

Vikalp Sangam at Timbaktu, 17-19 October 2014

A Report

The idea of organizing a Vikalp Sangam (Alternatives Confluence) is rooted in the motive of collectively challenging the dominant framework of today's economic and political system, which is unsustainable and inequitable. The purpose of the Sangams is to provide a platform where individuals and organizations engaged in various alternative initiatives can come together, share experiences and work towards coherent visions of meaningful alternatives.

This was the first Sangam, hosted by Timbaktu Collective at Timbaktu, a picturesque location in Andhra Pradesh in the lap of wonderfully regenerated nature and the heart of rich culture. Timbaktu, the name, itself had a very fascinating story behind it which added to the whole unconventional spirit of the Sangam. The location as well as the space aesthetically merged with the theme and idea of the Sangam.

The three days of the Sangam, 17th to 19th of October, were a unique experience filled with inspiring stories, some brain-storming and discussions, singing, dancing and several mouth-watering meals made from locally produced organic crops.

Cultural and Visual Ambience

Apart from the inspiring setting of the Timbaktu Collective, a number of cultural and visual events and processes provided a creative ambience to the Sangam's discussions. The *telugu* folk songs at the beginning of every session gave way for a musical entry into the realm of meaningful discussions on the themes of Alternatives. The songs, some eulogizing the beauty of the nature/ village life and some with a revolutionary spirit, were sung by the local women and men along with a 'dappu' for a melodious rhythm.

The Cultural Performances on the second day, part of the Sangam framework, created a festive environment. The energetic performances of the kids from close by villages and the mesmerizing dance by the male folks pleasantly stunned the audience, also leaving everyone with the energy and enthusiasm to join in.



An exhibition on alternative initiatives was also arranged. The exhibition was thematically organized with the first panel introducing the idea of alternatives and the exhibition itself, and the subsequent panels focusing on initiatives on livelihoods, food and agriculture, women's empowerment, environment and ecology, and finally urban initiatives. A panel was also placed following the one on food and agriculture, and this was a farmer's

portrait from Kachchh who had voluntarily shifted to organic agriculture. A total of 13 initiatives were represented, including Satvik and Sahjeevan from Kachchh, Kutumbakkam from Tamil Nadu, Kudumbashree from Kerala, Jharcraft from Jharkhand, initiatives on organic farming from Jardhagaon in Uttarakhand, Timbaktu and Deccan Development Society from Andhra Pradesh, Maati from Uttarakhand, Hivare Bazar from Maharashtra, Swach from Pune, and finally a poster prepared by CEE that documents participatory budgeting in Pune. The materials used for holding the exhibition were local and were made from bamboo sheets tied together across bamboo poles.

Some of the participants also came with exhibits: the Rural Integrated Development Society (RIDS) and Three Wheels United India Services Limited had their posters, and the Deccan Development Society (DDS) had their seeds along with posters exhibited. A very interesting set of 'self-portraits' also evolved over the 3 days, with many of the participants creatively expressing aspects about themselves through drawings and short write ups.



Sharing of Experiences

More than 20 civil society organisations or movements, working on various issues such as community development, ecology, rights based issues, alternative politics and social development participated (list of participants below). This was not only a confluence of alternative ideas but also a milieu of organisations working in various parts of the country.

The session on the first day brought sharing of the different experiences of the participants where the emphasis was given on the 'alternative' nature of the work and was a true collage of different experiences (see Annexure for a synopsis).

There was a whole gamut of interesting *alternative agricultural initiatives* shared. From Uma Shankari's experience of working with the farmers without external funding and helping establish a watershed in her area, Mahila Samakhya's programme of pooling small landholdings for organic farming, to Sabyasachi from WASSAN pointing out the issue of neglect in the watershed expenditure. The entire watershed building activities come under the Revitalising Rain-fed Agriculture (RRA) programme of WASSAN. Dinesh spoke about the Earth 360 project which is involved in promotion of Millet farming. The *alternative economies* of agriculture underlined in Sangeeta's Organic Store- ReStore and Deccan Development Society's (DDS) endeavour of seed sales highlighted the trust relationships between the consumers and the producers which are rebuilding through such initiatives. The Mahila Samakhya's programme and DDS's experience also resulted in deconstructing the dominant gender roles and hierarchies resulting in women achieving greater economic sovereignty. Sujata and Farhan gave an alternative perspective of online marketing of the organic foods, which they strongly believe, would make the system of transaction transparent and sustainable. They have introduced

an online user friendly software. Stan from Just Change shared an interesting idea of participative capital which talks about an inclusive and participatory system of investment, production and consumers where one cannot perform and monopolize on one activity only but has to take part in the entire system of transaction.

The role of *political alternatives* were emphasized from the experiences shared by Kiran from Aam Admi Party- advocating political rights of farmers, Rythu Swarajya Vedika – working with farmer unions and engaged with political parties on farmers’ issues and V.B. Chandrasekaran from Dandakaranya- engaged in the resistance movement against the Polavaram dam.

Some other forms of alternative initiatives were shared by organisations working on *social and environmental* issues, such as the Niswartha- working on environment, health and societal responsibilities; Parimi from Vikaas Vidya Vinam which is a school with a very alternative framework for education; People’s Action for Creative Education (PEACE)- working for child rights and women’s rights; C. Bhanuja working with Rural and Environment Development Society (REDS) and Andhra Pradesh Women Network on implementation of laws against human trafficking and child labour; and Nalini from Hasiru Dala who is working on urban waste management in Bangalore.

Group Discussions

The introductions inside the hexagon- the session space, were also carried forward by people meeting and getting to know each other outside during breaks. Following the sharing, participants were divided into four groups, one each for the following topics: Revitalizing Village Economies, Food Security, Alternative Education and Alternative Politics.

1) *Revitalizing Village Economies*: The discussion began with an understanding that villages cannot be romanticized and seen as a homogenous unit. Villages too hold certain forms of discrimination and prejudices ingrained in the system. The functioning of village systems differs throughout India. Stan mentioned how the Tribal system is all together different from a common understanding about villages. Moving forward from this, the discussion then focused on the economic aspect of villages and how village economy is impinged upon by the urban economy, also reinstating that villages cannot be seen in isolation. For revitalisation of villages, protecting the village economy becomes vital. Collectivization of money/resources, alternative currencies, local production for local consumption, reciprocity as a value instead of exchange, etc. were some of the ideas discussed in the group. There was a sense of agreement attached to the idea of rethinking the concept of money. Money in its current form denotes power. The need to reduce its functionality to merely a means of measurement was strongly felt.

2) *Food Sovereignty and Security*: In this group a wide range of issues and projects were discussed with inspiring contributions from everyone in the group. Farming with respect to climate change and water conservation was shared as an underlying motivation for many of the innovations that are emerging as successful solutions.

“Farming is about uplifting you to the stage where you can feed others” is so beautifully demonstrated through the example of DDS, where families’ farm for their food, using dry land mixed cropping systems and zero budget farming with natural bio-pesticides. The women come together in sangams as a co-operative market, ensuring maximum nutritional diversity and food sovereignty amongst themselves first – the surplus is sold at a slightly higher price and the dividend is distributed. We were all inspired by the farmer exchange programs and Health Fairs. Bharat Mansata shared about his visit to Orissa and learning about tribal forest foods, the vast untapped potential of uncultivated foods that exist in our fast disappearing forests.

“Food As Medicine” and investing in health and medicinal herb gardens was also touched upon. Molly shared how certain plants that grow around Timbaktu are often used by the villagers in drought, and demonstrated how the ladies wrap Moringa branches in wet cloths overnight to shake off the leaves to make nutritious curries! The value of millets and the over use of grains and the temptations and consequences of cash crops (like ground nuts)

and highly priced popular commodities were presented as direct questions to explore the many sides of these issues.

3) *Alternative Education*: Group on Alternative Education pointed out the deinstitutionalisation of education and pointed out that education must also pay attention to the agricultural cycle (so that the dropouts during the harvest season can be checked) and a less structured school system brought up. Regarding the Food Sovereignty issue, ideas like changing the distribution system, marketing system, localization of market and taking care of the 'expansion of need' came out.

4) *Alternative Politics*: A large group took interest in the discussion on alternative politics. The Members of this group talked about various aspects, which they hold as alternative politics. During the discussion, the point of 'alternative politics and politics of alternative' was also raised for discussion. There was concern regarding how participation will work in a democracy which would be much more inclusive. There was a strong belief that political parties should not be run on corporate capital, which have made the political parties biased and narrow in taking care of the population they should be serving. Joy shared that alternative politics must be transformative in nature which will bring together the social movements and other experiments under the fold of larger politics. It must be motivating to the youth at the village level and act as a bridge between politics and development. However the question, which came out from the discussion, was what should be the vehicle for the alternative? Or whether there is any alternative forum we can build where the alternative ideas can be discussed. The role of media in carrying forward and highlighting the alternative ventures was also a point of concern.

After the round of group discussion the session was made open where various path breaking ideas came up. Shuffling of people into further smaller groups and rearrangement of these groups allowed everyone to engage in the different topics and led the discussions to a sort of convergence towards a larger picture of Alternatives. On the one hand some groups strongly believe that urbanisation is a manifestation of accumulation of wealth which is also a cause of growing disparities on the other hand other groups brought the example of tribal system of exchange which is not only between people but also giving back something to the community. From the extensive discussions some new ideas came out which were alternative in character and practice. Some key points, questions, fears and challenges were also brought out, which need to be given some thought into.

Broadly these were as follows:

- While there is a strong belief in the need for more decision-making power at local levels, there is lack of clarity on how, and what structures of larger decision-making would these be accountable to!
- Do we understand the politics of our initiatives? How much are we fundamentally challenging the system? There is a need to bring out the politics of alternative initiatives, often silently embedded, more explicitly.
- Do we have some vision of the society we want, in order to assess our individual initiatives? How else do we know we are making a fundamental difference? Is there also a possibility of plurality of visions?
- Need for transformative politics and systemic change. But what would be the elements of this change? And what political agency could take this forward?
- Stress also on changing from within as individuals.
- Linkages between rural and urban are missing. There is a need to transforming the city also.
- Caution regarding the meaning and ways of using 'community'. Need to be aware of internal differences and inequities within a community.
- Greater recognition that we have a systemic problem and the need to work together.
- Can local governance take socially just decisions?
- Children and women as big missing link in most discussions.

Towards an Alternative Framework

A draft on the Alternative framework (available at request), prepared and circulated in advance in English, Telugu and Hindi, was discussed in the next session with the aim of developing it further. A general consensus

was there on the democratic composition of the framework which provided the space for including various significant alternative initiatives. A few areas of concern were brought out, such as how can localization be carried out in the urban setting? It was pointed out that dignity of labour is important but it shouldn't legitimize the status quo of Dalit workers.

Another point of concern was how to involve the youth, which gathered some divergent opinions. The fact that youth are more connected to the issues such as LGBT rights but are rather indifferent towards movements such as Dalits movements, Labour movements, etc. was shared. To which one of the participants pointed out that it is also the question of individual freedom which is more appealing to the youth. Also emphasizing that the freedom of individuals should not be overshadowed when we dwell deep in the discourse about community rights and collectives. It was also suggested that the complexity of the language used in the intellectual circles could be the reason for the absence of youth involvement. The discussion then lingered on the ways language can be used as a tool to attract the youth and whether it in its present usage by the intellectuals acts as a hindrance and unintentionally leads to exclusion in a form. In consistence with this view, a suggestion of adopting a language which could connect with the locals/youth was made. However some others suggested that the complexity of the subject itself wouldn't be justified if simplified or made attractive, in a similar fashion as employed by the mainstream marketing and advertisement. This could lead to simplifying and diluting the content. Use of emotional and need-based messaging could work better. And there also needs to be focus on experiential opportunities like community work.

It was also argued that the concept of 'work' needs to be seen more critically, pointing out the necessity to emphasize on the issue of manual labour. Also to re-imagine 'work' in a way so as to move past the dichotomy of work and leisure(created by the capitalist system), by making work more creative; and thus having more control over our time.

The need for villages to be more self reliant than self sufficient; the relationship between local and outside needs to be worked out so as to have a system in which there can be exchange of resources/energy/finance between the centre and the local communities. The local communities should have a right to demand these from the centre.

Another point was the political participation of individuals and movements, with different ideologies based on thinkers/philosophers such as Ambedkar, Gandhi, Marx, so on and so forth, could lead the progressive movement and act as agents of political change. There was also a point made to include the perspectives and rights of the physically handicapped.

Concern regarding the constraints which disallow integration with other sectors, organizations, and other critical issues was also highlighted.

Follow Up and Feedback

The final sessions were on feedback and follow up actions to carry forward the discourse and sharing of alternatives. The *follow up* actions included the following:

- Involving media (mainstream and alternative) for increasing the visibility of these efforts.
- The need to articulate organic urbanization more in the Sangam process and to include issues of livelihoods of urban poor and their sustainability.
- Bringing in more social movements for the next Sangam.
- Have meetings on regional/alternate economies.
- Create an email list for the continuation of the discourse via mails.
- Document stories of people we work with, which could include some common questions such as- 'what does well being mean to you?'
- Taking these messages to children and youth and getting their perspective into the Sangams, including introducing more and better literature to them.

- Create and share profiles of the participating organizations.
- Encouraging voluntarism and local fundraising.
- Learning from the previous alternatives' initiatives which began post independence, and from the intellectual acumen of our country, such as Buddha, Kabir, Gandhi, etc. through study circles. But also to break away from our own idealist view, instead of taking inspiration only from famous/mainstream ideologues and traditional practices such as Yoga, especially Brahminical ones, to go beyond these and to identify and get inspiration from more local cultures, unsung thinkers, etc.
- Providing opportunities for more reflection of self, along with going back to our roots and traditions.
- The need to further exchange skills and experiences across initiatives/organizations and across sectors for making each initiative more holistic.
- Organizing a Sangam entirely focused on education and learning.

The *feedback* points regarding the Sangam were as follows:

- To have shorter sessions, this would allow participants to have some free time in the evenings.
- Greater opportunities for spontaneous groupings.
- More physical activities such as energizers, walks, etc.
- To have Keynote Speakers for some sessions, who could be academicians, experts, etc.
- To have 4 or 5 cases (alternative initiatives) and focus on them in depth.

The Sangam ended by thanking and applauding all those involved in organizing it, especially the entire Timbaktu Collective and Kalpavriksh team. Special thanks were given out to the translators who did a commendable job. The Vikalp Sangam culminated with the announcement of the next Sangam to be organized in February 2015 in Tamil Nadu.



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Annexure: Sharing by participating organizations

Timbaktu Collective is a rural development organization working in the four mandals – Chennekotha Palli (C.K.Palli), Penukonda, Ramgiri and Roddam of India's second most drought prone district, Ananthapur in Andhra Pradesh. For over 20 years they have been working on issues of rural development through Eco-restoration, Child rights, Youth development, Disability rights, Alternative banking with women, Organic farming and producer owned business enterprise development.

Sangeeta from Chennai spoke about '**ReStore**', an Organic Store which has been functioning for the past six years. Amidst the mainstream ventures they wanted to do something new and alternative which also made urban people interested. So they started selling traditional food, cotton clothes, and varieties of traditional rice. Their venture posed a challenge to the dominant mainstream paradigm. However they do not have the certificate for the organic food and the entire endeavour is based on the trust amongst the volunteers, producers and customers. In reference to their work, Stan from Just Change/ Accord mentioned that bringing back the trust amongst the people is one of the most important things.

Chandramma and her friends from **Deccan Development Society (DDS)** shared the same experience though they have the certificate. In addition to that she mentioned that they also have a community Radio through which information on types and availability of seeds is disseminated. Chandramma shared the oppressive nature of upper caste large landholders on whom they were earlier dependent. By gaining the capability of having their own livestock and seeds, she told that women in these villages have achieved economic sovereignty and are socially and financially empowered. Now they have reached to an extent where people come to them for seeds. She mentioned farming should develop to a stage where one would be able to feed others.

Kiran from Aam Admi Party shared a different story which was about the political rights of the farmers. **Rythu Swarajya Vedika**, advocating farmers' political rights, aims to save the small farmers from the onslaught of the big corporate agri-business houses. Kiran told that they have planned the 'Kisan Swaraj Yatra' which is aiming at land rights of dalit farmers and to develop a connection with the farmer wing of the political parties.

C. Bhanuja from **Rural and Environment Development Society (REDS)** talked about the Child Labour Issues where she highlighted that the livelihood approach is one of the most needed initiatives to check the problem. Bhanuja also works with the **Andhra Pradesh Women Network** where the issue of human trafficking has been taken up and almost seven rescue missions have taken so far. In her opinion, the livelihood is 'breaking down' because of the mono-cropping such as groundnuts. Suspension of the collective farming is another cause of the farmer suicide, she pointed out.

Sujatha and **Farhaan** from **Daana Network** gave an alternative perspective of online marketing of the organic foods, which they strongly believe, would make the system of transaction transparent and sustainable. This would solve the problems such as who to sell the products, at what prices etc. Thus for a simple management of the commerce they have introduced an online portal where a user-friendly software will facilitate the farmer to reach out the buyers easily. It is worth mentioning that the importance is given on the simplicity of the software so that it can be utilised by the people who have very little or no exposure to the computers.

Uma Shankari expressed her deep concern about the financial tension of new generation starters vis-a-vis her times; she told that she started working with the farmers without any external funding. The whole region was going through a crisis of drinking water so the watershed program was set up. In this process different govt. schemes did not work, rather organisations such as *WASSAN* and *CWS* extended their help. However she also mentioned that when the farmers' confidence is very low and a large-scale initiative is needed to be taken then the question of fund no doubt becomes an important factor.

Sabyasachi from **WASSAN** shared his work on integrating farming activities at the village and block level. He pointed out the issue of neglect in the watershed expenditure. He told that the government expenditure should invest sufficiently in the farming institutions/activities. The entire watershed building activities comes under the RRA (Revitalising Rain-fed Agriculture) programme of WASSAN.

Parimi started an alternative school called **Vikash Vidya Vanam** near Vijayawada, where children live their life without prejudices and sheer rat race of career. It is focused more on teaching the way of living with the nature, understanding the value of natural resources. The learning system is more oriented based on real life experiences which also helps in building the communitarianism rather than making one an atomised individual. It is indeed a complete schooling, full of activities such as games and fine arts, taking care of personal chores such as cleaning washrooms to washing own clothes.

Sreenivaslu, Jaya Ramesh and Sri Ramachandra came to speak on behalf of **Niswartha**, a voluntary organization. The idea is giving back to the society from which we have got our resources for living. So the volunteers give at least one day per month for various developmental works. The activities are segregated as environmental, Societal Responsibility and other developmental works. People from different professions have joined Niswartha by paying only 100 rupees which has a potential to run a substantial fund for development.

Kristappa talked about alternative and sustainability in Political Parties and stressed the need to look at the best practices. **Nalini** shared the urban perspective which deals with the waste management of Bangalore City. The initiative is called **Hasiru Dala** which aims at reaching 25,000 people of the city. Till now they have reached 10,000 people. Different price mechanism has been set for solid, wet and sanitary waste. For this initiative the residents of the apartments segregated the wastes and are encouraged to decrease the quantity of waste.

Stan: Just Change is a grass roots organization based on the idea of participative capital, creating infrastructure for producers and consumer to trade directly while allowing investors to actively participate in the social change process. Thus not only ensuring better prices for producers but also delivering good quality products at lower costs to consumers - so that poor and disadvantaged people who cannot afford the fair trade premium are also included.

People's Action for Creative Education (PEACE) is a grass root voluntary organization in the field of rural development working in Nalgonda and Medak districts of Andhra Pradesh for improving the living conditions of poor and marginal farmers, women, children and disabled persons. They are also a part of MINI network for promoting food festivals.

Mahila Samakhya works for the women empowerment, especially in the field of agriculture so that women can be involved in the decision making process. They initiated a project in which they pooled small landholdings for organic farming in 5 districts. They also worked on grain storage bins, seed bank, food grain charity, self micro-financing and women's lands rights in these districts. Although this project has stopped but the process still continues, especially where women's sanghams have been empowered in decision-making.

Chandrashekhar is working to mobilize the local village people against the Polavaram project which would lead to submergence of villages and large scale displacement. He emphasizes on resistance which involves empathetic dialogue and peaceful resolution.

Dinesh: Earth 360 is an enterprise involved in bringing Millets back into mainstream diet and cropping patterns. They act as resource group for farmers & organizations, are involved in marketing activities, in diverse situation of rain-fed farming including technological interventions for processing for multiple uses.

List of Participants

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