



PANDEMIC RESILIENCE IN NORTH EAST INDIA

Volume 6
of the Extraordinary Work of 'Ordinary' People:
Beyond Pandemics and Lockdowns
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Introduction

North East India represents a unique cultural milieu of over 220 ethnic and indigenous communities inhabiting its varied and rich flora-fauna landscape. The communities are nestled in the eastern Indian Himalayan range and the fertile plains of the Brahmaputra River and its tributaries*. It comprises eight states, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim, and has a population of over 45 million, which is 3.76% of India's population**. While the region has had periods of prolonged conflicts given its diverse and complex issues, a common thread that underpins this region is the way communities and their institutions have shown a pathway of resilience.

In this volume, we explore stories of resilience demonstrated by ordinary people in their communities to the severe impacts of the pandemic and the two lockdowns in 2020-21. The pandemic has forced us to reconsider the efficacy of our current welfare state and market mechanism given the magnitude at which it has affected the lives of millions of people in India, including the North East. The stories in this volume bring a nuanced perspective of '*vikalp*' or alternatives where people found ways to cope and devised their unique norms of delivery mechanisms for food, health and income generation. While these stories are from some of the states of North East India, they resonate with a collective idea of people articulating their own trajectory for self-reliance and exploration of new systems that deliver and bring meaning in their daily lives.***.

The leadership shown by women in their community during the pandemic is one of the key themes of this volume. Women's groups have shown how conservation of endangered species can be done through innovative mass social awareness campaigns and creating alternative income sources through small business enterprises to support their families. Likewise, the presence of strong leadership by women in business and healthcare has resulted in inclusive market norms and solidarity, where the allotment of business opportunities to entrepreneurs in the daily market was given to needy women. Similarly, business ideas around rural agro-tourism offer us a new way to see how essential health care services can be made accessible for poor rural communities that are deprived of such facilities and services.

* <https://oaji.net/articles/2016/1115-1476782788.pdf>

** Census India (2011).

*** We acknowledge that all the North East states have not been represented here. We hope to be able to fill that gap in the future.

Alongside women, youth and organisations demonstrated how mobile technology, social media networking and collaboration, and innovative transport solutions was an effective supply-side intervention for agri-marketing during the lockdown. It generated the much-required confidence in the agriculture sector as it addressed the critical gap of transportation and logistics for agri-business in the region.

The pandemic has generated a new consciousness on health and food. Likewise, women, children and youth have shown promising examples of how our local food ecosystem can be economically and environmentally viable, that it is possible to create and promote locally produced food to ensure a resilient and healthy community.

The underlying themes in this volume offer a holistic discussion around people, their agency and the transition happening in their lives. It provides the reader a bold perspective on how innovative business models centered around local communities can create inclusiveness vis-à-vis conservation and ecology, health care and nutrition, livelihoods and gender. Such examples can go a long way in creating a precedence for a more sustainable and inclusive development trajectory the region deserves.

1. The Hargila Army

Communities and Conservation



Community mobilisation (Photo by Anupam Nath)

The Hargila Army is an all-women group working towards conserving the endangered greater adjutant stork in Assam. The stork, locally known as 'hargila', is a scavenger bird that breeds in dumping grounds and thrives on garbage and filth. Traditionally considered to be a bad omen, the hargila had been an unwelcome guest that was often attacked and chased away. Thanks to Purnima Devi Barman's perseverance and determination, the bird is now celebrated with passion in the villages of Assam. This story is of this extraordinary conservationist and her 'army' of women who are out to save the hargila against all odds.

The Background

It was the local population's apathy towards the hargila that made Dr. Barman pause work on her Ph.D. and move to on-ground conservation of this fast-depleting bird species. Due to absolute lack of awareness and sensitisation, all people wanted was to get rid of these big, smelly birds that messed up their farms and courtyards. Chopping down nesting trees was an easy option for the tree owners as the timber would also fetch them some amount of money. Since most of the hargila's nesting trees are located in private properties, their survival is directly dependent on the landowners. In the absence of any support from the government, conserving this species required Dr. Barman to rope in the local community.

An attempt to befriend the local women started with organising cooking competitions, felicitating them in public meetings and educating them through games and presentations. It took a fair amount of patience and persistence to have the community embrace the hargila as a part of the local culture. The bird is now an important symbol in the different festivals and rituals that the community observes. To ensure that the upcoming generation maintains this respect for the hargila, local schools have been trained into sensitising young students towards the importance of protecting the bird.



Communities and Conservation

While the all-women Hargila Army might be well trained in educating people about the species and its role in the ecosystem, conservation cannot be sustained if it is distanced from the practical needs of financial security. This movement has demonstrated how both can and must go hand-in-hand.

Particularly during the pandemic last year, when many means of livelihood became redundant, this community of local women leveraged their handloom enterprise by going online through www.pashoopakshee.com. Traditional weaves like gamosas and sarees were already available at one of the villages associated with the movement. To this was added a range of face masks with the stork, as well as tiger and rhino motifs with goals of fulfilling an immediate need for the product, local income generation, and awareness for conservation. Demand increased as the products now reached not only beyond Assam but also outside the country. The local women conservationist-entrepreneurs saw a significant increase in their income during this period of crisis.

Pratima, a young member of the group, became the saviour of her family when her husband's business failed during the lockdown. With a ban on weddings and other congregational events, his tent house became a redundant asset. Through the handloom enterprise run by the women's group, Pratima was able to ensure sustenance for her family, thus also earning a newfound respect from her husband and others at home.

The pandemic did revive a challenge for the Hargila Army as rumours about the bird being a carrier of the virus spread in the region. Before much harm could be done, the group was successful in allaying fears and dismissing the rumour through campaigns and raising awareness. Apart from this rumour, the pandemic has actually been a good time as far as conservation of the hargila is concerned. Dr. Barman says that the culture of online webinars and conferences that increased due to COVID-19 helped her reach out to a larger audience. Increased outside support has facilitated new projects such as building artificial nesting platforms and breeding spaces for the bird. COVID-19 seems to have been a blessing in disguise for the hargila.

Lessons

The hargila movement is a classic example of effective community conservation made possible due to mass local involvement and awareness raising. It underscores the impact that women can have when they work together as change-makers. Integration of some level of livelihood opportunities along with the conservation programme serves to enhance the resilience of not only the women but also the conservation work.

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Hargila art by school children (Photo by Carla Rhodes)

2. Thanamir Apples

Stronger Together



Harvesting apples (Photo by N. Lemchimong Yimkhiung)

Thanamir Village is nestled at the base of Mt. Saramati, the highest peak in the Northeastern state of Nagaland. This region is the traditional homeland of the indigenous Yimkhiung Naga, who pursue a number of nature-based livelihoods, particularly slash and burn or jhum farming, fishing, hunting, mushroom picking, beekeeping and apple farming. Apples first made their way into this remote border village through a soldier who presented fruits to a village elder who planted its seeds nearly four decades ago. Now known as the "Apple village of Nagaland", Thanamir had hosted eight editions of the annual apple festival since 2010, until the pandemic hit in early 2020.

Challenges faced due to the pandemic

Thanamir lies on the Indo-Myanmar border in the Kiphire district of Nagaland and gained road connectivity from Pungro Town, the nearest town and regional headquarter, only after 2008. The remote and mountainous roads in this part of the region make for poor connectivity, especially for trade.

The apple festival was initiated by citizens and local leaders to boost tourism and the agro-economy from Thanamir. Over the years, it became a significant part of the local economy and culture. Among the many socio-economic disruptions caused by the pandemic in Thanamir, some key ones affected students who had to return home and continue their education on sparse electricity and poor internet connection, daily wage laborers who were restricted from travelling to other regions in search of opportunities, and residents who experienced lack of access to essential commodities, services, and businesses in the town. Along with the apple festival being cancelled in 2020, the curb on local travel restricted customers and tourists from coming to Thanamir. The impact of this was borne by most apple farmers, who make up over 60% of residents.

Addressing the pandemic

In the years prior to 2020, individuals and families would sell apples independently, as the opportunity arose. Farmers had been growing apples for many years in the hope of transforming this into a larger, community-level business. But there were many barriers to their plans: poor road connectivity, having relied on outside support in the past, and fear of multiple taxes to be paid en route to big towns and cities. However, in the current times, restrictions and isolation during the pandemic allowed the Thanamir residents to dedicate time and thought to bolster apple sales collectively as a community. Apart from trying to recoup a lost livelihood, another motivating factor for members of the Thanamir Village Student Union (TVSU) was to raise funds for their upcoming Golden Jubilee in 2023. Together, different groups of people from the Student Union, Village Council and the general public joined forces to pool their time and resources to strategize and execute a way to market Thanamir apples.

While travelling to transport and sell apples from place to place was challenging, residents tapped into advertising their apples on multiple social media platforms with the aim to target a wide customer base. Exercising the knowledge they already had of social media, the youth used this to their benefit and developed a new networking system. Further, a number of customers were found through print advertisements in the local newspaper. People also relied on word-of-mouth marketing to friends and family in towns and cities like Dimapur, Kohima, Pungro Town, and Kiphire Town. The most important step in their plan was to offer home delivery to their customers in these cities, which allowed both sellers and consumers to avoid busy markets during the unlock phases of the pandemic. Through this process, they also built connections with their customers, who on many occasions ordered multiple times. All this led to a greater demand than supply! In both 2020 and 2021, residents sold 500-1000 kgs of the 7-8 varieties of apples grown in Thanamir.

Lessons

Working together, rather than in isolation, allows for efforts to thrive. In the situation of a pandemic, taking the products directly to one's customers and not waiting for the customers to approach the business can help build direct intimate connections.

Recognising this value, creating strong networks, and collaborating with local institutions for the same, can build long-term resilience. Tapping into the knowledge and awareness among youth and the effective use of technology becomes important in dealing with newer market contexts.

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Apple trees in a Thanamir resident's backyard (Photo by N. Lemchimong Yimkhiung)

3. SPREAD NE

Healthcare and Livelihoods



Dr. Swastika Padmapati at the Community Wellness Centre (Courtesy SPREAD NE)

SPREAD NE (Society for the Promotion of Rural Economy & Agricultural Development North East) is an NGO that works with the vision of gradual but steady transformation of agricultural practices from chemical to organic production. SPREAD NE works in the entire north-eastern region, creating farm and food entrepreneurs using natural resources sustainably and equitably for inclusive growth in the sector. It was founded in 2017 in Guwahati by a farmer, Samir Bordoloi, and encourages local people to eat local food from local resources.

It has helped small and marginal farmers in nutrition security by helping them develop their homestead gardens into organic nutrition and medicinal gardens and has also created sustainable livelihoods by marketing the surplus through formation of farmers' cooperatives. Through its Green Commando (GC) programme, it has facilitated, trained and created a network of change-makers who promote zero-cost organic farming.

Responding to COVID-19

The pandemic had hit the region, bringing with it a multitude of challenges. Remote villages that always faced accessibility and transportation issues had more to deal with during the lockdowns as movement restrictions only added to the problems. Local communities faced difficulties in selling their produce and had inadequate storage facilities resulting in its wastage. In addition, their healthcare issues increased as well: shortage of doctors in Government PHCs; lack of help in health-related emergencies; difficulties in travelling due to bad hilly roads and inadequate transportation facilities.

Samir Bordoloi conceived of the idea of Community Wellness Centres (CWCs) to address these multiple issues. During a trip to Kolongpur village to support Mohe Phangcho, a GC, who was training farmers in producing a food forest crop, two stories that he heard motivated him to start the CWC initiative. He learnt that 12 babies were born in the jeep he was travelling in, while transporting pregnant women to the nearest hospital. Mohe Phangcho also narrated the moving story of carrying his ailing mother in a bamboo stretcher through the hilly roads to the Sonapur hospital, only to lose her at the end.

The CWC would attract doctors to the village by offering a farm and village tourism programme. The villagers of Kolongpur came forward and dedicated a space for the Centre and also donated bamboo and thatch grass for it. They constructed the building in a mere 15 days as they had the expertise and skills to do so! They sought assistance for the construction of some bamboo huts with proper sanitation facilities which would serve as accommodation for the doctors.

They planned several activities around agrotourism: trails through the orange orchards and roselle food forests, meals prepared with local food, farm-stay and camping. In exchange, the farmers would request the doctors, including veterinarians, to give 3 hours of medical service to the community. Bosco Institute in Jorhat, Assam, supported the building of 4 cottages in the village and provided 2 solar dryers for roselle processing, along with their partners Child Aid Network, Germany and HUB, Jorhat, Assam.

The CWC in Kolongpur started in September 2020. Kolongpur is a beautiful village situated at the Assam-Meghalaya border between Pantisang and Harhang mountains. Its population of 700 to 800 belongs entirely to the Amri Karbi tribe. The main occupation of the people is agriculture. Though the village is only around 45 kilometres away from the main city of Guwahati, it suffers from inadequate health facilities and CWC seems to be trying to fill the gap.

Dr. Swastika Padmapati, a young doctor from Assam, was the first doctor to offer her services to the farmers of the village. Her visit built the confidence of SPREAD NE and the farmers. The network of GCs and the use of social media helped in popularising the concept, reaching out and connecting to many young doctors and willing practitioners. Many doctors also volunteered to support the movement started by the community.

Towards sustainable rural livelihoods

Samir's trained the women farmers of the village to make herbal wellness beverages from native nutraceutical plants like the roselle herbal tea. The Centre developed its first marketable product, Roselle Herbal Tea branded as 'Hanserong' Roselle tea. The women's group generated a fund of about Rs. 65,000 from the sale of roselle herbal tea grown with zero external input.

Under their latest initiative, "Slow & Active Living Programme", they are looking at slow fashion products like woven cloth. They use traditional looms and ahimsa silk which use much less water to produce garments and tapestry products. They made use of social media to advertise their products and speed-post services for delivery in different parts of India. These Centres are designed to provide for not only health care but also livelihood security through agrotourism and the production of wellness food products. In a way, these Centres converge health care, livelihood security, and women's empowerment.

Lessons

Health and livelihood security are intertwined. The COVID-19 pandemic posed challenges to both. The CWC initiative of the SPREAD NE showed how to strike a balance between them. CWC became a platform for improved access to healthcare, women's empowerment and providing livelihood security through agrotourism and developing marketable products. It also showed how community involvement can help mitigate the effects of the crisis.

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Training for developing the roselle tea brand (Courtesy SPREAD NE)

4. Farm on Wheels

Empowerment through Community Ownership



Farm on Wheels with fresh vegetables (Courtesy NESFAS)

NESFAS - North East Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity Society - is a non-profit organization based in Meghalaya with its head office in Shillong. It acts as a platform that facilitates community-level networks to empower local communities. With its work spread in more than 130 villages of Meghalaya and Nagaland, it engages with thousands of local farmers and in particular small-scale indigenous women farmers in various activities. NESFAS promotes celebration, protection, and preservation of local agrobiodiversity, environment, cultural practices, and knowledge.

NESFAS facilitates community-driven initiatives like *Mei Ramew Cafe* (Khasi word for Mother Earth) and *Aman A-Song Cafe* (Garo word for Mother Earth) which brings responsibly produced local biodiversity to the plate. These cafes help promote local food amongst youngsters and tourists.

Farm on Wheels

The pandemic and subsequent lockdowns disrupted the demand and supply chain in rural areas and the closure of local markets. Small and indigenous farmers, who usually sell their produce at local markets on a daily or weekly basis by renting a space or by selling it to local traders, faced economic hardships.

As the situation went into disarray and the farmers faced a looming crisis and difficulties of livelihood, four Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) groups came up with an innovative and sustainable solution - Farm on Wheels (FOW) - to tackle the problems. NESFAS facilitated this initiative under the project, "No One Shall be Left Behind: Biodiversity for Food, Nutrition, and Energy" in collaboration with Rural Electrification Corporation to create a sustainable livelihood for farmers by offering some seed money, promotional material, and training. This community-based participatory action not only helped them sell their produce but also empowered the community in localised, collective decision-making.

FOW literally means bringing farm produce directly to consumers in a vehicle. The initiative kicked off in June 2020 from the regions of East Khasi Hills and Garo Hills. More than 28 groups of around 280 farmers started the initiative which spread across 13 villages in Meghalaya. Each farmers' group hired a vehicle that collected the farm produce of local farmers. The groups coordinated amongst themselves and mapped out market days for each of them. In order to minimise expenses, only one or two farmers accompanied the vehicle which contained fresh edibles from local farms. They started reaching out directly to their consumers in nearby suburbs and cities. Initially, there was a little apprehension from consumers, but soon the initiative became popular as it adhered to social distancing norms and brought fresh organic vegetables and other edibles directly to their homes.

FOW built relationships of trust between the farmers and consumers, and it helped them in understanding each other's needs and interacting with diverse markets. Consumers got reintroduced to native vegetables and benefited from fresh healthy chemical-free food. The economic benefits of the initiative have been huge for farmers. They saw a considerable spike in the sales and a rise in their income by selling their produce directly to customers as compared to selling it to retailers or traders. The exchange of knowledge and information regarding where and how food was produced, who produced it, and the exchange of traditional recipes has been an educational and heartwarming outcome of the initiative. FOW in a way empowered the farmers' groups to sell the produce at a price decided by them.

As social distancing restrictions and other COVID-19 related protocols started easing out, some farmers went back to their permanent shops in local markets but many continued with the initiative. This collaborative enterprise has been especially helpful to small-scale farmers, whose limited quantities of produce made it difficult for them to sell at the markets and forced them to turn to middlemen.

A group from Mulum, West Jaintia Hills (where the FOW started in September 2020) is now exploring the potential of the initiative in all nearby villages, and so far results have been very positive. In July 2021 the FOW initiative started in new localities of West Garo Hills, and in August 2021 in Mawhiang in Mawsynram C&RD Block of East Khasi Hills District.

Hiring a vehicle still remains a challenge for the groups. Some groups plan to buy a vehicle in the near future. Another challenge (but a positive one!) that groups from the Mulum area have to face is the increased demand for organic vegetables and fruits from the customers.

The FOW initiative has raised the importance of local food for the local community. Consumers are directly contacting the farmers, and placing advance orders for vegetables. Farmers are shifting more towards the cultivation of organic and indigenous crops and planning to grow a diverse variety of food. Looking at the benefits brought by the initiative, 24 more PGS groups associated with NESFAS from across East Khasi Hills, Ribhoi, and West Garo Hills have agreed to initiate the FOW very soon.

Lessons

Participatory and community-driven actions can be empowering and provide more sustainable solutions. The power of doing business should lie in the hands of the community and collective decision-making can help build remarkable resilience even in times of unprecedented crisis.

Building relationships of trust between consumers and farmers is key to just remuneration for the farmers and leads to an understanding and recognition of the hard labour involved in farming.

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5. North East Network

Women for Local Resilience



Children accompanying their parents in agricultural work (Photo by NEN)

North East Network (NEN) is a women's rights organisation based in Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland, linking rural and urban women with organisations on development and related issues within North East India. NEN recognizes the potential and the rights of every individual and child as crucial, irrespective of their race, colour, caste, ethnic origins, abilities, linguistic group, religious belief, sexual orientation, marital/civil/family status, gender, age or social grouping. Thus, NEN endeavours to touch individual lives to bring about a collective change in society.

Gender discrimination and violence against women, governance and state accountability, natural resource management and livelihoods are some of the sectors that NEN works in. Various social activities, awareness programmes and drives are conducted so as to bring about a positive change in the community.

Problems faced due to the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the entire state of Nagaland. During the initial lockdown period in 2020, the street vendors, the artisan community and especially the daily wage workers, completely lost their livelihoods because of restrictions on mobility, transport issues, and the shutting down of the market.

NEN's work with 600 plus weavers was halted for about four to five months due to lack of marketing opportunities and raw material. So the weavers too faced a big blow in terms of livelihood. Food security became another issue. A lot of people in Nagaland have become dependent on the market for food. During the lockdown, people in urban and semi-urban areas and also in villages began panic-purchasing. In remote areas, families that were self-sufficient weren't really affected. But those dependent on the market to meet their food requirements were impacted.

During this time, the pandemic also opened up a very big challenge of inadequate healthcare and medical infrastructure. This issue was faced by both the urban as well as the rural populace, but especially by the latter due to lack of healthcare infrastructure and awareness about sanitation and hygiene. There was fear and panic among the people because they were not well informed about and equipped to deal with the virus.

Addressing the pandemic

Due to the strict lockdown, the street vendors could not go to their usual vending spaces to sell their produce. But the collective strength of the women was beautiful and inspiring. At Kohima town, women vendors jointly approached the municipal councillors and availed vending spaces. Out of nearly 300 vendors, only 80 vendors were initially allotted space. Although everyone was in need, it was collectively decided to give the space to those who were the most marginalised and affected.

Rural women who foraged edible herbs from the forest and harvested vegetables from their fields, shared it with people living in the urban areas who did not have access to fresh food. They were kept in different locations including hospitals and traffic islands, where people could just pick up the vegetables they needed. It was that section of society that is usually considered poor, that shared what they had with those in the urban areas, where everything had come to a standstill.

NEN identified their women leaders, young volunteers and new, young leaders in different localities and started connecting with them. Women across various sectors were digitally trained and they started spreading awareness through videos about the virus, the importance of hygiene and nutritious food, sanitation, the importance of farming, biodiversity and solidarity. They used their own dialect and vernacular language so that the messages reached out to the maximum number of people across the communities without having to actually visit them.

The entire community, through the many community-based councils, participated in slowing down the spread of the virus thereby reducing pressure on the healthcare system. Young people who came back to the villages were quarantined. The quarantine centre in Chizami village was converted into a creativity hub. The centre was equipped with notebooks, paints, brushes, diaries, digging implements, bamboo, etc. which allowed the youth who had to quarantine to engage in different art, craftwork, knitting, and gardening. The quarantine centre thus was not viewed as a depressing place. It became a space that allowed those quarantined to engage in activities that used local resources and learn and practice useful skills, rather than sit idle in the centre.

All of the above efforts and initiatives by the village people, aided by the government and the volunteers of NEN, helped the community to be prepared for the even harsher 2nd wave of the pandemic which hit the state of Nagaland at the end of March 2021. Although some restrictions regarding transport and mobility were imposed again, it was easier to overcome most of the difficulties. People were more aware about the virus and the protocols around it. Since they were less fearful than before, all activities did not come to a standstill. People continued going to their fields and hawkers continued their vending.

After the second wave, some of the youngsters who had moved back to their villages during the lockdown stayed back to help their parents with farming that they had picked up in the lockdown. They realised that they cannot depend on the market for food. There were also some who felt insecure about returning to the cities and said they would look for opportunities in their community itself.

Lessons

In difficult times, people come forward to help each other, irrespective of their social or economic status. They have the hearts and the power to give people whatever they can. Also, strong women leaders can bring about a huge positive change in the society if given the right tools, education and purpose. They have the power to bring the community together and create solidarity amongst them.

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See also, a talk by NEN on their work in North Eastern region:
<https://youtu.be/NXh4XYbi5gc>

6. Fertile Ground

Sustainable Organic Farming in Assam



Swapna Basumatary (right), an organic tea grower from Assam's Bodo tribe, sharing some of her ideas with workers at a garden under conversion to organic (Photo by Peggy Carswell)

Peggy Carswell, founder of Fertile Ground: East/West Sustainability Network, first travelled to Assam from Canada for a very short period of time in 1998 but returned a year later to locate a source of organic tea for a local fair trade project in Canada. Assam has always been a tea-producing state but only a few growers were aware of the organic ways of growing tea at that time. Besides, as traditional practices of agriculture started declining, farming in the region became more chemical-intensive and commercialized. This along with the loss of traditional agrarian practices saw the disappearance of many traditional varieties of rice and vegetables. Assam has also witnessed a high rate of rural-urban migration within the state. Many young people in the state have chosen to migrate out of rural areas, eventually abandoning farming.

This motivated Carswell and her team to set up Fertile Ground which has been providing encouragement, support, training, and resources to farmers, small-scale tea growers, extension staff, teachers, students, and families in Assam to use organic means of farming to produce tea and vegetables since 2003.

The revival of the lost art of traditional farming in Assam became one of the key ways of how Fertile Ground created an impact. The organization used the rising local and global demand for organic products to create better-paid jobs and raise the standard of living of the local people. This was done by providing classroom and hands-on training to care for the soil, produce healthy crops, and protect local seeds and cultural practices. Fertile Ground helped set up three organic demonstration gardens which provide hands-on practical training and resource materials in Assamese. The organization has also created a "learning garden" and a training centre that provides employment to several local people along with opportunities for local farmers and tea growers to learn about organic farming. Along with training in organic cultivation, the organization also provides training in the marketing of organic products and the production of organic inputs. Through this, the organization has been successful in providing opportunities to the local rural youth who migrate out to cities in search of better livelihood opportunities and help revive traditional food production.

Challenges due to the Pandemic

When the pandemic hit, one immediate challenge the farmers of Assam faced was the closure of vegetable markets. The market for organic vegetables also closed down. This meant that the organic farmers trained under Fertile Ground could not sell their products in the market. However, these farmers trained by Fertile Ground did not have to depend on the market for seeds and organic fertilizers, unlike non-organic farmers. "Our only challenge was to produce enough food for our sustenance," said Mahan Bora, a farmer from Jorhat, who has worked with Fertile Ground for a decade and has set up the first seed lending library of the North East - the Annapurna Seed Library. Bora added that the organic farmers trained by Fertile Ground were taught to not spend monetary resources on food production but use inputs available from nature to organically produce food even when there was no income. Hence, the only major issue of these organic farmers was producing enough food for sustenance without depending on the market when their income from selling the vegetables came to a halt.

Addressing the Pandemic

Fertile Ground helped build a system of good practice where farmers did not have to depend on the commercial market as the lockdown ensued. During the pandemic, Fertile Ground provided seeds to the local farmers to grow their own crops. But the mere availability of seeds did not ensure enough production for the sustenance of each farmer's household. With past training and knowledge of local organic practices provided by Fertile Ground, the farmers prepared their own organic fertilizers and pest repellents. For instance, some of the recipes for organic fertilizers are as simple as mixing neem or tulsi, or papaya leaves with water or cow urine. Moreover, many farmers cultivated in groups ranging from 5-10 farmers to make the process of farming for sustenance easier. Fertile Ground has always encouraged collective farming but the pandemic ensured the benefits of the process. These practices helped close to 500 trained organic farmers in the districts of Bodoland, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, and Jorhat to produce their own food without relying on the market in any way.

Lessons

Past and indigenous farming practices along with knowledge of local agro-ecological conditions can build self-sustaining rural communities. Collective farming can also help communities cope with crises. Localization and subsistence agriculture have reflected the ability to contend with a skewed and fickle market.

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7. SeSTA

Nutrition Gardens and Food Security



Sandhya Laxmi Debbarma, an SHG member, at her nutrition garden (Courtesy SeSTA)

SeSTA - Seven Sisters Development Assistance - is an organisation based out of Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura, who collectivises women to form Self Help Groups (SHGs), builds their capabilities and strengthens livelihood systems. They believe SHGs can be an effective platform to empower women and reduce their vulnerabilities. SeSTA began their operations in Tripura in 2017, and their work largely revolves around sustainable livelihood activities and income enhancement. They work in partnership with the Tripura Rural Livelihood Mission to achieve the same, in the blocks of Hezamara, Jirania and Mandai in West Tripura district and Jampuijala block in Sepahijala district. SeSTA works with the SHG women to promote their livelihoods by means of enhancing production of paddy through System of Rice Intensification (SRI), enhancing production and productivity of vegetables, oilseeds, maize and spices through System of Crop Intensification (SCI). They also bamboo plantation, horticulture, pig rearing, backyard poultry and fishery.

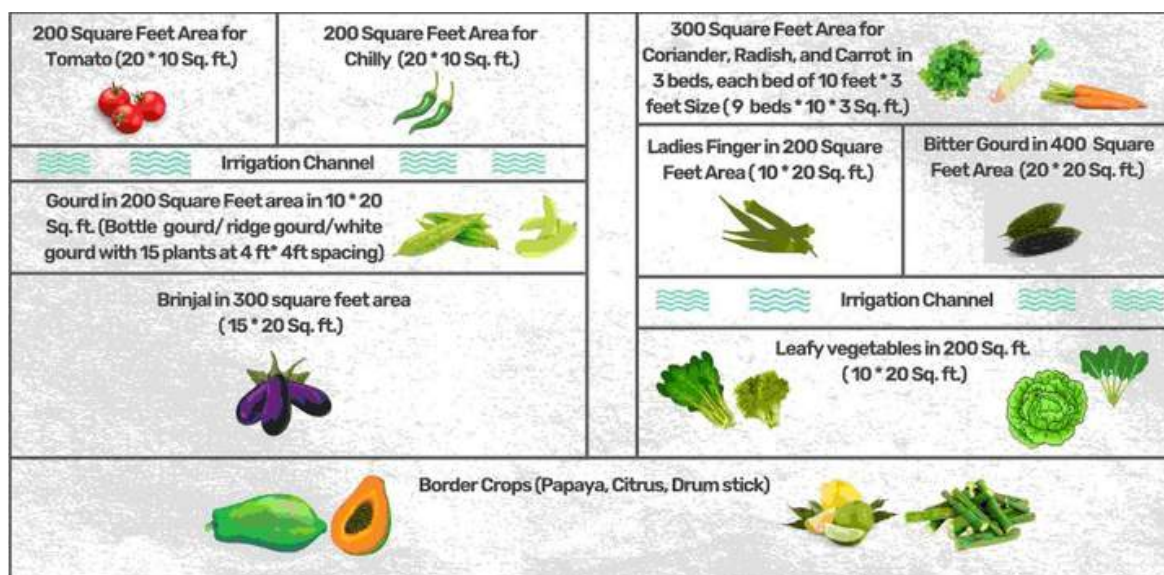
Following the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020 and the nation-wide lockdown, the markets were closed in Tripura. With the possibilities of work and income curtailed, many in the villages were deeply affected. Some of the areas SeSTA worked in were marked as containment zones, and a direct intervention in the communities seemed challenging.

SeSTA thus established a communication mechanism with the SHG members and villages through the Community Resource Persons (CRPs) they had trained earlier. The CRPs are SeSTA's main resource in the field, as they are well trained in organic agriculture, scientific rearing of livestock and community mobilisation. Now with the pandemic, they took up the responsibility of delivering immediate relief required in the villages. Later, the villagers were also equipped to use online technologies for communication, in case any shutdown happened in the future.

As the pandemic occurred, people started to realise the importance of growing one's own food and taking care of one's nutrition and health. It was a need that was recognised from both ends, SeSTA and the communities they worked with. In November 2020, SeSTA started training the SHG members to set up nutrition gardens in their homes with at least eight different kinds of vegetables, firstly to support the diet diversity of the family and secondly to promote income enhancement by selling the excess produce. During the initial phase of the pandemic, SeSTA team members received training on setting up nutrition gardens through online sessions. A scientific process was followed in designing the layout of the garden which included plot selection, plot preparation, selection of nutritional vegetables, and setting up water storage, irrigation channel systems and compost pits. A chart with the process of growing each vegetable was also provided, along with the details of what could be grown in the next round, vermicomposting procedures for organic manure, etc. By January 2021, close to 180 such nutrition gardens were set up by the SHG members.

One of the successes of the Nutrition Garden campaign was that the SHG members were almost independent after the initial set up was done. They only asked for more seeds they could grow. Sandhya Laxmi Debbarma, a daily wage labourer from the Doigola village in West Tripura was one of the many SHG members whose income was affected following the lockdown. With SeSTA's support, she took to vegetable cultivation, and is earning a livelihood through it. She has now also taken up growing bamboo and wishes to get involved in livestock rearing as well. It was daily wage labourers like her who were most adversely affected by the pandemic, as they were dependent on the market for most of their basic needs, including food. The practice had become such that they could meet their needs at any time from the market in exchange of money. The pandemic affected their income and the markets were also shut. This made them aware of the importance of growing food, even if in limited capacities, a practice that was common in the villages two generations ago.

The pandemic also provided the SeSTA team in Tripura the opportunity to reinvent themselves. When they began their operations in 2017, they were engaged in training activities and the villagers found it challenging to cope with the complexity of the methodologies involved.



Nutrition Garden Design (Courtesy SeSTA)

They then shifted to simpler methodologies and communication with certain "packages of practice", which the villagers not only picked up easily, but also found useful. Sheds were built for goats and sties for pigs out of bamboo, and proper shade and security was provided to other livestock which the villagers reared. With COVID-19, the villagers realised the importance of vaccinating not just themselves, but their livestock as well. Mortality of the livestock came down tremendously.

SeSTA are now in the process of reviving the old practice of bamboo cultivation. Tripura used to produce 28,000 MT of bamboo sticks for the Indian incense sector. This was largely being produced by one and a half lakh rural women, mostly tribals, in their houses. However, with the introduction of new technologies and alternative raw materials, many lost their livelihood. SeSTA is now working to promote bamboo plantation by mobilising 200 women in 20 SHG groups, also with the intention of training them in bamboo crafts. Thus, varied approaches and practices for livelihood enhancement of the villagers are being carried out, keeping their sustainability and self-reliance into consideration.

Lessons

Building capacities to grow one's own food makes one feel empowered as they are equipped to be more resilient and self-sufficient. Being able to address one's most basic need of food allows for the further exploration of sustainable and non-extractive livelihood practices.

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8. Farm2Food Foundation

Nutrition Garden and Child Education



Porcupine fencing to mitigate floods (Courtesy Farm2Food Foundation)

Farm2Food Foundation is a non-profit social enterprise working in many districts in Assam to build partnerships with communities, provide training and tools for sustainable, farm-based livelihoods. By engaging in farm and food entrepreneurship, individuals and households become self-dependent, children who have enough nutritious food to eat attend school more and perform better. By selling the products that they create (such as vermi-compost), farm-preneurs are able to generate income, and eventually invest in education and nutrition in their communities. Further, by practising sustainable organic farming techniques the environment around these communities improves, enabling future generations to thrive.

The organisation sees its local communities as co-creators and as facilitators. The objective of Farm2Food Foundation is to provide the training and tools which will enable local communities to take control of their own production and development processes in order to build a productive, change-oriented, and self-reliant society.

Addressing the pandemic

COVID-19 drastically impacted the lives of tea garden communities in Assam. The first wave of the virus did not hit them in the sense of medical emergencies. What had really impacted them was the strict lockdown and the restrictions that came along with it. They had lost their livelihoods as well as food security. To tackle this, Farm2Food distributed dry food rations in the community. They also procured nearly 600 quintals of vegetables from the local farmers and agri-entrepreneurs thereby supporting their businesses. Along with the distribution, the community was encouraged to start their own homestead gardens. Young volunteers from the school nutrition garden* were appointed to explain the process and help with the farming. Gradually, about 2000 gardens were set up.

Also, there was relief material and food ration that was sent by donors and NGOs from various parts of the country. But transportation of this material from the urban areas to the small villages and towns became a huge challenge. Logistics costs had surged due to the lockdown. The community then realised that the material can be brought in by their own transport vehicles that were used to send the local produce to the cities for sale. The relief material was then loaded in these vehicles while coming back to the villages. The community benefited greatly from this because not only did the expenditure reduce, but the truck drivers received income too.

Another challenge was children's education. With schools closing down when the lockdown started, many children were married off, or were sent to work in agricultural fields. Many parents were forced into these choices due to the drastic fall in their income levels.

Since the teachers in schools that had been recruited through the Teachers' Eligibility Test were mostly from outside the villages, they went back to their homes. Online classes were being conducted, but lack of internet facilities and smartphones became an issue for the students. So, to keep the kids in touch with education, the team members started a mobile library and science laboratory. As they travelled to different villages on motorcycles, they carried a lab box containing basic lab equipment such as a magnifying glass, microscope, thermometer, etc. and some interesting books, on motorcycles in different villages. Young children showed a lot of interest and performed science experiments and borrowed books.

* story documented in EWOP Vol 5 (<https://vikalpsangam.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Youth-Stories-of-Hope-Resilience-Collective-Dreaming-17-Apr-EWOP-Vol5-digital-version.pdf>), page 27

Some villages had been declared as containment zones which made travelling to these areas difficult. Hence, the students from higher grades set up tuition classes for the ones from lower grades in their courtyards. They also borrowed books from each other. This ensured that there was some sort of engagement and interaction among the kids.

The organisation's work until the pandemic was focused on education and agriculture. Since the pandemic threw up health-related issues, the volunteers learnt to use oximeters, digital thermometers, oxygen concentrators and other healthcare appliances. These were distributed to more than 60 Primary Health Centres (PHCs). The nurses and pharmacists in the PHCs and Community Health Centres were trained to use these.

Farm2Food has also started focussing on flood mitigation measures. Through porcupine systems using locally available bamboo, they have safeguarded about two lakh people who are vulnerable to floods.

Lessons

Linking different marginalised groups to strengthen localisation efforts results in greater resilience. This is evident even more clearly in times of emergencies. In addition, working to build self-reliance and food security through homestead gardens has seen positive outcomes. Focusing on young children through training in school nutrition gardens could also build resilient communities in the future.

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Students tending to their vegetable garden (Courtesy Farm2Food Foundation)



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Extraordinary Work of 'Ordinary' People: Beyond Pandemics & Lockdowns

This is a series of documents being brought out by the Vikalp Sangam Core Group, showcasing stories of community resilience in the face of COVID-19 and the lockdowns imposed by the government. Across India, while a vast number of people suffered the consequences of food insecurity, loss of livelihoods, illnesses, and dislocation, several communities have been able to tide over the crises because they have built and sustained strategies of relative self-reliance in food, health, livelihoods, governance and other aspects.

The volumes so far

Extraordinary Work of 'Ordinary' People: Beyond Pandemics and Lockdowns - [Volume 1](#) | [Graphic Novel](#)

Community Forest Rights and the Pandemic: Gram Sabhas Lead the Way - [Volume 2](#) | [Graphic Novel](#)

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Vikalp Sangam is a platform to bring together movements, groups and individuals working on just, equitable and sustainable pathways to human and ecological well-being. It rejects the current model of development and the structures of inequality and injustice underlying it, and searches for alternatives in practice and vision. About 80 movements and organisations around the country are members of its Core Group (listed below).

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