



## WOMEN REGAIN THEIR AUTONOMY BY REGAINING CONTROL OF THEIR SEED. Sangham community seed banks in India.

"If I have seeds in my own hands, I have the crops in my own hands. If I have the crop in my hands, I have the food in my own hands. If I have the food in my hands, I have the health and well-being of my family in my own hands."  
**Kandakam Mogulamma, biodiverse millet farmer.**

### The success story

In 1980's and 1990's priorities began to shift in dryland farming communities in India as neoliberal 'rural development' programmes aggressively pushed farmers change from their traditional farming practices to mono-cropping commercial crops like cotton, sugarcane and soyabean. The narrow focus on yields and monetary gain increasingly made traditional peasant cropping systems unattractive. Much of the development in the drylands also focused on groundwater extraction, improved seed and input subsidies for chemical pesticides and fertilizers, all in a bid to increase farmers' income. However, ultimately this path spelt doom for the soils, ecology, agro-biodiversity of the region and also created food and nutrition insecurity.

The 'Green Revolution'<sup>1</sup> development approach lured farmers away from traditional cultivation practices and vastly reduced the circulation of



seeds. The control of seeds was then passed to the market and state. Seed keeping is a traditional practice of women that is passed down from generations of women and a dire consequence

<sup>1</sup>A technology transfer approach to agriculture that emerged after World War II that promoted the use of artificial fertilizers, pesticides, and high-yield crop varieties.



of this transfer has been the loss of women's autonomy in agriculture. Their rich traditional knowledge on seed varieties and seed keeping techniques also face threat of erasure.

In 1996 the Community Gene Fund programme of Deccan Development Society (DDS) set out to reduce external dependency and re-establish women's control over seeds, the most critical link in the food chain. DDS encouraged bio-diverse cultivation of the local crops like millets, pulses and oilseeds, starting with establishing seed security for women. Interactions with seed keepers from different villagers made it clear that saving the variety of seeds is the first step towards saving the variety of crops, and only women were interested in such preservation due to their holistic perspective of farming in terms of food, health, economic and cultural values of these crops. Thus, DDS realized

that by first supporting community level seed banks to facilitate sharing and exchange between farmers, women's position in agriculture as seed keepers and decision makers can also be restored and promote community cohesion between these poor women.

This effort, involving nearly 5000 women in 75 villages, has been successful in achieving seed sovereignty for the women involved in the project and has created a vast network for sharing and exchanging varieties. Local seed varieties, which were being invisibilized, are conserved at community level in seed banks where women can borrow and deposit, and consequently also preserve on their farms. Traditional seed preservation practices are also followed to retain and enrich the seed quality.



There has been a significant increase in crop biodiversity as women who used to grow 4-5 varieties now grow 15-20 varieties of crops in their farms. The seed varieties saved with traditional methods in the seed bank are known to exhibit a better germination rate compared to the seeds found in market.

When sown in traditional mixed cropping systems and with farmyard manure, these seeds give higher yields than improved varieties. Traditional seed keeping practices like storing asphyxiating

foxtail millets around, and using cow dung, neem leaves and ash prevent pests and ensure their quality does not deteriorate in storage.

Several key members have won prestigious awards for their efforts. In 2015, Ms. Anjamma, a veteran DDS farmer and expert seed keeper, was awarded the 'Plant Genome Saviour Award' by the Protection of Plant Varieties & Farmers Rights Authority, India (PPVFRA) for her efforts in preservation and conservation of local varieties of seeds and extinct varieties of plants



## How the sangham seed banks programme was implemented

The programme which started in 1996, is still running successfully. Initially the programme created a community level seed bank in every operating village of the organization by gathering the voluntary collectives of women (sangham) of the village. Within the first two years of implementation of the programme, around 500 women recovered 50 traditional landraces and set up seed banks in 30 villages.

Later women started saving for themselves in their own household seed banks and trading with other farmers if any of them fell short on their varieties. Currently, the women farmers of 1 500 households who have participated in this programme have become seed sufficient to hold individual seed banks. There is an operating Central Seed Bank at Machnoor Village that stores up to 85 varieties of seeds. Machnoor Seed Bank lends seeds to villages or organizations that desire to return to millets cultivation or to revive a crop. It also provides seeds to other community seed banks when they lack a variety of seeds. Women farmers who contribute and hold the control of seed banks among themselves are the key

implementing partners of the programme. Local artisans are also involved since seeds are mostly stored in weaved baskets. Women on different levels - household, community and regional level – are working practically to preserve seeds and orally to share their knowledge with other farmers to conserve the biodiversity in the region.

Central to the success of the programme were the key strategies of promoting local community participation, womens' leadership and Indigenous knowledge preservation. Sanghams played the main role in this effort through their observations and the way they looked at the entire seed keeping effort, which formed the logic of the community gene bank. DDS had a network of over 70 sanghams with a membership of nearly 3 500 women. The organisation was able to facilitate networking among these sanghams for sharing and exchanging varieties. Special budgetary support was not requested for this project. However, DDS used its own resources and around 1 million rupees (roughly US\$12 200) was spent on this work.





## Key lesson

Women's participation and leadership is vital in community seed-sharing systems. Male farmers mostly value monetary benefits and trade seeds for money, whereas women farmers are more patient about seed saving and sharing with other women. Seed also carries a cultural value to women who participate in most agricultural rituals and it is sort of taboo for some women to sell such seeds for money.

To preserve regional cropping systems and food systems, policy makers are focussing on promoting extension service at post-harvest stage with value-chains and marketing. Such programmes should take a more comprehensive look and realize that seed sovereignty is important in preserving local crop varieties.

## CROPS4HD

This document is an output of the CROPS4HD project ([www.crops4hd.org](http://www.crops4hd.org)): a consortium of SWISSAID, FiBL, and AFSA supported by the SDC and LED. CROPS4HD has three major components: production, market and policy advocacy.

alliance of civil society actors involved in the fight for food sovereignty and agroecology in Africa. Its members represent small-scale farmers, pastoralists, hunters/gatherers, indigenous peoples, faith-based organisations and environmentalists from across Africa. It is a network of networks, currently with 37 members operating in 50 African countries.

AFSA, which is responsible for advocacy, is a broad

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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