

Very Much on the Map: the Timbaktu Collective

Author - Ashish Kothari, Published on - 27.3.2018

Kalpavriksh



March 2014 (partially updated in August 2016)

Partially sponsored by ActionAid, New Delhi



Beginnings

Located in the Ananthapuramu district of Andhra Pradesh, close to the town of Penukonda, the Timbaktu Collective is an initiative to empower villagers (particularly the poorest amongst them) to take charge of their own future, and the future of their land and natural resources. It began as a tiny effort by Mary Vattamattam and C.K. ('Bablu') Ganguly, a couple that wanted to move away from the constant agitationist mode they were involved in as part of the Young India Project (organizing farm labour), into doing some constructive work in a few villages. Their desire was to not only demand change towards justice, but to actively and practically facilitate such change. They realized that one way to do this was to address the issue of land and agriculture, given the predominant dependence of rural India on these. Aided by a few other individuals such as John D'Souza (one of the founders of the well-known Centre for Education and Documentation), in 1989, they bought 32 acres of land near Chennekothapalli village, in the middle of an area where deforestation and land mismanagement had converted the hills into barren rock and the soil unproductive. It was a bold, almost foolish attempt at doing something in an area that had been given up as a gone case, both by the government and by many of the villagers themselves.

[While land and agriculture were primary concerns for Bablu and Mary, and to this end they initiated the regeneration of their own barren area, they quickly realized that the social dynamics of women's marginalization were crucial to any understanding of how change could take place. Thus began a process of mobilizing women to form collectives for savings, self-help, and mutual aid. As described below, the move towards sustainable, organic farming was an outcome of learnings from this initiative.](#)

From a tiny start working in a handful of villages, the Timbaktu Collective (TC) today is spread over 172 villages, its more than 120 full-time employees spearheading a variety of rural reconstruction initiatives (www.timbaktu.org; <http://tc-ckp.blogspot.in>). These include:

- Women's empowerment, rights and welfare activities such as livelihood and welfare cooperatives, thrift and credit groups, legal aid and support for women in distress;
- Rural enterprises including a farmer producer company, livelihoods for the landless, and training courses in enterprise management;
- *Childrens' rights and welfare activities, including a resource centre for rural children, advocacy for rights, and quality improvement of government schools;*

- **Ecological restoration and conservation, including the regeneration of a vast grassland (Kalpavalli), the forests around the main TC campus, water harvesting and conservation, and organic farming to revive biodiversity and the land;**
- **Advocacy and activities in support of 'disabled' children and adults.**

While TC's efforts are on a wide variety of these fronts, this case study focuses on two related aspects: organic farming, and farmers' producer cooperative.

Institutional structure and visioning

The specific work on farming and marketing described in this case study, as also other activities of TC, are carried out within an institutional structure that attempts to be fully participatory and democratic. The staff (about 120 as on mid-2016) that work on various activities form a panchayati, that meets once in two months for sharing experiences, decision-making, practical work, and (to quote Ganguly), "fun, games and movies"! There are several working groups, e.g. relating to the work with women; the coordinators of these groups form a core group that meets regularly for operational discussions and decisions. Committees on ethics, gender, sexual harassment and other aspects work to ensure that basic standards of human rights, legality, etc are maintained. The approach is to find interested people to take responsibilities of various kinds, and follow a broad framework that enables flexibility and encourages people to devise their own operating procedures.

A part of this participatory process is also vision-building. In Ganguly's words: "None of what has happened can happen without vision building exercised with the people. That's what community mobilization is all about. Actually it's far more than just vision building, it's all about building social capital, it's about bringing in new concepts, about making people think, stretching their capabilities, learning how to cooperate, etc. For instance, we had a series of meetings with the farming families before the sanghas were formed. Then we had a series of meetings with the sangha and other leaders before Dharani was registered. The rules of Dharani and organic farming were developed along with the leaders, some of who became the promoting Directors of the Cooperative. Member education remains a very important element in the work so that every member understands how the cooperative works. All decisions are made in the director meetings and then disseminated through the leaders meetings and sangha meetings, and this is a continuous process."

The above is also significant considering that the vast majority of the TC staff are local people (of 120, less than 10 are from outside). There is also an attempt to make several of the groups independent and autonomous (I will come back to this point in the concluding section).

Towards an organic future

TC's initial work on financial empowerment of women through thrift societies and self-help groups, has had a number of interesting offshoots. One of these is in agriculture. Several of the women's thrift groups realized that amongst the most common items for which loans were taken, was the expensive inputs (fertilizers, pesticides) that farmers had to put into cultivation. Simultaneously in the mid-2000s TC had started some demonstration plots to showcase the potential of organic farming along with conducting annual seed festivals. Women asked for help in experimenting with this organic farming on their own lands, and thus began a major programme to promote sustainable agriculture.

The difficult context in which this process had to work is important to understand. Ananthapuramu is amongst India's driest areas, with an average rainfall of 380 mm, and regular droughts. Traditionally the farmers had adapted to this with innovative dryland techniques including the extensive cultivation of millets (jowar, bajra, ragi, and others), and predominant concentration on food crops^[1]. But government programmes over last three decades pushed the cultivation of groundnut as it gave good economic returns, to the extent that at one stage about 90% of the cropped area in the district was taken up by just this one crop (the country's largest monocrop groundnut growing district)^[2] When successful, this gave the farmer a good return, but if it failed due to drought or pests, the result was economic devastation. Additionally the cultivator was locked into a vicious cycle of greater and greater input costs (especially pesticides), growing dependence on government and corporate entities, and declining fertility of the soil reducing productivity. Farmer distress has become all-too common. Also, groundnut reduces the relative control of women over agriculture and food, as it is a commercial, market-oriented, and heavy-technology crop much more amenable to men's control.

In general, the small dryland farmer in the region has had a tough task just surviving. Both economic forces and official attitudes militate against them, and increasingly it is drilled into their heads that they are simply not viable, especially if they don't adopt new technologies and methods including irrigation, chemicals, and hybrids. TC's initiative on sustainable farming is aimed at showing that the small farmer can indeed not only be viable but thrive, and that too in ecologically sustainable ways.

In the early years, TC supported farmers with millet seeds, regeneration of land, soil fertility enhancement (using natural inputs), biomass improvement and enhancement, sprayers for natural pesticides, and other such inputs. Farmers were required to contribute 15% of the costs in cash or kind. More than 1000 farmers were also given Halikar cattle, the local sturdy breed that had begun to disappear from the area; thus far, over 1000 pairs have been given, and are doing so well with numbers having multiplied 2-3 times. They are especially important because of being drought resistant, useful as draught animal, for their dung and urine, and as an asset that can be rented out. In subsequent years, major inputs by TC have been training, Sangha formation (see below), and Farmer Field Schools (enabling decisions at field level).

Transforming this scenario has been a slow struggle, but the demonstration effect has won hundreds of farmers over. Villages like Brahmanapalli, Kondakindapalli and Hariyancheruvu, amongst the first to try the organic techniques, are now almost 100% converted (Brahmanapalli did go 100%, but of late a few large farmer families have reverted to chemicals). Many farmers have added (or brought back) millets, castor, corn, redgram, green gram and other pulses to groundnut, all of this with only organic inputs that are produced locally. They report no loss in yield if one measures what is finally available to consume, and a substantial reduction in financial costs; several report an increase in yields even from a conventional, grain-only count.

In the most recent study, Shylaja Rao (2016) states: "over the years, there has been an increase in the number of farmers opting for millet cultivation since gross profit margin percentage from groundnut cultivation was a mere 5% (Rs.450/acre) while profits from millet cultivation were a high 45-50% (Rs. 3500-4500/acre). Also the cost of cultivation of millets is significantly less (about 50%) than cultivation of groundnut primarily due to reduced seed cost. In the event of crop failures

farmers are able to manage the losses incurred without undue stress/indebtedness. The assured market for millets through Dharani at pre-fixed prices which is usually about 25-50% more than the open market price for millets and the patronage bonus issued by Dharani has been an additional incentive for farmers to adopt millet cultivation.”

There is *reportedly* also an increase in self-consumption, as food crops like millets make a come-back, thereby reducing their need to buy foods from the market. The long-term nutritional benefits of this should be substantial (*though not currently measured*). Enhanced incomes have also been reported by the farmers, as have substantial improvements in soil quality. A recent independent assessment confirmed many of these results (see Box 1).

Box 1: Results of organic initiative

A detailed assessment of TC's organic initiative, carried out in 2013, came up with the following results: “60% of the study group recorded an increase in yield, 21% did not record any change in yield, while 19% recorded a decrease in yield... 61.1% of the farmers say that they have had increased household income, 78.6% farmers say that they have been able to actively participate in thrift and savings programs, 64.1% are able to meet the family's requirements without borrowing and dependency on money lenders has gone down by 73.8%... 70.9% of the study group has seen an improvement in the soil quality since the beginning of the organic program, while 54.4% of the population feels that their plants are able to withstand longer periods of water stress than before, 84.7% of the study group have recorded a decrease in chemical use since the start of the organic program... 75.5% of the group has observed more interaction among family members and collective decision-making is the norm in about 69.9% families. About 63.1% of the study group has recorded reduced migration of men to urban areas in search of livelihoods, while about 64.3% are able to better manage the food and nutritional needs of the family. As a direct consequence of the program the farming families now include millets, pulses and milk in their diet, contributing to food and nutritional security of the households. At the community level, 87.4% of the group feels that there is increased participation of women and youth in discussions/decision making; interaction among community members has increased by about 65%. As a result of this program 55.3% of the group is aware of the power of collective bargaining.” From: Rao 2013.

Two crucial institutional innovations have made this possible. At the village level, farmers are organised under Sanghas, which assume a kind of mutual aid and collective action function. Though initially the farmer sanghas formed in each village comprised 15-20 to 70-80 members, it was subsequently decided to standardize this to about 2 sanghas of 15 HH each in every village. In about 45 villages, such sanghas are divided into three groups of 5 farmers each, called

brundams

, which perform the essential functions relevant to the Participatory Guarantee Scheme (see Box 2 below). In the newer villages, though sanghas of 5 members each (those with adjacent plots, to aid in peer pressure and support) can be formed. These sanghas meet twice a month; leaders of all sanghas meet once a month. Additionally there is also one organic field worker, employed by TC, to support about 100 farmer members. Each sangha keeps full records and accounts. Three adjoining villages form a 'constituency', and one Director is appointed for each of these, elected from amongst Sangha leaders. The TC field workers assigned to help the Sanghas are trained in organic techniques, book-keeping etc, including at institutions like Centre for Sustainable Agriculture and Agriculture Man Ecology Foundation.

According to Rao (2016), “This decentralization of functions and activities has achieved transparency as well as greater involvement and participation of the local communities in project activities.”

Box 2: Participatory Guarantee Scheme (PGS)

TC has been one of the pioneers of the Participatory Guarantee Scheme (PGS) for certification of farmers and their produce as being organic (see <http://www.pgsorganic.in>). Groups of 5 farmers (called brundams) with adjacent fields keep a watch on each other (for anyone not following organic principles could endanger the organic status of the others); neighbouring groups of farmers do the same; and finally organic field workers and coordinators of TC keep a check. Inspection sheets are filled up by brundam members and given to the sangha with the recommendations for approving or denying certification. Usually these sheets of all farmers are put in sangha meeting and discussed case by case. The approved list of farmers for PGS certification is then prepared and sent to TC, the regional council. Any farmer found defaulting is debarred from being a member; however, depending on the situation and sincerity of the farmer, s/he may be given a chance to continue in the group on his/her promise for not using chemical fertilisers again, or be asked to come back after being organic for three years. There is twice a year (pre and post-harvest) inspection at 1st stage. All this is in line with the national PGS Organic Council guidelines.

All the documents utilised in the process are in Telugu, which enables the farmer members to participate. Training programmes have been organized for the farmers on certification and methodology under PGS system. They are all given a copy of Indian Organic Standards in Telugu. The standards are also printed in flex poster and displayed in the Sangha offices. The consolidated data is sent to the Secretariat of the PGS Organic Council every year. The certificates for the approved sanghas are received from the PGSOC and the certificates are displayed in the sangha offices. In first three years, the produce of the farmer is treated as 'organic-in-conversion' and from fourth year it is certified organic.

A second innovation is equally important. Traditionally farmers have been systematically cheated by traders buying their produce at low rates (or using faulty weighing machines). TC initiated a farmers' marketing organisation, the Dharani Farming and Marketing Mutually Aided Cooperative, which buys the organic produce at a slightly higher than market rate and sells it, with profits coming back to the farmers after cutting expenses (

<http://www.timbaktu-organic.org/>

). Dharani is explored in greater detail below.

The initiative has also helped to revive agricultural biodiversity, which was being lost in the government and market-led drive to grow groundnut. So far TC has been able to document and collect 28 varieties of rice, 31 of millets, 18 of pulses and 7 of oil seeds. The farmer sanghas are constantly trying out these for local adaptability, productivity, soil health, consumption preferences, and other factors that are important in farmers' choice of the crop mix. However, the results are uneven and a lot more will need to be done to promote biodiversity (see issue of rice diversity in Kondakindapalli case study below). TC also introduced prosomillet, and other native crops like kodo millet and barnyard millet, which was welcomed and cultivated by more and more farmers over the last three years.

Having started in 2005-06, by 2012 TC had facilitated about 1050 families in 34 villages spread over 3000 to 3500 acres, to go organic. Then in 2013 it decided to expand substantially and over the next three years it brought into the fold a total of 1620 families spread over 43 villages and 8700 acres, comprising 118 sanghams

[3]

. This includes some irrigated lands (1700 acres) as the government has begun providing sprinkler and drip systems and several farmers are employing them. Such lands are an extra challenge as they are more prone to monocrop of groundnut, and harder to retain or convert into millets. Another recent challenge is the government's promotion of millet hybrids, with a package of chemicals resulting in high productivity; there is a need for research in increasing productivity of the traditional varieties to counter this. Yet another issue being faced is change in rainfall patterns, perhaps linked to climate change; with increasing unpredictability, groundnut could no longer be dried out in the fields, so had to be brought home and stacked up, difficult for those with small houses.

As of mid 2016, about 900 farmers were certified as being fully organic and 642 more members have completed 3 years in conversion and have applied for organic certification from PGS Organic Council. For a brief period the PGS certification was being supplemented with an IMO certification, partly because TC and Dharani themselves wanted a third party check or audit, and partly because bulk buyers required it. However, the IMO process was expensive, and was discontinued.

Given the serious challenges organic farming posed, in most villages the share of farmers which has converted to fully organic is small; only in a few villages are they in the majority.

[Kondakindapalli \(Yerajinanagaripalli\): Towards 100% organic](#)

A village of about 100 households, all belonging to the Boya caste (technically, BC status), Kondakindapalli has rapidly adapted to organic farming and is now almost 100% free of chemical use.

Till about five years back several farmers in the village were using chemical fertilizers and pesticides. TC staff had begun to come and talk about organic farming, and several villagers were also beginning to question their use of chemicals due to health problems and growing costs. They were also seeing the positive experience of nearby Venkatampalli (which had begun going organic in 2005), so they requested TC to introduce organic techniques in 2008. Having seen TC's work through the Adisakthi Mutually Aided Thrift Cooperative Society of women (with 5910 members and a capital base of Rs. 6.98 crores), they trusted the organization. Also many farmers had never converted to 100% chemical, and a number of cultivators were still using organic techniques, especially for millets. A gradual conversion was therefore possible. The formation of Sanghas helped in mobilizing people and providing support.

Over the first five years, nearly all the households of the village have become organic. Only three families were holding out, saying they don't want to get into the hassles of attending frequent meetings and the pains of conversion from chemical to organic. So far, the experience is that yields are the same as when they were using chemical, and even if a bit less, the economics works out much better as input costs are minimal. Moreover, earlier with monocropping a single failed season was disastrous; now with multicropping, even with less rain or with disease and pest attack, some crops succeed. A number of traditional or new pest control techniques are employed, including organic sprays of 5 to 10 ingredients each ('panchapatra' and 'dasapatra' kasayams) in the fields, and the use of plants like jilledu (Calotropis) for stored crops (instead of the hazardous Gamaxene).

[Box 3: Farmer stories from Kondakindapalli](#)

[Yashodhamma has a 8-member household. In her dry fields, she grows korra, jowar, green gram, redgram, cowpea, mostly for home consumption and some sale to Dharani. Her irrigated fields grow paddy, chilli, vegetables and flowers. She has always been organic, and has now been encouraged to remain so with the support and buy-back arrangements of Dharani. Suryanarayana and Nagaraj Bogga, sons of Lakshmi and Lakshmana Narsamma, grow a mix of fruits, vegetables, flowers on what was previously fallow land. Some is for home consumption, some for the market. They initially got the idea of doing mixed organic cultivation from a training programme at TC, and subsequently developed their own ideas of what kind of mix could be tried. On some drylands, they also grow millets, groundnut and pulses. Till about 6 years back they used chemicals for groundnut, now it is all organic. Anand Boggu grows paddy \(only one variety\); he used to apply chemicals till 2008, even though he knew its negative impacts on health and soil, did not think there was an alternative. When TC came with an alternative, he decided to experiment. He is quite happy with the yields, which are about 30-35 bags \(approx. 22-26 quintals\) per acre, and the economic returns which are high since input costs are minimal; earlier he would have to spend about Rs. 5000 on DAP/urea per acre, and about Rs. 20,000 for pesticides in a season. The physical labour is greater in organic farming, but it is worth it. Last year his organic tomatoes got the best rates in Kollar market, earning him Rs. 2 lakhs \(this year he hopes to make 3 lakhs\).](#)

Several farmers have either retained millets in their drylands, or brought them back into cultivation; however, rice and groundnut remain dominant in the irrigated lands. No traditional varieties of rice are being grown any more; farmers said the seeds are not available, if TC could reintroduce them and offer to buy back, some farmers might try re-growing, otherwise it is unlikely that there will be a significant conversion since everyone seems to like the new varieties for their taste and marketability.

Women report that while earlier a lot of cash was needed to keep up agricultural operations, now there is less cost, and more nutritious food at home. Some families have switched back from drinking Boost to ragi malt!

While 30 farmers started with two Sanghas in 2008, by 2013 this had increased to 60 farmers in four Sanghas (Vinayak, Jawaharlal, Lakshmi Narasimha and Sanghameshwara). The earlier Sanghas are 100% organic, the new ones have applied for certification.

Farmers are relatively happy with the fact that they can sell their organic produce at good prices, much of it purchased by Dharani (see below). Dharani eliminates middlemen, releasing farmers from exploitative conditions and malpractices such as the use of faulty weights. The elimination of chemicals has also meant improved health for both humans and other animals. It has also led to an increase in bird populations, which in turn help to keep pests down.

Kondakindapalli's success with organic has reportedly had repercussions in neighbouring villages, with Pallenagaripalli wanting to experiment (some big farmers already trying it), and Puletipalli already about 50% organic.

Box 4: Gramasiri (labour) sanghas For the landless families in the village, TC organized them into Labour Sanghas under the Gramasiri agricultural labour livelihoods and marketing cooperative. 15 households in Kondakindapalli are part of this; the cooperative gives loans to purchase livestock (mostly goat or sheep) and these are used by the families as a revolving asset. From an initial set of 75 animals in 2008, by 2013 the population had been built to 364, and families earn several thousand rupees per year in the sale of their surplus stock. Narsimhulu Bariperu Chinnaka and Chinamma, a couple with almost no assets, were started off with 5 animals in 2009; today they have 20, having meanwhile sold about 25 and through this managed expenditure related to a wedding, food, clothes and house improvements. Across TC's functioning area, there are about 927 landless families in 47 villages that have benefited from this programme. All the Sanghas have also started thrift activities, and TC helps with training for additional livelihoods and entrepreneurship, handling accounts, etc. In 13 villages (not including Kondakindappalli) the Sanghas also manage common pasture land development. Gramasiri is now a producer owned, livelihood cooperative with 927 share holding landless labourers with a capital base of Rs. 1.21 crores. It now plans to explore getting into meat industry as a collective business.

Dharani: Towards producer control

The idea of forming a cooperative arose out of the experience of farmers getting less returns when selling individually to traders and having no say in the prices they got. The Adisakthi women's cooperative was registered in 1997-98 as a thrift cooperative; in 2005-06, with the Timbaktu Collective's support, it started an organic marketing wing to help market the produce of members who had turned organic. This wing was called Adisakthi Dharani, and in 2008, the *Dharani Vyavasaya Mariu Marketing Paraspara Sahayaka Sahakara Sangham Ltd (Dharani Farming and Marketing Mutually Aided Co-operative society Ltd, or Dharani FaM Co-op Ltd)* was registered under Andhra Pradesh Mutually Aided Co-operative Societies Act, 1995. Adisakthi Dharani's balance sheets were transferred to it. Initial capital was raised from well-wishers of TC in the form of low-interest social investment loans, and membership fees.

Farmers are ordinary members of Dharani, with a share capital of Rs. 1000 each. Every five farmers makes a unit (brundam), and three brundams make a sangham (approx 15 farmers). Every village has an office for these sanghams, and 1-2 people to assist in bookkeeping, office maintenance etc. Two leaders from each Sangham come together at the mandal level, forming a leaders' council that meets once a month at TC. Every 3 villages form a constituency, and a constituency Director is elected by members. The Board consists of 12 such Directors, and three nominated members (CEO Dharani, Chairperson TC, and Board member of Adisakthi). The Board meets monthly, while the General body meets once a year.

Membership of Dharani is getting close to 1650 (from ~1100 in 2012), with a total share capital and deposits of over Rs. 27 lakhs. However, given constraints of storage and processing, thus far only about 500 farmers can be supported with 100% purchase of their produce.

Box 5: Basis for Dharani Initiative

"When the Timbaktu Collective (www.timbaktu.org) initiated its organic farming project in Ananthapuramu dist, there were certain areas that required immediate attention in order to relieve the farmers from their distress situation. The Collective felt that a producer owned processing and marketing venture would be able to address the following major issues. **Unavailability of Credit**

Due to recurring drought conditions, most of the borrowers in rural areas of Rayalaseema region cannot repay the loans borrowed earlier. In view of this, financial institutions keep them as de-faulted borrowers, included in the black list, ceasing their chance of borrowing again. This had become a stumbling block to majority of the rural households in all the regions in the state particularly in Rayalaseema region. Consequently, the dependency on moneylenders and private financiers leading to increase in the cost of production, unremunerative cultivation and increased indebtedness.

Exploitative Trading

An entire district of farmers specialising in one crop, had also significantly increased market risk for farmers. Private traders and groundnut processing mill owners, whose pricing and weighing methods are at unfair terms, control much of the local market. These traders and mill owners often also couple as suppliers for farm inputs such as seed, chemicals and credit to farmers. The relationship as a whole is exploitative and often leaves the farmer at the mercy of the trader/mill owner. With the entire local system tuned and built to support only groundnut, in terms of marketing, credit, insurance, inputs, production know-how or social support, the farmer is forced to go back and continue growing groundnut, but only to further sink in the mire. **Trade policies and increased market risk**

The purchase price of groundnut has also been affected by policies relating to oil imports and trade. Imported **Palm oil**, sold at much lower price than that of groundnut oil. The local groundnut purchase price was affected by the situation in Maharashtra-Gujarat (which are other major groundnut producing regions) and bigger traders up the value chain, which only further exposed the Ananthapuramu farmer to greater market risk. **No access to growing Organic food market**

The Organic food market is growing at a healthy rate of 15-25% worldwide. In India too, the awareness for Organic and healthy nutritious food is on a constant rise. Much of the organic food grown today in India, as well as the organic guarantee systems developed, are focused on export markets in European Union, United States and Japan. The focus on export allows nutrition to 'leak out' from the country. Small-holder farmers have no direct access to this growing market and neither do they benefited from its added margins for lack of proper infrastructure and the requisite technical and marketing ability."

(from TC's note on Dharani)

Dharani offers a guaranteed price for millets like bajra (pearl millet), jowar (great millet), ragi (finger millet), korra (foxtail millet), and sama (little millet), arika (kodo millet), bariga (proso millet), oodara (barnyard millet), which is higher than the market (on average by 25 to 33%), and has offered to purchase all the millet that members can provide. It also purchases groundnut and paddy, but at market prices. There is a deliberate attempt at promoting millets, which has led to a gradual revival in cultivation (as mentioned above) and an increase in purchase. From an earlier 80-20 groundnut-millet purchase proportion, it is now 60-40. Millets also get farmers a bonus of Rs. 5/kg, if there is a surplus generated that can be distributed to members; groundnut bonus is only Rs. 1/kg, and paddy Rs. 2/kg. Other crops purchased include pigeon pea, green gram, and cowpea.

Products (of which currently there are about 50) are sold under the brand Timbaktu Organic. Dharani keeps 20% of final sale for organizational expenses and overheads; of the rest, 65% goes to farmers, and 15% goes into direct costs (packaging, transport, grading). Dharani stores after purchasing from farmers; no preservatives are used to increase the shelf life. Some processing units have been bought but with the significant increase in procurement, these are not adequate; future plans include expanding the processing capacity. However, the processing does not include any mixing of sugar etc, which some other groups do.

Dharani has tied up with about 240 dealers, who are somewhat discerning and not whole-sale, mostly from Bengaluru, some Kurnool, Ananthapuramu, Hyderabad, Vijayawada, Vishakapatnam, Mysore, Coimbatore, Salem and Chennai.

Dharani's financial status has been steadily improving. In 2010-11, it broke even for the first time (for the year's expenses); by 2011-12 with sales of Rs. 56 lakhs, it had recovered cumulative losses from the past and therefore fully broken even; in 2012-13 sales increased to Rs. 98 lakhs, and it could distribute bonus to members for first time; by 2015-16, it has distributed over 15 lakhs as bonus over 4 years, as the annual sales revenue had crossed the 2 crores mark in that year.

[4]

Part of the Dharani team (7 out of 14) is now paid fully by the Cooperative itself, while the remaining are paid by the Timbaktu Collective.

To get here, Dharani had to diversify its products, including some value added ones that fetched good revenues; it had to increase storage and processing capacity, and add one more cycle of procurement to the two per year so far. To the earlier list of products like millet flour, ragi malt, rice, honey, millet biscuits, peanut powder and laddu, and table peanuts, it has added various ready-to-make mixes including pongal, ragi dosa, ragi laddu, multi-millet laddu, and payasam, as also snacks like three kinds of murukus. It has also set up a distribution point for consumers in Bengaluru (not a retail shop, only a pick-up point), and is considering to collaborate with online retailers.

Has Dharani had the problem of promoting a shift away from self-consumption to the market, thereby inadvertently reducing the availability of nutritious foods in the home? Apparently this may be happening with pulses. But in the case of millets, with the effort of Dharani combined with TC's organic initiative and general awareness programmes, self-consumption of millets may be on the rise. This needs to be assessed, especially from the perspective of the farmer household's nutritional and food security independent of the market.



Oil bottling at Dharani's production unit

Analysis: In the right direction, but some way to go...

From available indications the TC initiatives on organic farming and the producers' cooperative have yielded several positive results: improvement in food security and sovereignty through both increased local availability and enhanced incomes, the spread of organic cultivation methods helping in healthier soils and environment, the revival of millets in cultivation and in people's diets, the empowerment of women in the governance of agricultural and other operations, greater economic returns for smallholder farmers showing that economies of scale can work for them also, enhanced livelihoods for the landless, the regeneration of commons, and others.

The work of groups like TC is also crucial to demolish a perverse myth sustained for the last few generations in India, that dryland farming is unviable. Given adequate access to diverse, appropriate, and good quality seeds (especially millets), decentralized water harvesting and conservation, membership of collectives where members can help each other out, the ability to combine the best of traditional and new knowledge, greater decision-making to women, and other such factors described in this report, there is every possibility of dryland farming being not only viable but able to provide food and livelihood security. Where it can be based predominantly on local inputs, it can also be a pathway to food and natural resource sovereignty. Examples of such viability are found in many parts of India,

[5]

unfortunately submerged under the blitzkrieg of misinformation fed by the agricultural establishment.

[TC's use of PGS is also pathbreaking, for it shows the potential of cheap, democratic forms of certification that consumers and official agencies find acceptable. Several other farmer groups in India are now using it. It would in fact be interesting to see if it has relevance to other sectors too, for instance in certifying community-based home stays, or crafts.](#)

Equally important is TC's stress on creating institutions that could last longer than project periods, and become a fulcrum of processes of change. In the case of agriculture which is the focus of this case study, the farmer sanghas (or sanghams) and the producer company Dharani are the relevant examples (though in other fields TC has created other institutions also). Its own *panchayati* of the staff is also an interesting innovation, as an attempt at democratic functioning that involves all the workers of TC, reducing arbitrary or solely top-down decision-making.

But there also remain serious challenges. With a significant expansion of organic practices, the infrastructure of TC and Dharani to manage procurement, storage, and processing has fallen behind, resulting in occasional frustration for farmers whose produce has not been procured or has been procured late. At Kondakindapalli farmers complained that their produce had not so far been procured (the delay was clarified by the TC staff member present). The TC staff itself is stretched to its limits, given especially the significant expansion of membership after 2013. This has necessitated TC and Dharani to invest in establishing two more processing units in two mandals. The need to increase staff from amongst the members themselves, or other youth from the villages, is urgent; TC could perhaps also ask to run the existing or a new Krishi Vigyan Kendra where further training and orientation could be given to create a bigger cadre.

Though the spread of organic cultivation and the membership of Dharani have been impressive, in a large number of villages those who have registered or are known to have switched to organic practices, remain a minority. Only in a few villages are they in the majority. There is however apparent demand from many other farmers to make the switch, if they could get adequate facilitation. Here too the need for a bigger cadre of resource persons.

While in general there has been a stress on increasing diversity of crops, and bringing back into cultivation traditional varieties of millets and rice, this aspect remains weak in some areas. In Kondakindapalli, for instance, there was no farmer growing traditional paddy varieties, and it did not appear that TC had tried to promote them. This is of course not an easy task, given the prevailing market trends and the cultural changes relating to food preferences. One good practice found in some other initiatives is seed or grain banks in the villages, from where farmers can access seeds when they don't have enough, or access varieties they want to try out. Local production of seeds for local sale can also be encouraged, to reduce dependence on the market or on government agencies (which has started as an integral part of the programme from 2016 kharif season).

TC has not paid substantial attention to formally linking with constitutionally mandated bodies like panchayats, but does recognize the need to do this if the gains of its work have to be internalized further, and sustained by the communities. A number of the women and men that have gone through TC's programmes have stood for and gained seats in panchayats, but this does not necessarily translate into its activities and approaches becoming more central in their functioning. Some political issues are taken up by various Sanghas sporadically when felt necessary, but a more systematic engagement may be worth considering.

[In fact TC has also not focused much on policy work, given the effort and time taken to achieve on-ground transformation. However, both the organic farming and millet revival work, as also Dharani, have become examples for government agencies and other civil society groups to come and see; Ganguly reports that "government agencies and other civil society groups to come and see; Ganguly reports that "](#)

[we are flooded with requests for exposure visits, trainings, etc.](#)

["Whether this may be having policy level impacts at state or national levels was not possible to examine in this case study. The government has started the 'Initiative for Nutritional Security through Intensive Millet Production \(INSIMP\)' scheme, with a budget outlay of Rs. 300 crores under the Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana \(Rao 2016\), but it is not clear if initiatives like Timbaktu have been a catalyst in this scheme's birth.](#)

Another interesting aspect that could be systematically studied is on the changes that are likely to have taken place in nutritional status and self-consumption, especially of millets, in the villages where substantial switch to organic cultivation and millets has taken place; Rao's 2013 report cited above has the beginnings of such a study, and her latest (2016) report mentions that there is substantial millet consumption, so it should be possible to see if there has been significant nutritional and health improvement.

An aspect that is worth examining is whether there is continued heavy dependence on outside funding for the organic initiative (substantial grants from Sir Dorabjee Tata Trust and the European Union/EED/BfdW), and if so, whether this is problematic from the long-term sustainability perspective? Dharani's experience suggests that it may be possible to become self-sufficient in the not-so-distant future, in so far as its membership is concerned; but expansion to a much larger set of farmers may continue to require external funding (in 2015-16 it has again requested low-interest investments from supporters and staff, and is also getting some support from Rang De). How much is it possible to get such funds from the government, which is anyway supposed to facilitate such processes? It is worth noting that so far TC has not received any government support in this regard.

One strategy being actively pursued is to make several of the groups independent and autonomous as cooperatives, and to federate them. The women's thrift cooperatives are already financially independent, and Dharani hopes to be within a few years.

Along with financial sustainability is the issue of institutional sustainability; there remains a heavy dependence on the founders of TC, and while a second line of leadership in activities like Dharani seems to be emerging, this is not so evident for TC as a whole. With almost three decades of work behind them, this is a matter of active concern and discussion in the group.

TC works within a context of serious traditional and new inequities (which affect much of India), including those of gender, caste and wealth. These issues get discussed regularly, not only in the formal institutional structures of TC but also in the various activities in the villages. But how much they have got internalized in community dynamics, and what change has been actually affected to reduce inequities and injustices, would need to be studied; anecdotally one can say, looking at the levels of confidence of women in interaction with outsiders like myself, and the relatively independent activities they are able to carry out, that at least on the gender front significant changes may be taking place.

Finally, and this may be the most serious challenge, it does not appear that any of the villages TC is working in, has moved towards holistic transformation. Such a change would have to be on economic, social, political, cultural and environmental fronts (referring to the key elements of the Alternatives Framework mentioned below), tackling inequity and unsustainability of various kinds. The diversity of sectors in which TC works, covers quite a range of these fronts, but it does not seem that they have all been concentrated into even a single village. A question that the TC founders Bablu and Mary themselves ask, for which there

are no easy answers, is whether to continue expanding geographically, or whether to focus more on deeper engagement in existing villages? This would also entail further democratization of panchayat raj institutions through a more sustained engagement with such institutions than has been attempted so far, creation of livelihood options and removal of social exploitation and inequality such that outmigration is reduced or eliminated, and other such steps. None of these are easy, nor short-term. But it appears to me that a deeper, more long-term engagement needs to be initiated in at least in a few villages, to show the potential of comprehensive rural transformation.

[Applying a Framework of Transformation](#)

A number of aspects of TC's work point to an alternative worldview which challenges today's dominant system. A framework for such an alternative vision, being evolved through the Vikalp Sangam process, puts forth five crucial pillars: ecological sustainability, direct political democracy, economic democracy, social justice, and cultural (including knowledge) diversity.^[6] It further lists a set of ethical values and principles that could be the foundation of transformation towards these pillars, including collective living, sharing and caring, diversity and pluralism, respect of the rest of nature, social equity, human rights, dignity of labour, respect of creativity, and non-violence.

This is not the place for a detailed analysis of how TC fares along these lines, and not everything will be visible through the limited lens of this particular case study which has focused only on some parts of TC's work. Moreover, such an analysis is best done in a participatory manner with the actors in the initiative itself, rather than as a purely external evaluation. Such a process was not possible at the time the case study work was done.

But some general observations using the framework can be made, including here some aspects of TCs work that has not been the focus of this study but which the author is familiar with:

On the ecological front, TC is clearly attempting a transformation towards resilience and sustainability, through its focus on reviving soils through the promotion of organic farming, decentralized harvesting and careful use of water, bringing back agricultural diversity, regenerating grasslands and forests (the former at a fairly large scale), and paying attention even to non-human species (for instance through studying, celebrating, and creating public awareness of the grassland wildlife species that have recovered in Kalpavalli).

On the *social* front, TC is perhaps most strongly focused, given that the very motivation for its creation was to facilitate transformation in the lives of the marginalized. Its attention to women and children, to landless, and to small peasants, is helping create such change; it is perhaps weak on dealing with issues of caste.

[On the front of politics, TC has elements of transformation towards more direct democracy and collective governance, especially through empowering women and other marginalized sections to be part of decision-making. However, it remains weak on processes to transform the more formally institutionalized political institutions such as panchayats. In the long run, this could be a serious hurdle towards sustaining and spreading the other aspects of transformation.](#)

- *On the economic front, there is certainly considerable positive change in the livelihoods of farmers and landless, with greater economic control through Dharani, as also enhanced economic empowerment of women; but there remain major areas of work such as greater self-reliance for villages and for TC itself, and of course like any other organization it remains constrained by the much larger forces that control India's (and global) economy. Also needed are more explicit discussions and decisions on the limits of economic activity, on consumerism, and other issues that often bedevil successful community enterprises and over-ride other crucial pillars of transformation (mirroring the ills of mainstream economic growth oriented businesses and lifestyles).*

On the [culture and knowledge](#) front, TC's work is resulting in changes in traditional norms that discriminated against women while reinforcing those that celebrated people's links to the land and biodiversity. It has brought back respect for local (traditional and new) knowledge, attempting to combine it with outside formal knowledge. Its work in schools appears to be bringing these and other aspects of cultural and knowledge transformation, though at a very initial stage.

Underlying the above, and not necessarily explicitly articulated in its messaging, TC's work does display some of the values and principles of a collective, commons-based, equitable, diverse and just society, one that respects our place in nature, and the dignity of labour. These and other values of the kind articulated in the Vikalp Sangam note mentioned above, could perhaps be more explicitly discussed within TC and indeed in the various groupings it has helped set up at the village level.

Like any other initiative that attempts to tackle multiple challenges in India, TC has its successes and failures or strengths and weaknesses. No single initiative can possibly work on all fronts of transformation at the same time, nor achieve them over a period of 2-3 decades, especially given both the long history of some problems like gender and caste inequities and the roadroller effect of the modern economy. Notwithstanding the weaknesses, though, the TC initiative shows the potential of a constructive rural revolution based on principles of ecological sustainability and social equity. It demonstrates that localized, democratic economies in the hands of ordinary citizens are worth exploring as alternatives to globalised economic growth controlled by powerful corporations. Today's dominant 'development' paradigm has created a series of crises (not the least of them climate change) that are affecting hundreds of millions of people, and has left over half of humanity struggling with poverty, hunger, or other deprivations. TC's initiatives have shown that it does not need to be like this.

Annexure 1: Literature used

Annual Reports of The Timbaktu Collective for 2011-12 and 2012-13.

Kothari, Ashish. 2014. Radical ecological democracy: Way forward for India and beyond. [Development](#) 57(1): 36-45.

Kothari, Ashish. 2016. Towards a saner agricultural future. *Farmers' Forum*, Vol. 16 No. 2, April-May.

Ramachandrudu, MV and Rukmini Rao, V. 2012. Revitalising Sustainable Rural Livelihoods Among Small and Marginal Dry Land Farmers and Landless Poor of Anantpur District, India. Mid-term project evaluation, Jan 2012. Timbaktu Collective, EZE/EED and European Commission.

Rao, Shylaja. 2013. *Impact Assessment of the Organic Agriculture Program*. Timbaktu Collective, Bangalore.

[Rao, Shylaja. and KN, Vineeth 2016. Scaling up agro-ecological production systems among small-holder farmers for sustainable livelihoods – A study of the Ananthapuramu District. The Timbaktu Collective, Ananthapuramu..](#)

Annexure 2: People with whom discussions held

At Kondakindapalli, several farmers were met individually in their fields or homes; members of the labour sanghas in their houses; and a collective meeting of the Sanghas was held during the village visit. Discussions were also held with the TC fieldworker accompanying me, Ms. Shahnaz.

Key members of TC interviewed on these two visits, at the TC and Dharani offices

:

Bablu Ganguly and Mary Vattamattam (both times), founders of TC.

Aji Augustin (Feb 2012) and Vineeth KN (Nov 2013), Project Coordinators of Organic Farming.

K. Murugesan (both times), CEO Dharani.

KR Sairam (Feb 2012), Team Leader, Marketing.

[\[1\] 70% of the area under cultivation was for food crops till the 1960s, according to Rao \(2016\)](#)

[\[2\]](#)

Rao (2016) reports the coverage now to be 71%.

[\[3\]](#)

Rao (2016) reports that by 2016, TC is working with 1632 families in 45 villages over approximately 9000 acres. The caste/social break-up is 76% Backward Castes, 12% Scheduled Castes, 11% General, and 1% Scheduled Tribes. The gender break-up of registered members is 28% women and 72% men (however, the latter could be misleading, since only one farmer per family is registered as member in the cooperative, though apparently most of the time both husband and wife actively participate in sangha activities).

[\[4\]](#)

Rao (2016) reports significantly enhanced monthly sales, up to 21 lakhs in January 2016.

[\[5\]](#)

See for instance, Kothari 2016.

[\[6\]](#)

See <http://kalpavriksh.org/images/alternatives/Articles/Alternativesframework3rddraftVSprocess20mar2015Eng.pdf>; see also Kothari 2014.