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EMPOWERING YOUTH IN AGRICULTURE: PRAGATI'S EXPERIENCES WITH TRIBAL YOUTH IN KORAPUT DISTRICT OF ODISHA, INDIA



Rural youth have the potential to make agriculture sustainable, and with proper guidance they can be the game changers in leading the path to future food security. In this Good Practice Note, Luna Panda and Rakesh Paul share the experience of Pragati in developing youth leadership in agriculture so that they are attracted and retained in agriculture.

CONTEXT

Koraput district of South Odisha is a highland plateau in the Eastern Ghats of India. Ironically it tops the list of poverty-prone and food-insecure districts in Odisha State despite its extremely rich biodiversity. The district holds 50.66% of the tribal population, whose livelihood is completely based on agriculture and forest produce. Promotion of chemical intensive farming (especially fertilizers and pesticides) and High Yielding Varieties as part of the Green Revolution have adversely affected cultivated lands and polluted agricultural eco-systems in several parts of the district. Most of the tribal youth below 30 years are migrating to cities and other towns to work as wage labourers in construction sites, industries, brick kilns, etc., to earn better income. Those who continue to engage in agriculture are doing it as they do not have any other option and it is the only means of livelihood in the village.

The tribal youth want more for themselves, including income stability, security, and a better quality of life. But without better access to land and capital, modern farming techniques, and more linkages to markets, the pathway out of poverty is unclear to them. Pressure on arable land is high, youth often also lack access to credit, information, extension services and many other productive resources necessary for agriculture. Thus, the majority of these youth are unemployed and forced to migrate out to urban areas, work at low paid jobs in inhumane conditions, and a few even get diverted to illegal activities. Young girls are becoming more vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation.



INTERVENTION

Pragati, Koraput (<http://pragatikoraput.org/>), an NGO working for socio-economic development of the bottom layers of the population in South Odisha is currently piloting an initiative with 1000 tribal youth to bring back youthful energy into the farms under a Project entitled 'Empowering Tribal Youth for Nutritional Food Security and Income Enhancement'. The pilot programme is implemented in 34 villages of Koraput block in Koraput district of South Odisha and it is supported by IFAD-IPAF (Indigenous People's Assistance Facility) from September 2019, to be completed in August 2021. Its focus is on enhancing knowledge and skills of youth in new innovative farming techniques and reviving traditional food systems by facilitating youth collectives.



These tribal youths are between the ages of 15 to 35. They are mostly school dropouts or less educated who do not presently find agriculture a remunerative source of employment. It is high time that these youths are supported and invested in activities contributing to agriculture production, entrepreneurship and market linkage for economic upliftment in the wake of global food insecurity and health emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic (Box 1).

Box 1: Attracting and Retaining Youth in Agriculture

India with the youngest youth population in the world at 34.8 percent (2011 census) has much youthful energy to offer, especially in the agriculture sector. But unfortunately, youth participation in agriculture is declining, even though agriculture still continues to be the primary occupation of more than half the Indian population. Hardly five per cent of youth are engaged in agriculture though over 60 per cent of rural people derive their livelihood fully or partly from farming and allied activities. This indicates that youth are disenchanted with agriculture and it has become the last choice as a profession.

There is no doubt that agriculture needs a young work force and hence involvement of youth in agriculture is a must. The rationale behind this is that the majority of farmers in the Indian context are more than 35 years old and they are not able to adopt new technologies/methods due to lack of education and awareness. Rural youth especially have not only the potential to make agriculture sustainable but they are also assets in their rural communities, and with proper guidance they can be game changers by heading the pathway to future food security.

To retain and bring back youth to agriculture, it is essential to transform agriculture and food systems in such a way that it becomes economically rewarding and also fits into the psyche of youth. The programme targeted youth within the age group of 15 to 30 years, most being school drop outs. Pragati has intervened to create a space for engagement and leadership of tribal youth in agriculture and food systems as agents of change, and not only as receivers of assistance and support. A multi-pronged strategy has been adopted for bringing the youth back to agriculture and food security. Organising youth collectives was adopted as a key strategy for bringing youth together for peer learning, developing youth leaders, and enabling them to manage their groups.

GOOD PRACTICES

Baseline Survey

The baseline survey, conducted with 250 youth of the two intervention Panchayats (Mahadeiput and Kendar) of Koraput block during the first quarter of the project revealed that the tribal youth preferred to migrate and also work as wage labourers in the nearby towns, doing very menial jobs, but they do not have any interest in farming as an occupation/source of livelihood. Most of the youth below 30 years are migrating to cities and other towns to work as labourers to earn their bread. Their economic needs overpower their disposition to exercise agricultural practices in their native places. These youth

are disenchanted with agriculture as they do not see much of profit/income in comparison to the time and effort they need to put in.

Organising youth collectives

In order to motivate youth, Pragati intervened in order to bring the youth together to form a Producer Group i.e., the name itself should instil in them the dignity in agriculture, helping them understand that they are contributing to household food security and also earning their livelihood from farming. The Youth Leaders are selected by consensus within the group, especially youth who have interest in learning and contributing in their peer groups. Out of 1045 youth identified in 34 intervention villages, 561 Youth Leaders have participated in trainings and exposure. Most of the young leaders are dynamic and have leadership skills that enable them to mobilise their peers in respective communities so as to respond to adverse situations and manage the groups effectively. The Youth Leaders are given the responsibility to participate, learn, and disseminate their knowledge in peer groups and engage effectively in implementation of the practices in their own villages.



Installation of Solar Irrigation / Indigenous seed conservation by youth

Skill development of youth on sustainable agriculture practices

Rural youths by blending traditional as well as modern agriculture technologies can bring revolution in agriculture if properly supported. Meetings were conducted by Pragati in each village in order to create an ambience of learning among youth and to promote intergenerational exchange of knowledge with focus on sustainable agriculture practices. Six hundred and forty youth have been trained on different improved agriculture practices such as system of crop intensification, vegetable cultivation, package of practices for root and tuber crops, and organic farming along with practical demonstrations and exposure in related fields.



Promotion of best practices-Sustainable Rice Intensification and Sustainable Millet Intensification

Partnership with agricultural research and extension

The scientific community representing different ICAR (Indian Council of Agriculture Research) institutions, such as Indian Institute of Soil and Water Conservation, Central Tuber Crop Research Institute, Central Institute for Freshwater Aquaculture, and Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Koraput, under the Odisha University of Agriculture and Technology (OUAT) have been supporting Pragati in educating Youth Leaders on improved varieties/breeds, and environment-friendly management practices. Besides crop production, the youth have been exposed to other allied sectors like pisciculture, livestock rearing, mushroom cultivation, etc. The trainings encompass ground level implementation of organic farming, knowledge on seed varieties, use of renewable energy for irrigation, and management of crop diversity through demonstrative models for ensuring future food and nutritional security.



Exposure Visit of Youth leaders

Critical input supports

With an objective to immediately attract and retain youth in agriculture, Pragati has provided critical inputs including seeds, planting materials, farm equipment and organic kits with drums, tubs and water jars to encourage them to adopt agricultural practices. They are being involved in new production technologies like System of Rice and Millet Intensification, half- acre model farms (Box 2) and seasonal vegetable cultivation which has increased production leading to yearlong food availability for their households and increased income from agriculture. They are also involved in collection and conservation of indigenous varieties of seeds. Community seed banks are established for further strengthening of these initiatives.



Organic manure kits supplied to young farmers

Box 2: Half-Acre Model Farm

The half-acre model is composed of an integrated high value vegetable cultivation, under which the farmer divides his 0.5 acre land into three parts, i.e., one part (0.10 decimal) with crops such as banana/papaya, another part (0.10 decimal) with creeper crops, and 0.30 decimal with seasonal vegetables. The planning and layout of field was done on the basis of food requirement of the family and the market demand. Crop calendar for the whole year is prepared so as to enable the farmer to perform various inter cultural operations on time. It helps to enhance nutritional security and enables a farmer to earn Rs 75,000 to 100,000 per annum.

IMPACT

The interventions— within a short span of 22 months – has been multidimensional. Tribal youth leadership has emerged in 34 intervention villages, and in almost every village there are a couple of influential youth (men and women), who are able to talk about their community, basic issues of the village, organic farming, seed preservation, role of youth, etc. Earlier only the traditional heads or political leaders used to lead their villages but now the tribal youth are also very active with updated information and knowledge about their issues, communities, culture, farming, local politics, etc. in order to lead their villages into the public domain. The youth collectives have brought solidarity among youth and also created a space for intergenerational exchange of knowledge.



Promotion of best practices in cultivation of Tuber Crops, Vegetables and Onion

The intensive trainings on improved agriculture practices and the inputs support have motivated 526 tribal youth who had no interest in farming to adopt agriculture as a prime occupation for ensuring their livelihood. Most of the tribal youth have shared the knowledge and skills with their families and community members about improved package of practices in rice and millets, organic farming and vegetable cultivation, which has increased their nutritional food security and income. The migration to towns and other states has reduced. Almost all the tribal households, most importantly, the tribal youth are very much active in conservation of indigenous seed diversity. They have collected all kinds of indigenous seeds, preserved traditionally, and also prepared a list of seeds in the seed register in every village. They also maintain their indigenous culture of caring and sharing through their native system of farming.

The youth farmers are getting motivated to cultivate and consume traditional foods like millets and tuber crops, which were gradually becoming forgotten by the younger generation. Further, during COVID-19 the traditional food crops have proved that they can ensure the nutritional food security of these indigenous communities. The youth are encouraged to re-identify the value of indigenous seeds, conserve and replicate it on their family farms, especially in the context of climate change and thus sustain production systems.

Both short-term and long-term plans in agriculture have also been put in place in order to deal with the formidable challenges thrown up by COVID-19 today, so that the youth who have returned as ‘migrant labourers’ can be engaged in agriculture. In future the youths will be linked so as to develop

more and more agro-ecological models with the knowledge they have gained from experience over their period of engagement with Pragati.

YOUTH ROLE MODELS



Durja Mudli is a 23-year-old role model in his community. With the knowledge and support of Pragati and of course his hard work, he has transformed one hectare of hilly barren land into an agricultural field. He has adopted vegetable cultivation with organic practices, which has given him a ray of hope and a new direction in life. Durja comes from the Paraja tribal community of Mangra village in Kendar Panchayat of Koraput block in Koraput district of Odisha. He had lost his parents when he was merely two-years-old and was brought up by his uncle. However, he could not study further after Class VII due to poverty. Finally, he became a helping hand to his uncle, struggling hard to feed their family members.

Durja got a new direction in life after participating in training programmes organised by Pragati, where he learnt about the SRI method of cultivation, preparation of organic manure, and vegetable cultivation. He also joined the exposure visit to see organic farming, which inspired and encouraged him. Pragati also supported him with a solar pump at a subsidized price through the Farmer Producer Company. Now he cultivates his land twice in a year. As a result, his family has sufficient food and the income is also increasing steadily. Presently, he has started marketing vegetables like cauliflower, cabbage, tomato, brinjal, peas and coriander. He has also planted some mango trees. Apart from all that he has also started constructing a shed where he plans to start poultry farming.



Mangaldei Nayak is a 21-year-old Parja girl, in Bagra village of Kendar Panchayat of Koraput block. She is the leader of her village, inspiring other young boys and girls as a progressive farmer. Her journey began when Pragati started its intervention in the village and formed a youth group. She became one of the active members of the village youth group. She attended regular meetings, participated in trainings and exposure, where she learnt about the importance of indigenous seeds preservation, SRI method of cultivation, preparation of organic manure, vegetable cultivation, mushroom cultivation and poultry farming.

The knowledge she gained is now reflected in her farm and also shared with other young boys and girls. She could convince her parents in adopting the SRI method and organic farming. They started farming paddy, millets and maize with improved package of practices. They also prepared organic manure which reduced input costs and increased the yield. Besides, they also started vegetable

cultivation of brinjal, tomato, potato, green veggies, coriander, etc. This was their first time cultivating vegetables, which they used for their own consumption, thus ensuring their nutritional food security. Most importantly, Mangaldei has preserved varieties of indigenous seeds collected from her village as well as neighbouring villages. Following her path, other young girls of the group have also preserved indigenous seeds in their houses. The preserved seeds are shared in the community during the sowing season, a means of promoting the indigenous culture of sharing and caring too.



Traditional seeds conserved by Mangaldei Nayak

CHALLENGES

The intervention of bringing back youth into agriculture is itself a herculean challenge. One of the major challenges has been the lack of awareness on the nutritional food security potential of agriculture, as most of the youth have been attracted towards instant monetary gain. Pragati has been successful in breaking this barrier and creating interest among the youth to reinvigorate the agriculture sector for dignified livelihood. The challenges in knowledge and skill gaps are being addressed through the trainings, exposure and linkages with different platforms. There are infrastructural challenges such as lack of irrigation, resources, finance, technologies and access to markets that need to be addressed to unfurl the full potential of agriculture for retention and engagement of youth.

PLANS AHEAD: PROMOTING SUSTAINABILITY & SCALABILITY

Thirty-four youth collectives have been facilitated at the village level and a Farmer Producer Company federating these collectives has been registered as the Ma Nishanimunda FPC, which is one of the key strategies for sustainability. The knowledge and skills gained by youth are the soft components of sustainability that can be shared among larger peer groups and the whole village community. All the youth are members of their village Producer Groups which is a platform where they sit, learn and plan together to address their issues. The youth are now being enrolled into the Farmer Producer Company, and nurtured to take forward the impacts of the project, especially in ensuring market linkage and developing entrepreneurship.

Pragati is planning on scaling up this initiative – supported by IFAD-Indigenous Peoples' Assistance Facility – in other nearby districts with greater involvement of youth in the agriculture sector. Pragati has also focused on linking youth with Government plans and programmes so as to provide them with more livelihood options. Pragati has also been planning to train the youth in disaster preparedness and make them role models for battling humanitarian crises which have direct and indirect impact on agriculture and allied livelihoods. On the whole these youths are in good hands and they are coming to the forefront to save and revive the diminishing interest in agriculture and take this sector to an all-time high in the coming years.

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