiversity to becoming the largest groundnut mono-cropped area in the country. Cash cropping has reduced the role of women in agriculture and pushed them to being mere sources of labour both in the field and at home. The district has seen a shift from locally produced

food grain to grain imports. With non-food expenditure on health, education and social events increasing rapidly without an equivalent increase in household incomes, spending on food is neglected. This has resulted in poor calorie and nutritional intake, which in turn has adversely affected the health of rural families.

Participatory Guarantee Systems are locally focused quality assurance systems. They certify producers based on active participation of stakeholders and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge exchange.

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This situation has necessitated an integrated and community-owned response dealing with the existing disparities and inequalities. In 2006, the Timbaktu Collective (see Box on page 18) initiated the Organic Agriculture Program (OAP), with emphasis on agroecological methods, to reverse the negative effects of the above-mentioned problems and in turn make small-scale farming a viable and profitable alternative.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS

A conscious attempt has been made to shift the focus of the farmers to agroecological practices that look into soil health, food crops, land, biomass and seed management, along with the elimination of external inputs. The strategy used was to form strong farmer groups in the villages as the foundation of the programme, with women and men as equal members. In 2008, these farmer groups were federated to form the Dharani Farming and Marketing Co-operative, which procures, processes and sells the produce of its members under the brand name "Timbaktu Organic". Participatory Guarantee Systems are used for organic certification to assure the integrity of the agroecological system of production. The directors of the Cooperative are elected from among the leaders of the farmer groups. While the day-to-day management of the Cooperative is looked after by professionals hired by the directors, they themselves handle all policy-related issues.

The Cooperative helps its members engage directly with the market and has awakened in them the power of collective bargaining. Dharani has become an excellent model of forward linkages in the organic agri-value chain. For millets and pulses the pre-fixed prices are usually 20-50 per cent higher than the market value. Based on volumes produced, Dharani



Farmers acquire practical agroecological knowledge at Farmer Field Schools.

Photo: Timbaktu Collective

arranges to pick the produce of farmers from the farm gate thereby reducing transaction costs for farmers. Dharani also provides member farmers a patronage bonus incentive at the end of the financial year, with a portion of the profit earned being redistributed to the producers on the basis of the crop and the quantity they have supplied to the Cooperative in that year. While the local market accounts for much of the revenue, organic produce is also sold to South Indian cities such as Bangalore or Hyderabad, where demand is growing.

WHAT HAS BEEN ACHIEVED SO FAR

The Organic Agriculture Program was initiated in 2006 after almost ten years of internal practice and experimentation in agroecological farming. By the end of March 2018, Dharani's annual revenues stood at 35 million rupees, and OAP had reached out to a total of 2,105 farming families, from 60 villages covering an area of almost 12,000 acres. Sixty-seven per cent of the population in the Collective's areas of operation are marginal dry land farmers

exploiting a fragile resource base. The Collective has successfully re-introduced organic and millet-based mixed cropping in these areas. The participating farmers have increased their incomes by reducing input costs, good prices and incentives received from Dharani. The input costs arise mainly from the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, which ceases in organic practice since fertilisers and pesticides are produced locally and with locally available materials. Yield loss in the initial years of conversion is compensated by the premium prices the Cooperative offers as well as by seed and cattle provided by the TC at subsidised rates. By March 2019, all the 2,105 members will be eligible to supply their produce to Dharani as they will all have been recognised as certified organic under PGS of Organic Certification.

The programme has been able to provide the right incentives to retain educated youth in agriculture, as periodic surveys by external consultants show, change the cropping patterns and move towards mixed cropping systems where a diversity of crops are grown ensuring not only food and nutritional security but also income and livelihood security of rural households. TC has invested in agricultural marketing infrastructure (warehouse, processing and value-addition facilities, brand creation), training stakeholders in entrepreneurial and marketing skills and enabling back-end and front-end integration to strengthen the cooperative and develop a viable business enterprise.

However, there are shortcomings. The decisions relating to transitioning to agroecological approaches are disproportionately and unjustifiably vested only on the farmers. Training and capacity building based on agroecological approaches to farming and transitioning are not given due priority by the public extension services, although the Timbaktu Collective's programmatic coverage foresees a focused team of trainers to build capacities of farmers. Gender inequities in rural areas pose a threat, where agroecological practices are mostly dependent on an empowered women workforce. Mainstream research on agroecological approaches and systems is inadequate. The notion that agroecological systems are suitable only to certain specific contexts and lack of policy support are greater impediments in making it a common practice.

WHERE ARE WE HEADING?

The work of Timbaktu Collective shows that agroecological approaches have a positive impact on the lives of smallholder farmers. The

THE TIMBAKTU COLLECTIVE

In February 1990, after a decade of working in rural Andhra Pradesh, a small group of social activists purchased 32 acres of barren land in chronically drought-prone Ananthapuramu district of Andhra Pradesh, India. They named the land "Timbaktu". Today, it is an agroforest habitat and a community featuring a high degree of social cohesion and co-operation and prioritising the "Good Life". In November 1990, the same group registered the Timbaktu Collective (TC), a community-centric, not for profit, voluntary organisation, to "help rural communities in ecologically challenged Ananthapuramu district of Andhra Pradesh take control of their own lives, govern themselves and live in social and gender harmony while maintaining a sustainable lifestyle".

Inspired to create a holistic outreach, the Collective launched several programmes on themes of rural self-governance, livelihood enhancements, community conservation, revival of local economy and empowerment with marginalised groups such as women, dalits, people with disabilities, children, youth, smallholder farmers, artisans and agricultural labourers. Each programme saw people coming together as co-operatives as this strengthened their shared capacity to engage with and overcome their common challenges. Over the past 27 years, the Collective has successfully stamped its presence in a clear operational area of 175 villages in four administrative divisions of the district, amongst 22,500 marginalised families. It has so far promoted 13 cooperatives with various stakeholders and their federations all of which indicate viability.

process of transformation started with mobilising and organising farmers into farmer groups. Through a continuous process of training/hand-holding and capacity building, farmers have learnt agroecological approaches to farming and acquired management skills and leadership qualities. This focus on developing human capabilities and placing people at the centre of development efforts has positively impacted the lives of member farmers, their practice of farming and their interactions with the market.

A natural resource management approach is more relevant, compatible and applicable in supporting smallholder farmers. It helps to reduce poverty, ensure food security, promote self-reliance, back ecological management of productive resources and empower rural communities. While farmers will continue to be supported in the shift to agroecological farming practices, the focus will increasingly be on taking the results of TC's work to policy-makers, getting involved in participatory research and dissemination of knowledge, further strengthening the skills of its farmers' groups in directly negotiating with authorities for their rights, working towards involving more women in the decision-making process and collaborating with consumers and citizen groups for a shift in policies favouring smallholder farmers. It thus wants to:

- get involved in farmer-led participatory research and extension services to develop and disseminate agroecological knowledge;
- build capacities of farmer groups and strengthen their skills to actively participate and engage with local and regional authorities and negotiate for their rights;
- actively involve women farmers in all decision-making processes relating to scaling up of agroecological systems to address discrimination and gender inequity issues;
- collaborate with citizen groups and consumers who support/promote small-scale producer groups, and promote negotiating with policy-makers on the need for a radical shift in all policies directly or indirectly supporting industrial food regimes.

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THE FUTURE OF AGROECOLOGY IN INDIA

Small farmers in India face a double risk – in producing and in marketing. Despite a lack of specific focus in their schemes, the earlier United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government did, in a sense, set the stage for the development of organic farming in India on a large scale. Since the launch of the Organic Farming Policy of 2005, some news reports suggest that there has been an increase in the area under organic farming by about 70 per cent. Sikkim, for example, is now a fully organic state.

The current National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government has come up with Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana (Traditional Farming Development Scheme – PKVY), which is actually a repackaging of previously existing schemes. Before the NDA government came to power in 2014, the UPA government had initiated a number of schemes and programmes aimed at developing agricultural activity in the country and improving the lot of the rural people – albeit without a focus on promoting organic farming. While the PKVY definitely addresses this aspect as well as the issue of local markets more strongly, it concentrates more on the north eastern states of India.

A major thrust towards organic cultivation, however, will require a number of other initiatives and infrastructural support. Active involvement in studying crops and their diseases, development of organic manure, natural pesticides, training of farmers and provision of storage and connectivity are all important areas to look into. But as more and more states of India are turning towards promotion of organic farming, what is seen is a growing influence and lobbying from organic fertiliser and pesticide companies to use this as a medium to expand their business. That the government is supporting such a trend reflects its insufficient understanding of agroecological practices.

As Ms Arpita Mukherjee, a professor at the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), pointed out in a recent article, some of the policy initiatives to promote organic farming and exports include the development of an organic regulation for exports by the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA), removal of quantitative restrictions on organic food exports, providing subsidies to farmers under the Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana (PKVY) in partnership with the state governments, and other schemes such as the Mission Organic Value Chain Development for North Eastern Region. Mukherjee also points out the following issues faced by organic farmers that are affecting their livelihood and income:

- First, the supply chain is underdeveloped, and small and mid-sized farmers located in hilly regions and tribal belts find it extremely difficult to access the market. In a number of cases, the middlemen take away most of the profits, and farmers are not able to earn a premium price.
- Second, while the government is subsidising farmers under the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) for India, which is a self-certification process supported through the PKVY scheme, these farmers are not allowed to export.
- Third, as a farmer converts his/her land from conventional chemical-based farming to organic farming, there is a risk of loss in yield, while no subsidy is provided to compensate this loss. Further, a majority of the government budget and subsidies are targeted towards chemical-based inputs.
- Fourth, there is a serious shortage of good-quality organic inputs, which increases the risk of loss of yield. Available quantities of organic fertilisers are way below what is required, and there are a number of spurious players in the market, too. More crop-specific and region-specific research and development (R&D) on organic inputs is needed.
- The fifth and the biggest challenge faced by organic farmers is the lack of an organic policy for the domestic market and imports. With the right policy measures, organic farming is expected to grow by 20 per cent in the next five years, and the farmers will see a rise in their income.