Very Much on the Map: the Timbaktu Collective

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Preface and Methodology

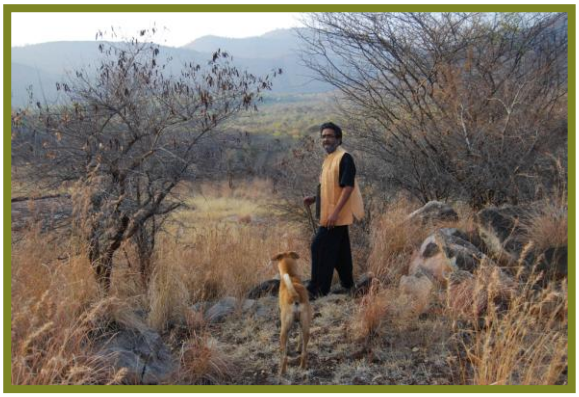
This case study is part of the project 'Alternative Practices and Visions in India: Documentation, Networking, and Advocacy', sponsored by ActionAid. This report has been written by Ashish Kothari, Kalpavriksh, based on (a) field visits involving personal observations and discussions with villagers, (b) perusal of existing material by Timbaktu Collective or by independent observers, and (c) discussions with a range of staff of Timbaktu Collective. During the project period, a visit was carried out in November 2013, but notes from a previous visit (February 2012) have also been used. A draft of this report was sent to Bablu Ganguly of Timbaktu Collective for comments and additional information. See Annexures 1 and 2 for key documents perused, and people interviewed or met. This should be considered work in progress.

Beginnings

Located in the Anantpur 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 tired of a constant agitationist mode they were involved in as part of the Young India Project (organizing farm labour), to do constructive work in a few villages. 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 some 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.

From this tiny start, the Timbaktu Collective (TC) today is spread over 156 villages, its more than 100 full-time employees spearheading a variety of rural reconstruction initiatives (www.timbaktu.org; http://tc-ckp.blogspot.in). While TC's efforts are on a wide variety of fronts including women's empowerment and livelihoods, natural resource conservation, food and agriculture, education, and governance, this case study focuses on two related aspects: organic farming, and farmers' producer cooperative.

Mary Vattamattam at Kalpavalli



Bablu Ganguly at Timbaktu

Timbaktu Campus , the buildings hidden by regenerated forest

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. Women asked for help in experimenting with this 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. Anantpur 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). But government programmes over the last couple of decades pushed the cultivation of groundnut as it gave good economic returns, to the extent that 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)! 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. Several farmers were also given Halikar cattle, the local sturdy breed that had begun to disappear from the area; thus far, over 600 pairs have been given, and are doing so well numbers have multiplied 2-3 times. They are especially important because of being drought resistant, 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).

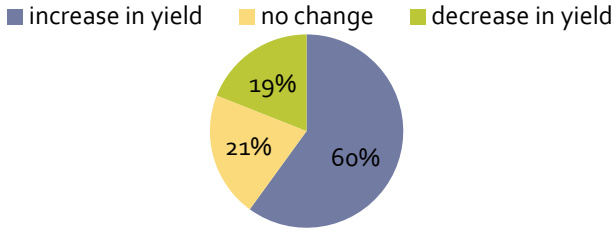
Transforming this scenario has been a slow struggle, but the demonstration effect has won hundreds of farmers over. Villages like Brahmanpalli, Kondakindapalli and Hariyancheruvu, amongst the first to try the organic techniques, are now almost 100% converted (Brahmanpalli did go 100%, but of late a few 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

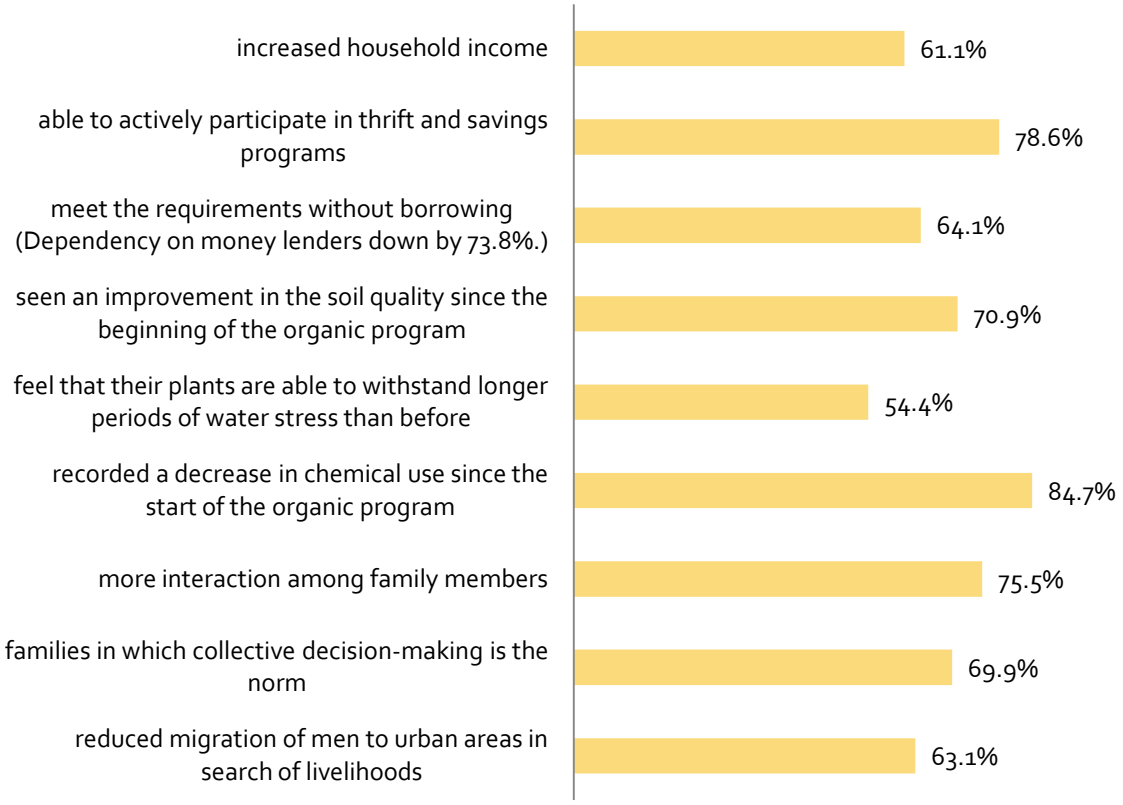
Kondakindapalli, Andhra Pradesh

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. 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

In a detailed assessment of TC's organic initiative in 2013, the proportion of surveyed farmers that reported:





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. *(adapted 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 volunteer per village (mostly from vill itself), part-time paid by the sangha. 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.

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 Kondankindapalli case study below). It is proposed to introduce a few plots of prosomillet, and other native crops like

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 the volunteers 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 Timbaktu Collective, 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.

barnyard millet, as demonstrations for farmers to learn from and experiment with.

Having started in 2005-06, by 2012 TC had facilitated about about 1050 families in 34 villages spread over 3000 to 3500 acres, to go organic. Then in 2013 it decided to expand substantially, over the next three years bringing in the fold a total of 1800 families spread over 45 villages and 9000 acres, comprising 120 sanghams. This will include some irrigated lands 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.

The significant expansion this year has created humanpower challenges, with each of the TC field workers having to cover a much larger number of families (about 195 each), keeping records, verifying the PGS procedures, doing outreach, collecting membership fees and share capital (for Dharani, see below). Each farm plot involved is also GIS mapped, and the farmer facilitated to do composting, integration with livestock, and so on. A total of Rs. 1.25 crores has to be collected from about 1800 families over the next three years, this being their contribution to the cost of inputs (about 7.50 crores) that TC will provide (cattle, biomass saplings, processing infrastructure, compost units, and capacity building).

As of late 2013, about 900 farmers were certified as being fully organic; 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 neither TC nor Dharani plan to continue it.

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 Adishakti Mutually Aided Thrift Cooperative Society of women (with 5720 members and a capital base or Rs. 4.55 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

Residents of Kondakindapalli, Andhra Pradesh

possible. The formation of sanghas helped in mobilizing people and providing support.

Over these five years, nearly all the households of the village have become organic. Only three families are 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).

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 anymore; farmers said the seeds are not available, if TC could reintroduce them and offer to buy back, some farmers might try regrowing, 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 nearly there.

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

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).

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.

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 Adishakti). The Board meets monthly, while the General body meets once a year.

BOX 4: GRAMASIRI (LABOUR) SANGHAS

For the landless families in the village, TC initiated Labour Sanghas under the programme Gramasiri. 15 households in Kondakindapalli are part of this; the programme purchases livestock (mostly goat or sheep) for them, which are used by the families as a revolving asset. From an initial set of 75 animals, 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 270 landless families in 18 villages that have benefited from this programme. Some of 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 Kondakindappali) the sanghas also manage common pasture land development.

Gramasiri is now a producer owned, livelihood cooperative with 675 share holding landless labourers with a capital base of Rs. 26.7 lakhs. From January 2014, it plans to procure and sell sheep and goats reared by its members.

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 Adishakti women's cooperative was registered in 1997-98 as a thrift cooperative; in 2005-06, with 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 Adishakti 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. Adishakti 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.

Dharani's production facility in Timbaktu campus

Membership of Dharani is getting close to 1800 (from ~1100 in 2012), with a total share capital and deposits of over Rs. 21 lakhs. However, given constraints of storage and processing, thus far only about 200 farmers can be supported with 100% purchase of their produce.

Dharani offers a guaranteed price for millets like bajra (pearl millet), jowar (great millet), ragi (finger millet), korra (foxtail millet), and sama (little 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

BOX 5: BASIS FOR DHARANI INITIATIVE

"When the Timbaktu Collective (www.timbaktu.org) initiated its organic farming project in Anantapur 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.

1. 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 defaulted 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.

2. 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.

3. 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 Anantapur farmer to greater market risk.

4. 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)

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 40-60. 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 20) 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 100 dealers, who are somewhat discerning and not whole-sale, mostly from Bengaluru, some Kurnool, Anantapur, Hyderabad, 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; by 2013-14, it expects to distribute more bonus, and have money left over to sustain some community initiatives. The CEO now gets partly paid through Dharani's own revenues (the other part from Timbaktu Collective); all other staff are from Dharani's revenues.

To get there, Dharani needs to diversify its products, including some value added ones that can fetch good revenues; it needs to increase storage and processing capacity, and add one more cycle of procurement to the two per year so far. To the current list of products like millet flour, ragi malt, rice, honey, millet biscuits, peanut powder and laddu, and table peanuts, it will be adding 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 also hopes to set up a distribution point for consumers in Bengaluru (not a retail shop, only a pick-up point), and is considering starting online marketing by 2015.

Dharani also offers loans to its members for expenses related to farming, at an interest rate of 12%.

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, the effort of Dharani combined with TC's organic initiative and general awareness programmes, self-consumption may be on the rise. This needs to be assessed.

Dharani products

Oil-bottling at Dharani's production unit

Analysis: 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. TC's focus on the most marginalized (small peasants, landless, women, children), on environmental sustainability, on collective and more democratic governance practices, are crucial components of an alternative worldview which challenges today's dominant system .

There remain serious challenges, many of which are still to be adequately tackled. 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 in 2013. 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 Kondankindapalli, 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.

It would be useful to carry out studies on the changes that 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.

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), 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. How much is it possible to get such funds from the government, which is anyway supposed to facilitate such processes?

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, 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, 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 rural transformation.

Failures and weaknesses notwithstanding, 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 that are affecting hundreds of millions of people, not the least of them climate change, and has left over half of humanity struggling with poverty and hunger. TC's initiatives have shown that it does not need to be like this.

Signage on Bengaluru-Hyderabad highway

Annexure 1: Literature Used

- Annual Reports of The Timbaktu Collective for 2011-12 and 2012-13.
- MV Ramachandrudu and V. Rukmini Rao. 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.
- Shylaja R. Rao. 2013. Impact Assessment of the Organic Agriculture Program. Timbaktu Collective, Bangalore.

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 (Nov 2013), Project Coordinators of Organic Farming
- K. Murugesan (both times), CEO Dharani.
- KR Sairam (Feb 2012), Team Leader, Marketing

Blackbuck in regenerated grasslands of Kalpavalli