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Sustainability and Income Security for Small Farmers, Women, and Weaker Sections

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Vision
SRIJAN’S sustained efforts helping deserving families in rural India to achieve holistic development in their lives

Mission
We at SRIJAN are committed to enhancing the overall well-being of the rural poor through livelihood initiatives, social development focus and women empowerment.

Tikamgarh, Madhya Pradesh

The serious farming crisis in India has been reflected in many reports of rural distress. There are apprehensions that in times of climate change with a much higher possibility of adverse weather conditions, such distress may increase. Most of the farmers in India are small farmers and their capacity for withstanding losses is limited. This capacity has been lowered further by the rapid increase of farm costs in recent times resulting in increasing indebtedness. Hence there is a growing urgency to evolve alternative rural development models which are capable of ensuring satisfactory and sustainable livelihoods to small farmers even in difficult circumstances. The need for this is all the greater in regions like Bundelkhand from where more acute rural distress has been reported from time to time.

It is in this wider context that there is a growing sense of urgency for finding rural and farm development models that can ensure adequate, secure and sustainable livelihoods to small farmers in difficult times. The ultimate test for such models of course is whether these really work in the practical conditions of India’s villages.

One such model which has been not just appreciated for being conceptually very sound but in addition has been found to give very encouraging results at the practical level even in difficult conditions has been called the Srijan Tikamgarh Livelihoods (STL) Model. It has been initiated by the well-known development organization SRIJAN (Self-Reliant Initiatives through Joint Action). Although this model is being implemented in four states, the name Tikamgarh has been particularly associated with it because several of its initiatives are first tried and improved in Tikamgarh district (Madhya Pradesh) before being considered ready for wider spread.
The STL Model is a combination of several categories of initiatives which are prioritized, well-integrated with each other and implemented on the basis of close involvement of communities, with special emphasis on weaker sections. The STL places the most emphasis on 16 components which are described below—

1. WATER CONSERVATION—
Water conservation is frequently the starting point of STL, particularly for water-scarce villages. The kind of work to be taken up depends on local conditions as identified by communities, but STL has some frequently selected types identified on the basis of high benefits at low costs, multiple benefits and integration with other parts of the model. One particularly favored work consists of silt removal from tanks, and making prior arrangements with farmers to carry away the fertile silt to their farms, generally at their own cost. Another favored option is to renovate and repair wells or other water sources, including previously constructed check dams which need repairs. Yet another frequent choice is to dig ‘doha’ pits in small streams and nullahs, the sites being chosen in consultation with communities, so that more water remains in streams for a longer time and wells are recharged too and provide more water. With these kinds of water conservation, villagers can get more water more easily from hand pumps and wells, so drudgery is reduced too, particularly for women and girls. Drinking and domestic water shortage is also reduced, providing women more time for more creative pursuits.

2. NATURAL FARMING
Natural farming is the second crucial component, generally benefiting from water conservation and also in many villages from deposition of fertile silt in farms. Natural farming is based on scientifically prepared solid and liquid organic fertilizers (Ghanjeeamrit and Jeevanamrit) prepared from cow dung and cow urine with some jaggery and gram added to this. Scientifically prepared organic pest repellants (neematra, brahmastra etc.) use cow urine along with leaves of various local plants such as neem and dhatura. Most farmers are encouraged to prepare this on their farm, but those who cannot do so can purchase this at a modest price from a natural farming center (or prakrit krishi kendra or Bio Input Resource Center) created in several villages where this model is implemented. Hence farmers get rid of the high expenses incurred on chemical fertilizers and pesticides as well as the environmental damage caused by these agro-chemicals. Natural Farming Centers also try to stock various implements and tools needed in natural farming. These can be rented by farmers on daily basis at modest rates, so that small farmers do not have to invest more heavily in purchasing them. With a keen eye on those small machines and implements which can prove genuinely useful for farmers, the natural farming centers have been adding more of these first on experimental basis and then spreading to other more centers when there is more demand from farmers. Mixed farming practices and improved soil conservation get more importance.
3. MULTI-LAYER VEGETABLE GARDENS
Multi-layer vegetable gardens are given a priority place so that small plots of around 300 square meters or so can be used to grow a diversity of vegetable crops. Depending on seasonality one or the other vegetables keeps getting harvested at any given time of the year providing a steady stream of income. This is the more visible gain of the vegetable gardens while the less visible but nevertheless important gain is that of the improved nutrition of family members. The ability of grow a wide diversity of vegetables on a small plot is based on growing at different layers—creepers climbing to the top, followed by bigger and smaller plants and finally root crops. This selection is based on which vegetable growth can be supportive to the other, the combinations which can grow best seasonally in any local conditions, and other such factors, in turn providing space for a lot of creativity. The eager and curious cultivator can remain very absorbed in the intricacies of a multi-layer garden, which can also have space for a few fruit trees, depending on the model chosen. Natural farming methods are extended to vegetable gardens as well.

4. FRUIT ORCHARDS
Fruit orchards are frequently grown on another small part of land. There can be a diversity of fruit trees, or just one or two species can be emphasized, depending on factors like land availability, soil conditions, local marketing conditions and other factors. Hardy indigenous species which can be grown at a low cost in more secure ways and find a ready local market are emphasized, resulting in the better availability of organically grown healthier fruits at the community level and of course to the farmer household.

5. ECO-GARDENS/TAPOVAN
Eco-gardens called Tapovans are promoted for their role of ecological protection alone, as distinct from any economic or livelihood benefits for the community. These are mixed gardens of diverse indigenous species, grown in more dense conditions closer to each other, tree species of different height so grown as to be supportive of each other. Planting is preceded by applying layers of organic fertilizer obtained at community level. Voluntary work for protection at early stage is emphasized and outstanding survival rates have been achieved, hence testifying to the high commitment of communities to those environment protection works in which there is no direct or immediate economic gain.

6. PRIORITY TO WEAKER SECTIONS
Priority to weaker sections of society is an essential precept of this model. This is evident also from the several highly creative and successful natural farmers that have emerged from among the dalit, adivasi and OBC communities under this initiative, despite the much lesser resources of these sections. However an inherent limitation of farme-based development models is that their main activities do not cover the poorest sections consisting of landless households. The STL model has sought to at least partially make up for this by having a program of kitchen gardens which can benefit even those households which do not have any farmland. Secondly, goat based livelihoods are also important for landless households and this is an aspect which has been much promoted by this model. Then the STL model also has provisions for involving landless household members in the activities of farmer producer organizations such as those relating to value addition from food-processing and better marketing.
7. STRONG ROLE FOR WOMEN
A strong role for women farmers has been provided in the conceptualization and implementation of this mode, which is an acknowledgement of the important but often ignored contribution of women farmers. This has led to the inherent creativity of women farmers emerging in very heartwarming ways, confirming further their higher aptitude for the more creative activities relating to natural farming. While setting up natural farming centers, women have been given priority for a leadership role. They have justified the high trust reposed in them. In addition, women have given exceptionally good results in other roles as well, such as in their role as para-vets for goats, or pashu-sakhis as these vets from within the rural communities are called.

8. IMPROVING GOAT LIVELIHOODS
Improving goat-based livelihoods has been another important part of this model. Surveys in many villages have revealed that for weaker sections, goat-based livelihoods constitute the most important aspect of animal husbandry, particularly in terms of providing a lump sum earning during lean times or at the time of an emergency. However, it was also found that disease outbreaks among goats can be a big setback. Hence what the STL model has emphasized the most in its support for goat rearing is to arrange for the training of selected women from within communities so that they can emerge as para-vets for goats, or goat doctors or pashu-sakhis as they are often called. In addition, efforts are also made to ensure that weaker sections also have better access to those government schemes which can make available more goats to them in a subsidized form.

9. HELPING RURAL ENTREPRENEURS
Promotion of rural entrepreneurs has also been an important component of the STL model. This can be seen in the form of natural farming centers or bio-input centers which are selling village-produced liquid and solid organic fertilizer as well as organic pest repellants at modest rates and also renting out farm implements. With the spread of natural farming in any village or cluster of villages, this is a role that is expected to grow steadily. Then women para-vets for goats are also emerging as entrepreneurs as they also handle sale of nutrient feed and provide their services on the basis of modest fees, earning their livelihood from the community by providing an important service to the community. As farmer producer organizations become more important, emergence of rural entrepreneurs will be linked more to them, as this is also an important component of the STL model.

10. VALUE ADDITION
Value addition and improved marketing is another important component of this model which will be increasingly achieved with the organization of farmer producer organizations. Food-processing activities provide an obvious way of increasing returns, and there can be other ways of getting better price for organic farm produce too and it is an important part of the STL model to pursue and promote these so that farmers can get better earnings from their produce.
11. CONVERGENCE

Convergence of several efforts to increase their collective contribution is an important component of the STL model which has already led to the achievement of good results within a short time. Various organizations may have diverse strengths in various areas, various donors may be willing to contribute to different aspects of an important many-sided initiative keeping in view their own priorities. The STL seeks to optimize their cooperation and contribution in such a way that the best results for communities and various programs being taken to these communities can be achieved. An important aspect of these also relates to convergence with various existing programs of the government. As the government has by far the most resources, involving government agencies can lead to a significant stepping up of benefits while the government agencies may also be able to find better ways of ensuring that the implementation of their programs is improved.

12. CLIMATE CHANGE MITIGATION

Climate change mitigation is one of the most important challenges confronting humanity. The STL model seeks to be in harmony with the task of effectively facing this challenge and to contribute significantly to climate change mitigation. The entire program of natural farming as applied to cereals, legumes, vegetables and fruits contributes to climate change mitigation.
The reduction of chemical fertilizers, chemical pesticides and to some extent diesel achieved under this model reduces fossil fuel dependence on permanent basis. This model also seeks to promote solar pumps. The big emphasis on tree planting and protection of planted trees under various components of the program helps to absorb carbon dioxide, provide cleaner air and improve soil. The soil improvement with higher humus and carbon content helps to absorb carbon dioxide.

13. CLIMATE ADAPTATION
Better adaptation to climate change and improved resilience are also built into the STL model in robust ways. Climate change brings with it the possibility of more uncertain and adverse weather, including extreme weather events such as acute drought or destructive floods. By improving soil and water conservation this model seeks to improve the resilience of rural communities in such situations. When a diversity of crops are grown which yield a steady stream of income and when a good share of the income comes from trees rather than crops, then the ability of rural communities particularly farmers to avoid more heavy damage is increased and security regarding some minimum income is improved. Similarly diversity of livelihoods also contributes to this. Farmers becoming more self-reliant in terms of accessing their basic inputs locally as well as in terms of their knowledge/technology base constitute other important assets which add to their resilience. Strengthening of community ties and growing cooperation among community members, which are important components of the STL model, also add to this.

14. INCREASING BIODIVERSITY
Increasing biodiversity is a strong and important component of the STL model. Regarding farm biodiversity, STL emphasizes mixed farming of several cereals, legumes, vegetables, fruits and spices so that just a 2 acre farm may be harvesting 20 or more types of food in a single year. In addition there is the biodiversity promoted by the great diversity of trees in eco-gardens or tapovans. As soil improves with trees and natural farming, earthworms re-appear and micro-organisms in soil also increase, indicating an increase in soil-biodiversity and fertility. Wild and stray animals (also chuutta or anna animals particularly cattle) also benefit from water conservation. Birds benefit a lot from this as well as from trees and eco-gardens. The process of pollination is helped by the increasing presence of bees, butterflies and birds.

15. RESPECT TRADITIONAL WISDOM
Respect for traditional wisdom of farmers and rural community is also inherent in the STL model. Although more obviously it seeks to take modern scientific knowledge also to rural communities, this is done not in violation of traditional wisdom but instead we see due consideration to traditional wisdom being provided in this model.
After all, natural farming is quite close to what the rural communities were practicing before the advent of chemical intensive methods, and this is why with traditional wisdom behind them many communities find it easy to accept the STL model, while the addition of concepts such as preparation and use of organic fertilizers in more scientific ways helps farmers to maintain or even increase their productivity. Saving diversity of traditional seeds is also taken up by several farmers working under the STL model.

16. STRONGER RURAL COMMUNITIES

Strengthening rural communities in many ways is a very important part of the STL model, an aspect which contributes significantly to its strength. The STL model involves consultation and mobilization efforts with the community from the very initial stage. What is often discussed with the community is how increasing cooperation as well as voluntary contributions of the village community can contribute to the success of the various development and environment protection initiatives which are being planned. All this helps to increase community unity and mobilization for tasks of common welfare, tasks such as water conservation and eco gardens. When excess silt has accumulated in a tank and this has to be cleaned and at the same time the deposition of silt in farms has to be arranged, then such work which benefits a large section of the community also calls for the united action and cooperation of community members. Similarly when a check dam has to be repaired or doha pits have to be dug at sites identified by the community then this calls for cooperation of the community and unity at various levels. Hence the community works together to create important development works and assets while at the same time preparing for the maintenance and monitoring work to be carried out later. Then there is the creation of eco gardens which need voluntary work for creating and maintaining. In all this work the community is also learning and getting used to acting with greater unity and cooperation for the common good. What is more, as per the STL model, more importance is being given to often neglected sections including weaker sections of society and women, and so in this context very valuable lessons are being learnt in community mobilization processes.