The severe negative impacts of the current model of ‘development’ and ‘globalisation’ include ecological destruction, displacement of communities, disruption of livelihoods on a mass scale, and growing socio-economic inequities. These impacts have been widely documented, written and talked about. However, there are also myriad attempts at generating and practicing alternatives that provide viable pathways for human well-being that are ecologically sustainable and socio-economically equitable. But they are often small, scattered and unlinked, and thereby not documented enough to be widely known. They have certainly not been threaded together into comprehensive frameworks or visions of an alternative society and are far from reaching a ‘critical mass’ to challenge and change the dominant paradigm.

In Kachchh, a group of organisations are working together on matters as seemingly disparate as pastoralism, resource conservation, rain-fed agriculture and crafts. They have come to realise that everything is connected to everything else. One of these organisations, Sahjeevan, works with pastoral peoples like the Gujjars and Rabaris in the Banni, advocating for community & habitat rights and securing grassland and water resources on which they depend. For more, including photos, on these and other initiatives see the poster Livelihoods 1.

A key dimension of these efforts is also the conservation of local skills, which are linked uniquely to a culture and a place, involving the use of local materials such as natural dyes, printing patterns and the cloth itself. Khamir is a space for these ideas to come together. It markets rain-fed and organically grown cotton in Kachchh as ‘Kala’. See more on poster Livelihoods 2 (also see poster Agriculture 2).

Food is the essence of human well-being. There are innumerable examples in the country of initiatives that attempt not only the conservation of traditional seed and livestock variety, but also to secure all the links in the chain from production based on organic principles to consumption based on local markets. One of the most creative efforts is of Deccan Development Society (DDS) in the eastern states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. In a globalising world, their objective has been to protect the autonomy of food, from seeds and crop production to the natural resource base on which it depends, and from creating a regional market to employing the media as an education tool. This autonomy is achieved through empowering women’s sanghams or voluntary village level associations, mostly consisting of dalit women. See more on this and other initiatives including Jharcraft and ones at Kuthambakkam on poster Livelihoods 3.

The Thar region in the western state of Rajasthan, similar to Kachchh in many ways, also has a family of organisations - together called URMUL - with shared beliefs of community-driven development through programmes that are devised, strengthened, sustained and finally owned by the communities. See more on this and other initiatives including Timbaktu Collective on the poster Agriculture 1. Agro-ecological and cultural contexts are different from region to region. Farmers in Kachchh have increasingly preferred cash crops with national and international markets, such as cotton and castor. Satvik, an organisation based in Bhuj, has adopted a two-pronged approach, where on the one hand they advocate traditional drought-resistant seed varieties for food crops, and on the other obtain third-party organic certification for cash crops. This helps farmers to access markets and weed out the use of chemicals in agriculture. See more on poster Agriculture 2.

There was a time when Maganal, a farmer from Anjar block in Kachchh, used state-subsidized chemical fertilizers and pesticides. He saw his productivity increase in the initial years and then gradually drop, but farming was still turning in a profit. But increasingly he saw that the soil was retaining less moisture and the microbes in it were dying. He decided to turn organic. This was painful, for the soil had got used to chemicals. But Maganal had cows and buffaloes and he used their manure to feed the soil, rotated his crop through the year and even left some land fallow for months at a time. More about his story on poster Agriculture 3.

Forests provide crucial life-support and livelihoods to hundreds of millions of people, supporting agriculture, animal husbandry, non-timber forest produce, and diverse cultures. The threats that these forests face come from both within and without communities, and their conservation is often most effective when the communities that use them are closely involved in their protection. Jardhargaon in Tehri - Garwhal in Uttarakhand is a pertinent example. Gaining inspiration from the Chipko Movement of the 70s, this village in the...
Since 2006, the Forest Rights Act has not only enabled some forest-dependent communities to continue using traditionally accessed forest resources as their right, but also given them a mandate for the conservation of those resources. By late 2014, over 2 lakh acres of forests were reclaimed by communities. In the village of Nayakhera in Maharashtra, Khaj facilitated the filing of Community Forest Rights (CFRs) under FRA and the title was granted to the village in 2012. Since then the community has taken various measures to protect forests over 600 hectares, including a ban on hunting and cutting whole trees for firewood. In addition, fines are levied for grazing in non-designated areas and steps taken to mitigate fires. More on this and on Mangalajodi village in Odisha on the poster Community-based conservation.

Maati in Sarmoli, Uttarakhand is a collective of about 20 women that first came together as a response to domestic violence. They have since grown into a living example of direct democracy, through participation in local politics, in management of their forest and water resources, in agriculture based on seed diversity and in complementing their livelihoods with low-impact tourism based on homestays. More on Maati and on Kudumbashree on the poster.

Women’s Empowerment

. The failings of modern mainstream education are many, including engendering a culture of conformity and ultra-competition, and being increasingly absorbed by corporate values. The Students’ Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL) is a departure from that ethos, providing instead a space that nurtures individual choice and creativity, innovates technology that is locally useful, develops educational material that is locally relevant, and is diversified enough to value both intellectual and physical work. SECMOL’s work began in the 1980s and was a result of Ladakhi students failing within the local government’s education system. Its alumni now include, among others, an all-female travel company and an award-winning filmmaker. More on this and on ecban Development Society’s Pachasale (the green school) on the poster Education. ‘We elect the government in Mumbai and Delhi, but we are the government in Mendha-Lekha!’ Mendha-Lekhavillage in Maharashtra was one of the two first villages to legally win community rights over their forests. Its adivasi communities earn substantial incomes through sustainable use of their natural resources and share this wealth equitably for village reconstruction. In fact recently, all residents of the village voluntarily donated all of their agricultural land holdings to the gram sabha (village council) to prevent private ownership of a vital resource. More about this and about ‘communitisation’ of welfare schemes in Nagaland in the poster Decentralised Governance. SWaCH is a women’s co-operative of self-employed waste-pickers, collectors and other urban poor. They are involved in the urban waste cycle, from the point of generation in homes and offices (by insisting on segregation at source) to its disposal and recycling. Their relentless campaign has led to not only better waste management but also a greater awareness of the issues facing waste-pickers and their eventual empowerment to lead a more dignified life. Urban Sustainability 1. In 2009 people of varied back-grounds including citizens, private donors and the local administration of Bengaluru came together to carry out various restoration activities such as de-silting and providing alternative tanks for religious activities. One of them, Kaikondrahalili lake, is now a source of fodder for nearby villages, a recreation site for urban visitors and home to bird and other animal life. It is part of a wider attempt to restore a chain of water bodies in a city which was once famed as the city of lakes. More on this initiative and on Participatory Budgeting in Pune in the poster.

Urban Sustainability 2

. When the scale is local, and when the end-user is a participant in the process, renewable sources of energy can be socially just and environmentally prudent. In the village of Dharmai in Bihar, it has been demonstrated successfully that a settlement of 450 households and 50 commercial establishments can run on a solar micro-grid. More on this and other initiatives on the poster Energy. In 1996, local youth of Yuksom - the gateway village to Khangchendzonga National Park in Sikkim - set up the Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee (KCC) with a view to make treks into the park more sustainable. The committee introduced the idea of ‘zero waste trekking’ and organises homestays for visiting tourists. In conjunction with the Forest Department, it banned the use of firewood by trekking operators and instead provided kerosene stoves. In addition, plastic waste is recycled and sold as products at KCC’s education center. More about this and about the eco-friendly resort owned and run by the Maldhari villagers of Hodka located in the Banni grasslands of Kachchh in the poster Ecotourism. Every grassroots practice and movement - whether of sustaining livelihoods and participatory governance, of conserving agriculture and forests, of transforming education and urban spaces, or of empowering women and other oppressed segments of society - has contained within it a diverse heritage of ideas, cultures and worldviews. Can these seemingly isolated perspectives and visions be brought together to form a comprehensive framework that poses fundamental alternatives to today’s dominant economic and political system? Can we then collectively evolve a vision of an alternative future? For this, it is essential that a platform exists for people and groups and movements that practice alternatives to come together in regional and national gatherings to constructively challenge and learn from each other, build alliances and evolve alternative worldviews. We call these Alternatives Confluences or Vikalp Sangams. More in the poster About Vikalp Sangam. Contact the