



Vol. 1 | May 2020

EXTRAORDINARY WORK OF 'ORDINARY' PEOPLE

BEYOND PANDEMICS AND LOCKDOWNS

Examples, lessons, and specific recommendations
for communities, civil society organisations, and
government agencies

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INTRODUCTION: WHY THIS DOCUMENT?

March 2020 onwards, COVID19 pandemic related crises have affected hundreds of millions of people in India. Over 90% of the country's workforce is in the informal or unorganized sectors, and the vast majority of primary and secondary sector producers are dependent on daily marketing to earn a livelihood. The shutdown of production facilities and the inability to reach markets has meant an immediate loss of livelihoods for them. For migrant workers, there is the additional impact of being stuck away from home, and with the sudden shutdown of public transportation, they have been amongst the worst sufferers. Lack of access to basic needs like food, water, housing and so on, have affected millions.

While the immediate humanitarian crisis is visible and has generated widespread spontaneous initiatives by civil society and by several state governments to provide relief, much less common are attempts to address root causes of the suffering. The COVID crisis has sharply exposed the deep fault lines of Indian economy, society and polity. This includes the extreme vulnerability of producers and workers, and within them of women, Dalits and Adivasis, and others who are already marginalized. It also includes the folly of depending on long-distance exchanges and trade for meeting basic needs. It has shown the deep links between ecological devastation and socio-economic deprivation. Overall, the inequality and unsustainability of predominant models of 'development' have been clearly demonstrated.

In such a situation it is vital that not only are immediate relief and rehabilitation measures in place, but simultaneously fundamental rethinking of economic, social, and political approaches takes

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place. India (like the rest of the world) desperately needs to find alternative pathways of well-being, that help generate dignified livelihoods for all, and that help us move towards ecological sustainability. It needs to facilitate the self-empowerment of communities (rural, rural, urban), the building of capacity to govern and manage food, health, water, energy, shelter, education, and other basic needs and aspirations in ways that reach towards self-reliance and where possible self-sufficiency.

A movement towards such a society - swaraj in its real sense - is not only theoretical. It is already taking place in hundreds of initiatives across India. In this series of documents we would like to present such examples, from which crucial lessons can be learnt and adapted to achieve similar results elsewhere. We show how each of the major problems faced during COVID19 (all of which have been around for much longer, of course, but are more sharply visible now), has solutions, already demonstrated by communities, civil society, or government agencies somewhere in India.

We invite you to understand and learn from them, and distribute this document in whatever media and language you can. And if you have your own examples that you think others should know about, do pl let us know!

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CRISIS: FOOD INSECURITY IN VILLAGES**SOLUTION: FOOD SOVEREIGNTY AND SECURITY BY COMMUNITIES****EXAMPLE 01****EXAMPLE 02****RECOMMENDATIONS**

Photos by Ashish Kothari



(L) Narsamma & other DDS women at PRA, Pastapur; (R) Sangham organics shop, Zaheerabad

Dalit and Adivasi Women Farmers of Deccan Development Society, Telangana

Over the last 25-30 years, several thousand dalit and adivasi (pastoral) women of Zaheerabad district, Telangana, have created an agricultural revolution. Through women's collectives in over 70 villages, and membership of [Deccan Development Society](#), they have revived traditional seed and livestock diversity (especially millets) in their dryland fields, turned completely to organic and local inputs, revived mixed and multiple cropping, created grain banks in each village for easy access, and fought for land rights to women. In the process, conditions of food insecurity and malnutrition have been transformed into adequacy and nutritional health. They also run an independent public distribution system to make sure the poor have cheap, nutritious food; and [ConFarm](#), a producer-consumer arrangement with 100 families in Hyderabad. Most important, the initiative has given them the dignity they never had in a casteist, gender-inequitable society. And won them the UN's [Equator Award](#).

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During the COVID-19 lockdown, the families of these women have enough food not only for themselves, but also to share with landless families, donate for district relief measures, and provide 1000 glasses of millet porridge every day to municipality/ police/ health workers in Zaheerabad town.

LESSONS

With minimal external inputs, respecting local agro-ecological conditions, building on local knowledge, and facilitating local markets, communities even in dryland areas can achieve food sovereignty and security. India's agriculture development model is the complete opposite of this, and needs fundamental transformation.

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See also COVID-time conversation with DDS:

<https://vsoronatimes.blogspot.com/2020/04/vikalp-varta-2-self-reliant-village.html>

Photo by Ashish Kothari



Photo courtesy of DDS



(L) Shamlamma (DDS), Ippapalli village, Telangana; (R) DDS distribution of ragi porridge during Covid-19 crisis

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Photos by Ashish Kothari



(L) Kedia farmer with organic crops ; (R) Kedia organic field with amritpani sign

Kedia Organic Village, Bihar

Kedia village of Jamui, Bihar which includes 97 farmer families, adopted the Living Soils approach of ecological agriculture in 2014. Its aim was to rejuvenate the soil using biomass, and restore biodiversity by stopping the use of agrochemicals. Till then, it had been trapped in the cycle of agrochemical company seeds-extensive irrigation-monoculture of rice and wheat, which has affected 'green revolution' farmers across India.

The community, in collaboration with Greenpeace India and the state Agriculture Department, and after initial testing in a few fields, transformed their entire farming operations in 4-5 years. Now they grow all the food they need (except salt and sugar) organically, without using any inputs from outside the village. The enhanced biodiversity helps in protection against pests, and in keeping up soil fertility. They have rejuvenated open wells, now adequate for household and irrigation purposes round the year, and stopped using borewells. Importantly, this turn-around is due to changed mindsets of both the farmers and of government officials.

This initiative has influenced the Bihar government to adopt a more favourable approach to ecological farming. Its 3rd Agriculture Roadmap commits to develop one organic farming model village in each district, create organic corridors along all highways and on both the sides of river Ganga, and convert 21000 acres of farmland to organic by 2020.

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During the Covid-19 pandemic, the community has pro-actively made and distributed protective masks, and adopted the required behavioral changes. Noticing that livelihoods of daily wage earners and of some farmers were threatened by the lockdown, Kedia's farmers steered a community solidarity response. It has distributed dry ration kits (with organic rice, wheat flour, dal, mustard oil and chana) to 426 families in surrounding villages, which are not eligible for the government ration distribution programmes. The community engaged with local media, panchayat members, and civil society groups to identify and reach these families.

LESSONS

Organic, diverse, locally managed agriculture with minimum dependence on outside agencies can help achieve food security that can enable communities to tide over crises like COVID-19. Additionally they would also be in a situation to help others who are not in a similar position. Policy and programmatic support from government agencies and civil society can aid significantly in this transformation, as long as it is oriented towards creating local capacity to self-sustain the process.

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Photos by Kedia's farmers



Kedia COVID relief work

CRISIS: FOOD INSECURITY IN VILLAGES**SOLUTION: FOOD SOVEREIGNTY AND SECURITY BY COMMUNITIES**

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Recommendations for Food Insecurity in Villages

- Prioritise small producers (who constitute most of the producers in India), including farmers, pastoralists, fishers, forest-dwellers, craftspersons.
- Facilitate the formation of collectives of such people, especially the more vulnerable sections, at village and village cluster level; ensure that they have adequate access to land and other productive assets.
- Support, promote, practice organic, biologically diverse, locally eco-sensitive agriculture, with food as the highest priority. Promote the setting up of Community Grain Banks, build on traditional systems of storing and passing on local genetic material of crops and livestock.
- Ensure optimal use of water, giving high priority to dryland and rainfed farming; dis-incentivise use of bore wells and water intensive crops, and incentivize the rejuvenation of open wells and other traditional and new systems that optimize water use.
- To enable small producers to switch to such agriculture, transfer chemical fertilizer and any other Green Revolution related subsidy to organic inputs and other facilities to help in the transition period; but such support must help reach self-reliance and sovereignty, not become a perpetual dependence on government.
- Actively disincentivize big producers, especially corporate ones, through taxation and other means.
- Prioritise procurement of local produce in PDS, mid-day meals, anganvadi and other such programmes (empowering local communities to run them), in relevant public institutions such as hospitals, schools and colleges, and in private institutions; incentivize crops, livestock, fisheries that are suited to local agroecological conditions and small producer systems.
- Do not further compromise food sovereignty and security, by signing on to more trade deregulation/free trade agreements; get out of any existing such agreements.

CRISIS: LACK OF MARKET ACCESS FOR FARMERS AND INADEQUATE OR UNHEALTHY FOOD AVAILABILITY IN CITIES

SOLUTION: DIRECT FARMER-CONSUMER LINKS

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Photos by Manas Arvind



Gurgaon Farmers' Market

The [Gurgaon Organic Farmers Market](#) (GOFM) is a weekly market that has run continuously since 2014, till the COVID lockdown. This initiative connects about 20 organic farmers around Gurgaon with over 500 families living in Gurgaon. With the lockdown, the market went online, where customers have their baskets door-delivered. All these years, it has remained a profit-free and fully voluntary effort and runs with a charter of ethics.

The farmers are mostly local, from small to large, as long as they are willing to adhere to the values of GOFM. The market has both farmers and aggregators (organic stores) setting up stalls. The prices are determined by farmers themselves.

Volunteers and some enthusiastic customers visit the farms regularly, to 'verify' that they are organic; GOFM does not believe in or encourage organic certification, and works on relationships of trust. There have been cases where farmers have cheated and been asked to leave. But the incentive to remain organic is so high that these cases are extremely rare.

Manas Arvind, one of the founders, co-manages an online group farmers-markets-india@googlegroups.com, of those already running farmers markets or interested in starting one.

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Every rural area can be connected with neighbouring villages, towns and cities, with farmers, pastoralists, fishers, forest-dwellers, and craftspersons being facilitated to set up markets where they can directly reach consumers, or where small scale traders/aggregators that have fair practices can set up stalls. Most essential items will have a ready local market, considerably reducing the need for long-distance trade that is fragile (as shown by COVID!), and where profits are mostly made by middle-persons and companies.

However, one major challenge is the affordability of organic food in such arrangements; how can it be made accessible to low-income consumers also? Cross-subsidies, civil society and policy/programmatic interventions by the state, can help to some extent.

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See also COVID-time conversation at:

<https://vscoronatimes.blogspot.com/2020/04/vikalp-varta-1-farmers-markets.html>

Photos by Manas Arvind



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Photo by Dayanand Nikam



Satara farmers transporting their perishable produce to select locations

Satara 'Direct To Home' Exchange During Covid-19

With the onset of corona outbreak right after the Rabi harvesting season, farmers in Satara were faced with 2 challenges - unavailability of migrant labour to cut and lift the yield and of truck drivers for transport of their produce. This led to middlemen either not buying their produce or buying them at extremely low prices. The sudden reverse labour migration had thrown the agriculture sector into disarray across the state, and there was inadequate response from the centre.

Satara local administration, along with farmers, local mandi middlemen, civil society and social innovators started looking for [local solutions](#). Sanchit Dhumal, the deputy chief officer and head of health department at the municipal level, along with Avinash Pol, an experienced social worker, figured out the logistics for such an initiative. Their experiment for enabling direct to home delivery for essentials like grocery, milk, vegetables and fruits succeeded. It helped farmers and ensured that physical distancing norms are strictly followed. Around 38 farmers in the area, with the support of the Satara municipality, are aggregating their perishable produce, carrying them to select locations, and using loud speakers to attract

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attention from families looking for fresh produce. They are earning more money than earlier when they had to depend on the middlemen in the local mandi (market).

Permission was secured for the farmers to run a fleet of vans to transport the produce. This became an opportunity for a collective of farmers to build a direct to home delivery model. These vans, hired for Rs 1200-1500 a day, go to various residential areas, and produce is sold directly to the customers. As of April 2020, they cover around 250 households.

This model is a safer option than overcrowded mandis where physical distancing is practically impossible to enforce. For farmers, eliminating the middlemen has significantly boosted margins. Customers find this preferable due to the ease of availability and reasonable prices for the fresh produce. Regular availability of produce prevents them hoarding materials unnecessarily.

LESSONS

Facilitating direct, local, and decentralised farmer-to-consumer linkages can be of benefit to producers, consumers, and the environment in general. It can lead to local community empowerment, create positive rural-urban relations, and in general enhance the ability of communities to deal with crises like COVID.

The challenge now is to see if this model sustains beyond the COVID-19 crisis period; and also whether more organic, healthy agricultural practices can be incentivised.

CONTACT

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Photos courtesy of Navadarshanam



(L) Navadarshanam SHG Activities; (R) Navadarshanam food co-op members

Navadarshanam Community Supported Agriculture

Navadarshanam (<http://navadarshanam.org/>) is a small community founded in 1990, located in rural Tamil Nadu adjoining a reserve forest about 50km from Bengaluru. It has been exploring alternatives to the modern way of living and thinking, seeking both ecological balance and inner peace. Its residents have experimented in the areas of eco-restoration and wilderness preservation, alternative energy, sustainable organic farming, water harvesting, health and healing, as well as in promoting healthier and traditional foods.

It has also helped create and continue to guide the activities of a food initiative, as a self-help group (SHG), operated by the local villagers, that offers organic, wholesome food choices to urban consumers in Bengaluru and elsewhere, while supporting rural livelihoods and preserving traditional skills and farming ecosystems. In 2017, the SHG launched a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiative, which helps local organic farmers plan their operations based on commitments from urban subscribers for a weekly box of vegetables, fruits and groceries (with ecofriendly packaging). All commercial benefits from the enterprise are passed on to the rural

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producers of the food. For farmers that are able to follow the guidance provided, the CSA has consistently increased their incomes anywhere from 10-fold up to 20-fold over the same acreage of cultivation.

Being just inside the Tamil Nadu border, the COVID-related lockdown posed a major challenge to procure permits from two states to continue cross border deliveries – but the CSA deliveries have continued without interruption so far. Local farmers would have otherwise suffered great losses. Also with very limited market access in the red zones of Bengaluru, urban subscribers have been hugely thankful that the CSA has managed to come through with fresh local organic produce. The distributed drop locations and all in open areas have ensured that members are able to maintain norms for physical distancing and minimize risk of transmission.

LESSONS

Apart from those learnt from the other two initiatives described above, the Navadarshanam example also points to the resilience of a fair rural-urban link, overcoming even the severe limitations of the COVID-related lockdown.

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Photo courtesy of Navadarshanam



Navadarshanam
food co-op
members

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Recommendations for Lack of Market Access for Farmers and Inadequate or Unhealthy Food Availability in Cities

- Facilitate the setting up of local producer markets in decentralized manner, enabling easy access both to primary producers and to consumers. These can be between two rural areas (including through fair barter), or between villages and towns/cities.
- Incentivise organic, small-holder or artisanal based produce in these markets; if big producers are also allowed, ensure that they do not dominate.
- Do not allow corporate companies to enter such markets.
- Facilitate fair price-setting by making full information available to producers and consumers; facilitate mutual negotiations in a transparent setting amongst them.
- Enable access to low-income families to organic produce through cross-subsidies, ethical investments by consumers and others, making special arrangements in fair price shops/PDS, and absorbing some of the producers' costs like infrastructure at the market and/or transportation of produce.
- Remove GST and any other such taxes that make the playing field even more unequal for artisanal and handmade produce, including handicrafts.
- Proactively make arrangements for regular visits of urban consumers of all ages to the where primary producers work, to see, understand, and participate in production processes, and transition from being passive consumers to becoming sensitive partners.

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Photo by Shrishtee Bajpai



Photo by Jhaduram Halami & Ijamsain Katenge



(L) Mahagram Sabha; (R) Salhe village residents on getting relief package from village assembly fund

Forest based livelihoods in Korchi, Maharashtra

In north Gadchiroli (Maharashtra), in 2016, 90 gram sabhas (village assemblies) came together to form a federation called the Mahagram Sabha (MGS). This emerged from the need of a forum that could effectively resist mining that threatened their livelihoods, as also create secure local livelihoods. The [MGS](#) has been working towards asserting direct democracy, localising the means of production, restoring ecological balance through biodiversity conservation, reviving cultural identity, and transforming social relations such as gender inequity. Through all this it is questioning the existing model of development, including conventional systems of health and education, amongst others, in particular as they relate to a predominantly adivasi region.

Using the Forest Rights Act 2006 and Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996, 87 of these gram sabhas have gained their rights to govern, use and conserve their forests. This inverts a couple of centuries of centralized government control. With this, collection and trade of

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non-timber forest produce has enhanced family incomes, and community-based forest protection and management. Importantly, it has enabled a village level fund to be set up, which has been used for a number of community activities, to support health and education for needy families, and to face damage by floods and droughts. Gram sabhas that have earned well have loaned money to other gram sabhas to start financial ventures.

In COVID times, the gram sabhas' ability to earn from their forests has been crucial. In [Kukdale](#), Salhe, Gahanegata, and Zankargondi villages, ration kits have been distributed, with a focus on landless families, widows, people with disabilities, and migrant labour families.

LESSONS

Through community governance of nature and natural resources, building on local knowledge, and establishing processes of direct democracy, livelihood security and ecological sustainability can be achieved. India's economic and political model that places power in the hands of centralized state and corporations, is contrary to this, and needs fundamental transformations.

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Photos by Manjary Asok



(L) Kudumbashree members from Thiruvananthapuram district of Kerala, engaged in face shield production; (C) Kudumbashree members from Kollam district of Kerala, engaged in the process of packing the grocery kits for Supplyco; (R) Kudumbashree members arranging parcel meals at the Janakeeya Hotel at Mannanchery Panchayat in Alappuzha district of Kerala

Kudumbashree, Kerala

Kudumbashree was launched in 1998 as part of the Kerala State Poverty Eradication Mission. It is a community organization of neighborhood groups of women in Kerala, which was launched to empower women both economically and socially in rural and urban areas. The main focus of the program was that every woman in a village or a municipality should be part of this process and that the scope of the process is local. Each government initiative from food security to health insurance, from housing to enterprise development, from the National Wage Employment Programme to the Jagratha Samiti, every development experience depends on Kudumbashree to provide the community interface and hence [ensure local self-governance](#). It promotes diverse forms of production, including household items, agro-processing, and handicrafts, enabling lakhs of women to earn decent livelihoods from their own settlements.

In times of Covid, Kudumbashree has emerged as an important link between government's relief work and communities. Kudumbashree in convergence with local self-governments started Community Kitchens in local bodies, where food is being prepared and home delivered to those under home quarantine and for needy people. They have also played a very active role in disseminating information on Covid awareness, government

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instructions, connecting people through help lines etc. in villages as well as cities. Kudumbashree has prepared and sold over 2 million cotton masks through about 300 tailoring units. Also, 21 micro-enterprise units have prepared nearly 5000 litres of sanitizers. During the time of Covid-19 Kudumbashree is making face shields, a protective gear that can be used by medical staff engaged in treatment of Covid-19 patients.

LESSONS

Self-governance and empowering communities, empowering women, initiating community driven efforts can play a crucial role. In time of crises, the centralized decision making and control, rarely works as we can see in the current crises. Each state government has to make their own rules, process and have to be self-reliant to cope with challenges. The further decentralized and empowered this decision making would be the better equipped we would be deal with the crises.

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Photos by Manjary Asok



(L) The food kit distribution held at the tribal areas of Pathanamthitta district of Kerala; (CL) Kudumbashree members from Pathanamthitta district of Kerala engaged in face mask production; (CR) Kudumbashree women from Kozhikode district of Kerala engaged in sanitizer production; (R) The floating supermarket arranged by the Kainakari Panchayath CDS of Alappuzha district of Kerala

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Photos courtesy of Samaj Pragati Sahayog



(L) Earthen dam construction; (R) Sevanpanti Naala watershed management results

Livelihood and Water Security in Central India

Headquartered in Dewas, Madhya Pradesh, the Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS) one of India's largest civil society initiatives, working with its partners on a million acres of land across 72 districts in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. Much of [its work](#) in the last three decades has focused on Adivasi communities, prioritizing decentralized water security as a basis for secure agricultural and other livelihoods. Equity, sustainability, empowerment, prioritizing the most marginalized including women, are core principles.

Some key results of its work include drinking and irrigation water self-sufficiency in about 120 villages, and a consequent sharp rise in agricultural productivity, leading to 80% reduction in distress migration. Other work on livelihoods, agriculture (farming and animal husbandry), and allied activities is spread over many hundred villages; in over 120 villages, non-pesticide use farming has been promoted over more than 9000 hectares. The organizational foundation for the work is women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs), formed in over 500 villages and 15 towns (as of end-2018). Another institutional intervention is the Ram Rahim Pragati Producer Co. Ltd (RRPPCL), with 4800 women of over 300 SHGs as its members. Health and nutritional awareness and improvement are also a major focus across its region of work. Beyond its direct involvement, it also provides opportunities for people from other areas to learn, through its Baba Amte Centre for People's Empowerment.

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During the COVID crisis, SPS has reached relief to over 13,000 families in Dewas and Khargone districts of MP, with the SHGs centrally involved in identifying the most vulnerable people and in distributing relief packages. An interesting innovation was that wheat for this package was procured from several thousand local farmers through the RRPPCL, which helped them avoid having to do distress sale in the middle of the lockdown. This was made into wheat flour by RRPPCL and 118.40 tonnes of this flour worth Rs. 38 lakh was included in the relief package. Thus, a triple whammy was achieved: support to farmers through purchase of wheat at a good rate, income for farmer shareholders of RRPPCL through sale of wheat flour, and relief to the most vulnerable families through free supply of the package of essentials.

In its next phase, SPS hopes to strengthen local livelihoods further, as a long-term strategy against economic distress.

LESSONS

Empowerment of villages through institutions of self-help, especially focusing on women, and the revitalisation of local economy that reduces distress migration for work, provides enormous resilience to communities in times of crisis. This includes relative independence from state relief measures.

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Photos courtesy of Samaj Pragati Sahayog



(L) Samaj Pragati Sahayog (SPS) relief work during COVID-19 crisis; (R) Hatpipliya women's SHG federation (SPS) General Body Meeting

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Photos courtesy of Khoj



(L) Rahu Gram Sabha; (R) Bamboo depot in Rahu village, Amravati district, Maharashtra

Villages with forest rights, Melghat area, Maharashtra

Payvihir and other villages, at the foothills of Melghat in Amravati district of Maharashtra, have championed the conservation of their forests and reforestation of degraded lands after obtaining Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights under the Forest Rights Act 2006. Their gram sabhas have coordinated with various government and civil society agencies to enhance income from sources like MNREGA, dairy, and fisheries, and also moving to more organic agricultural practices. People desilt the local dams and use the silt in farm, which has increased their productivity almost 3 to 4 times. Better conservation has also enhanced habitat for wildlife.

During the COVID crisis, Payvihir immediately closed its boundaries, organised essential supplies with vendors on a weekly basis, and ensured that farmers got labour for their fields on time. They rescheduled their other works in a manner that they did not need outside workers either for agriculture or for forestry operations. The work in farm and forest has thus continued most of the time during the lockdown. The women prepared masks through their SHGs, and another SHG ensured that the PDS supply reached all the families on time. Village entry and exit is systematically recorded.

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CRISIS: RURAL LIVELIHOOD INSECURITY LEADING TO OUTMIGRATION**SOLUTION: LOCAL GOVERNANCE-BASED SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS**

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EXAMPLE 04

Another village, Rahu, coped even better as it had just distributed its share of revenues from the harvest of non-timber forest produce (especially bamboo and tendu leaves) to the tune of Rs 10000 per family. This too was possible because CFR rights under the FRA has enabled Rahu to manage its forests for the last 5 years, earning over 3 crore (30 million) rupees. The earnings are partly used for collective community activity decided in the Gram Sabha, as also for managing, protecting and working the forests.

Rahu too closed its boundaries during COVID, and organised essential supplies through a local villager. They continued to work on their farm land and also began the preparation for the harvests of bamboo and mahua. This year, about 100 families have a collection of 1 quintal of mahua flowers each. The gram sabha was contemplating procuring it from people, storing and marketing at a later stage, thereby preventing any distress sale; for this they also used the services of local banks. They now have a full one month to harvest bamboo and then organise to sell it through an open auction. There is a concern about the market response, but they are confident that there will be a way out.

LESSONS

Villages that have empowered themselves through local mobilisation and governance, and use of appropriate laws like FRA, are capable of handling crises like COVID better than others, and better than cities. Their resilience shows up in such situations. The use of appropriate digital technologies (e.g. for communicating regarding essential services and for marketing local produce) is also important.

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CRISIS: RURAL LIVELIHOOD INSECURITY LEADING TO OUTMIGRATION

SOLUTION 02

SOLUTION: SMALL-SCALE, LABOUR-INTENSIVE MANUFACTURING AND CRAFTS

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Photo by R. Elango

Photo by Ashish Kothari



(L) Kuthambakkam community meet; (R) Samathuvapuram houses and shop, Kuthambakkam, Tamil Nadu

Economic revival in Kuthambakkam, Tamil Nadu

Kuthambakkam, a village on the outskirts of Chennai, comprises of seven hamlets. Till the early 1990s, Kuthambakkam did not have roads or infrastructure, livelihoods were insecure, there was significant casteist discrimination, and cases of domestic violence against women and children were reported. The area was a major regional hub of illicit arrack brewing and black market.

It was in such a scenario that Elango Rangaswamy, having returned to Kuthambakkam from a city-based job, and winning the panchayat election in 1996, decided to try to [transform the village](#). He introduced grassroots level planning, and mobilized local people to respond to the problems of the village. His initial aspirations were to address illicit liquor production, violence against women and caste discrimination; the larger vision was to provide decent housing for all, form more self-help groups, create employment through panchayat activities, create livelihoods based on local resources, and build an economy on the principle of abundance instead of scarcity. Nearly 150 families were able to get local employment in small-scale manufacturing units. Additionally, using a state government housing scheme (Samathapuram), he managed to convince several dozen families to live in a mixed caste housing colony. One outcome of the economic revival has been less outmigration for work.

Being an engineer and inventor, Elango worked on energy saving solutions for both the public space and households, including a reasonably priced solar kit.

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A project called the Panchayat Academy was started in order to spread good practices and to educate and build capacity in panchayat leaders in Tamil Nadu. Through all this, he kept up a constant dialogue within the village, to try to maximise local participation. The primary task, says Elango, is “building the skill level towards self reliance at family level and family level clusters, leading to self reliant villages. The network of such villages will form self-informed and reliant economic zones.”

In response to COVID19, Elango has devised [a way to make disinfectant using solar power](#), which can be set up in any settlement. Communities can produce and use the technique to produce disinfectants and other sanitary products locally, and ensure full local sanitation.

LESSONS

Small-scale manufacturing can be a major source of local livelihoods in villages and towns. Additionally, struggles and innovative ways to reduce casteism are crucial. Through such economic and social transformation, conditions enabling villagers to stay back and have dignified lives and livelihoods can significantly reduce distress migration.

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See also COVID-time conversation with Elango:

<https://vscoronatimes.blogspot.com/2020/05/vikalp-varta-4-innovation-and.html>

Photo courtesy: Special Arrangement (The Hindu)



Photo by Ashish Kothari



(L) Solar disinfectant process invented by Elango R. in COVID times; (R) Manufacturing unit, Kuthambakkam, Tamil Nadu

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Photos by Ashish Kothari



(L) Master weaver Shamji Vishram Siju and young kharad weaver Damabhai Marwada, Kachchh; (C) Prakash Naranbhai Vankar, continuing ancestral tradition of carpet weaving with new innovations, Kachchh ; (R) Sheetal Hlteshbhai, one of several young women now weaving, Jamthada village

Revival of handloom weaving in Kachchh, Gujarat

As is the case with crafts in general in India, about two decades back the handloom craft and trade in Kachchh was in severe decline. Hit by the entry of cheap mass-produced industrial substitutes, and by a series of natural disasters in the last 1990s and early 2000s, it was a mere shadow of its former self. A little after this, as part of an intense civil society effort to rebuild Kachchh after the devastation, a crafts facilitation organization Khamir along with some enterprising weavers decided to try to revive handloom weaving. Innovating on the indigenous, organically grown Kala cotton, and re-establishing the chain from cultivation to cloth production, they created a range of new products that could attract a market. Within a few years the craft revived, and now has an established presence within and outside India.

This has resulted in an overall increase in [overall well-being](#), especially economic. Most importantly, it has attracted youth to either stay on in the profession, or come back to it after having worked in industries or in middle-east Asia. Their motivations for this are not only financial; equally important are the satisfaction of expressing their own creativity, being able to work at home and be with their families, being their own boss, and continuing their ancestral heritage. There is a noticeable flowering of

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innovation and creativity, and hybrid knowledge and learning systems, without losing the essence of Kachchh's vanaat.

Linked to this has also been a transformation in social relationships, including in caste (a reduction in casteism towards a community traditionally considered at the bottom of the hierarchy), gender (a greater role and voice for women), and generations (a greater assertiveness amongst youth while retaining traditional respect for elders).

However, with their products now oriented towards a national and global market (where traditionally it was mostly for local exchange), the transformation has also made the craft more fragile. With the COVID crisis, its vulnerability to the ups and downs of global trade has become sharply evident. This is likely to affect the less well-to-do amongst the weavers, such as many 'job workers' who produce for the 'entrepreneur' weavers. On the whole, though, the vankar community seems to feel that it has survived previous crises, and will outlive this one also, with customary adaptation and innovation.

LESSONS

With adequate innovation and investment, traditional craft occupations can be viable, dignified sources of livelihood, enabling younger generations to stay on in or even come back to them. Building on local knowledge, creativity and entrepreneurship while also exploring new techniques and designs, and dealing with traditional or new forms of discrimination and inequality, is important. Such occupations are not mere jobs, but livelihoods that combine the economic with the social and cultural aspects of life.

CONTACT

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See also COVID-time conversation with young weavers:

<https://vsoronatimes.blogspot.com/2020/04/vikalp-vartha-2-youth-weave-new-story-in.html>

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Recommendations for Rural Livelihood Insecurity Leading to Outmigration

- Promote localized livelihoods and local markets, giving priority to farmers, forest-dwellers, fishers, pastoralists, craftspersons, and other such producers
- Promote sustainable nature and natural resource based livelihoods, and the conservation of ecosystems and environment they are dependent on.
- Promote self-reliance and self-governance, empowering gram sabhas, mohalla sabhas, and other such local settlement based units of decision making. Give maximum priority to the full participation of women and other vulnerable sections/people.
- Enable creation of a Village Fund with appropriate rules of transparency, community benefit, and rotation of control.
- Prioritize local administration, leaders and workers for effective implementation of programs and policies.
- Support implementation of laws like Forest Rights Act, Panchayati Raj Act and Panchayat (Extensions to Scheduled areas) Act, and NREGA; connect programmes with them that create long-term local resources and capacities for communities to achieve self-reliance and self-governance
- Phase out policies and programmes that incentivize or force long-distance market dependence for basic needs
- Review all development activities and policies that involve irreversible destruction of nature and natural resources
- Eliminate incentives and sops to big industries, for all products and services that can be produced and exchanged/distributed through local communities and distributed/decentralized entities
- Eliminate incentives for machine production of products that can be produced through labour intensive methods
- Stop weakening or dilution or sidestepping of laws that safeguard basic rights of people, and conservation of nature and the environment
- Stop unfair taxation, levies, etc. (e.g. GST) on handmade products and processes; ensure MSPs for all such farm/forest/fishery produce and handicrafts, while not forcing producers to only sell to government agencies

CRISIS: COMMUNITIES UNABLE TO DEAL WITH HEALTH CRISES**SOLUTION: COMMUNITY HEALTH EMPOWERMENT****EXAMPLE 01****EXAMPLE 02****RECOMMENDATIONS**

Photos courtesy of Kunariya Panchayat

(L) Kunariya Gram Sabha; (R) Village mapping at Kunariya, Kachchh, Gujarat

Panchayat-led COVID response in Kunariya, Kachchh, Gujarat

Kunariya village is 20km from Bhuj, in Kachchh. Over the last few years it has actively moved towards effective implementation of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment that promotes self-governance of villages. The current sarpanch of the village, Suresh Chhanga, elected in 2017, has facilitated [greater public participation](#), collective decision-making, effective implementation of relevant government's schemes, and bridging the gap between villagers and government departments. Relevant information on schemes, policies and budgets, is made available to people through regular meetings and social media, to increase their participation, awareness on issues that have a direct impact on their lives, and transparency of governance. Special focus is given to facilitating the voices and opinions of women, enabling an increase in participation zero to 50%. The [panchayat has also been](#) proactive on implementing progressive laws like MNREGA and Food Security Act. There is an explicit attempt to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Kunariya has also taken a lead in interlinking of panchayats in the area. Over 115 awareness programmes reaching 16,000 people have been organised on health, education, agriculture, animal husbandry, women's participation, cleanliness, employment and environment.

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During [the COVID crisis](#), the panchayat made full use of social media to raise awareness about COVID and relevant safety measures, and facilitated house to house health survey. Only prescribed traders/producers could enter the village for selling the essential commodities. Around 316 needy families were provided food aid from the panchayat; better-off families and several farmers contributed to feed 87 of the poorest families for a month. Visually impaired and differently-abled individuals, single-women and other marginalised families were provided with food aid, necessary medicines, and other urgent and basic necessities. 106 labourers were immediately provided work through MNREGA in consultation with the local administration.

One of the most innovative steps was to reach out to elders to teach children stuck at home their special skills of music, crafts, cooking, traditional technologies, as also enable e-learning. This was because of the recognition that children were bored, missing out on going to school, and also in some cases facing aggression from elders who were stuck at home. For the future, the panchayat plans to have a separately constructed ward in case of emergency if COVID cases appear.

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Photos courtesy of Kunariya Panchayat



(L) Mask distribution during Covid; (R) Meeting with disaster management committee

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Photos courtesy of the Tribal Health Initiative



THI has brought down mortality rate and malnourishment levels in children have come down by 70%.

Health empowered panchayat's prompt response to COVID, Sittilingi, Tamil Nadu

Tribal Health Initiative ([THI](#)) is a non-profit organisation, located in the Sittilingi Valley in Dharmapuri district Tamil Nadu. It works for the welfare of the local community in the area, the Malevasi adivasis. THI was founded in 1993 by a young doctor couple from Kerala, Regi George, an anaesthesiologist and Lalitha Regi, a gynaecologist, who were inspired by Gandhian values. The project started with just a mud brick hut functioning as a clinic and labour room, and now has evolved into an ISO certified full-fledged hospital, with six doctors and 30 nurses attending close to 100,000 patients a year.

With their consistent effort with the cooperation of the locals, the initiative has brought down infant mortality rate from 157/1000 in 1993, to about 20/1000. There have been no maternal mortality cases reported in the last decade, and malnourishment levels in children have come down by 70%. THI's focus is not limited to health; it has initiated a community outreach programme, an organic farming collective, a craft initiative that aims to revive Lambadi embroidery, and a programme for mobilising women entrepreneurs.

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Their model of community mobilisation has also strengthened the local governance in the area and the [prompt response](#) of the Sittilingi Panchayat for the COVID-19 outbreak is a perfect example. The moment the announcement of the pandemic was made, Panchayat President Ms. Madheswari called for an urgent meeting with a team that included the PHC, THI, and other government departments, and went into disaster control mode.

Awareness campaigns were initiated for villages under the panchayat (with a population of about 15,000), and frequent announcements were made in autorickshaws. Physical distancing was enforced in all places of public gathering, and all shops except grocery and hotels were closed. Migrants who had returned were quarantined and the hospital started a separate OPD. As an income generation initiative, local tailors were asked to stitch masks in bulk for the villagers. Token system was introduced in the ration distribution, to prevent crowds and in some areas, fines imposed for not following handwashing rules. Daily update systems were enabled via social media as well.

LESSONS

Communities that are empowered to self-govern, and enabled to build on their own knowledge relating to health, are much better able to cope with COVID like crises, as also other ongoing health and medical issues. Dependence on outside expertise can be minimized in this manner, also thereby reducing the burden on centralized facilities and personnel.

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CRISIS: COMMUNITIES UNABLE TO DEAL WITH HEALTH CRISES

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Recommendations for Local Capacity to Handle Health and Other Emergencies

- Ensure the establishment or strengthening of local health facilities (PHCs, etc), integrating diverse systems of medicine and healthcare, under the overall governance of institutions of local self-governance in association with relevant government departments and civil society organisations; use the principle of subsidiarity, i.e. what can be dealt with at this local level should be, and block/district/state level facilities should only be for specialized services beyond this.
- Enable institutions of local self-governance to make effective use of traditional and new social media for all kinds of information flow and transparency (schemes/programmes, rules/laws, emergency measures for crises)
- Such institutions to have an updated roster of all vulnerable families/individuals and their specific needs
- Ensure that there is a special focus to facilitate the views and opinions of women and children
- Enable the convergence of all relevant government staff, overcoming their departmental silos, NGOs and local self-governance institutions
- Facilitate the understanding and planning of, and actions on, health, food, nutrition, livelihoods (agriculture, craft, entrepreneurship) in a holistic manner.
- Experiment with learning and education through life and throughout life, consisting of arts, music, dance, basic health and hygiene for everyone.

This document has been put together with inputs from Ananthoo, Shrishtee Bajpai, Sethulakshmi Vinayan, Purnima Upadhyay, Sangeetha Sriram, Ishteyaque Ahmed, Alex Jensen, Sujatha Padmanabhan, Elango Rangaswamy, Sujit Sinha, Mihir Shah, Aditi Sajwan, Suresh Chhanga, Gijs Spoor, Juhi Pandey, Gopi Sankarasubramani, Suhas Kolhekar and has been coordinated by Ashish Kothari. Design and layout by Naveed Dadan.

Citation: Vikalp Sangam, *Extraordinary Work of 'Ordinary' People – Beyond Pandemics and Lockdowns* – Volume 1, Vikalp Sangam Core Group, Pune, May 2020.

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