

CASE STUDY

Telangana, India

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Landless farmers turn idle land into fertile land and obtain titles

In 20 years, 425 poor landless tenant farmers in the villages of Telangana State, India, transformed 1400 acres of infertile and idle wasteland into cultivable land using dryland farming. Realising the potential of the improved land, the absentee landlords tried to reclaim the land by threatening the tenants with eviction. Following a considerable struggle with the landlords, the farmers' collective, with the support of SDDPA, successfully negotiated the registration of land in the name of 395 families. The security of tenure for the farmers has prevented the loss of livelihoods, enhancing agricultural and environmental sustainability in the area.

PRINCIPAL ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

Society for Development of Drought Prone Area (SDDPA)

Village Self Help Groups (SHGs)

LOCATION

Villages in Wanaparthy, Pangal, Gopalpet and Kodair mandals (district sub-divisions), Mahabubnagar district, Telangana State, India

TIMELINE

2005-present

TARGET AUDIENCE

Women's land rights and biodiversity advocates, agro-biotech specialists, government officials, village-level networks, farmers self-help action groups

KEYWORDS

Dryland farming, agro-horticulture, farmers' federation, land rights awareness, women's economic empowerment

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GOOD PRACTICES

Towards making land governance more people-centred

This case study is part of the ILC's Database of Good Practices, an initiative that documents and systematises ILC members and partners' experience in promoting **people-centred land governance**, as defined in the Antigua Declaration of the ILC Assembly of Members. Further information at www.landcoalition.org/what-we-do

This case study supports people-centred land governance as it contributes to:

- Commitment 1** Respect, protect and strengthen the land rights of women and men living in poverty
- Commitment 2** Ensure equitable land distribution and public investment that supports small-scale farming systems

Case description

Background issues

Since the 1950s Indian states have enacted a series of land reforms for abolishing the *Zamindari* (feudal landlords), prohibiting or strictly regulating tenancy, imposing a ceiling on large landholdings and redistributing *bhoodan* land (mainly unproductive idle land donated to the state by landowners) and *banjar* (barren or under-producing) government wasteland. In 2007 approximately 14.7 million acres of government land had been distributed to rural landless poor families across all states.

The Andhra Pradesh (AP) Land Reforms (Ceiling on Agricultural Holdings) Act of 1973 aims at improving equity in land distribution and efficiency in agricultural production for the poor. The AP government accelerated land distribution from 2005 onwards, transferring almost 1.7 million hectares of *banjar* and *bhoodan* land to the landless. In 2010 about 5,253 million acres had been assigned to 3,159 million landless poor beneficiaries (Rani 2013). However, the Act was breached and subverted with impunity. Legal loopholes allowed landowners to evict many of the poorest tenants, giving land ownership to intermediaries instead than to the cultivators.

Land transfer is plagued by the filing of wrongful declarations in the *patta* (the record of legal ownership), the suppression of land holdings by landlords and the fraudulent *benami* transactions - anonymous transactions made using another person's name. The *patta* can be issued jointly to a group or it can be an individual transaction. Legally, *patta* for government *banjar* land endowment to a group of farmers cannot be registered in the name of an individual beneficiary.

However, it is not unusual for a beneficiary with clout to claim the *patta* in their name. Prior to the 2012 amendments, there was no provision in the Act to review cases involving fraud. A matter, once dismissed by the Land Reforms Tribunal, could not be re-opened for scrutiny and review.

Telangana has a history of social unrest related to land. Nationally, it has one of the highest rates of farm suicides and agrarian distress (NCRB 2014). Farmers with small landholdings face difficulties in getting agricultural loans from financial institutions because they lack a history of borrowing. They are induced to borrow money from traders and buyers of agricultural products at exorbitant interest rates. The absence of co-opted marketing mechanisms leave farmers exposed to underpayment and exploitation. This leads them to loan default and the forced sale of land to pay off debts.

Consequently, cultivable land with irrigation facilities continues to be in the hands of big farmers (often absentee landlords) who cultivate only small parts of their agricultural land, leaving the rest of it idle or fallow.

Solution

The historical, socioeconomic and cultural complexities, the laxity in the implementation of the law, and the political and legal interferences are too great a barrier for the landless to overcome these challenges on their own. Enabling communities through collective action is a solution for translating government land reforms into secure and subsistence tenure for the poor.

Working on the drought resistant, non-farm sources of income in the poorest villages of Telangana, the Society for Development of Drought Prone Area (SDDPA) encountered issues around land titles of government-assigned wasteland, demarcation of that land and land titles on private idle land. The SDDPA began to engage and organise the poor tenant farmers by investing in agro-horticultural practices to convert land that was abandoned, overgrown and untenable into productive agricultural land.

In over 20 years, tenant cultivators rejuvenated this land with dryland farming and their hard work, enjoying sufficient income from agro-horticultural plants even during the unfavourable monsoons. Together with SDDPA, farmers organised Self Help Groups (SHGs), creating vertical and horizontal peer support, farmers' federations and networking mechanisms.

The networked and federated SHGs successfully thwarted the legal claims of the landlords by negotiating and filing petitions with the land revenue officials. They managed to secure land from the absentee landlords in the name of 87% of the families in the Wanaparthy *mandal* (435 in total). Currently, they are also fighting for other claims.

The provisions under the AP Land Reforms and Right to Information Act of 2005 create the necessary legal platform for farmers to challenge the absentee landlords when they try to reclaim the land - made agriculturally viable by poor tenant farmers - that they abandoned and neglected for years.

Activities

In 2005 SDDPA began organising 30,000 poor families across 150 villages in Mehboobnagar to teach them dryland farming techniques and assist the beneficiaries of banjar government wastelands with land claims. This commenced in a staged manner in tandem with the following nationally and internationally funded land-based programmes in rural employment, poverty alleviation and biodiversity:

- The AP Comprehensive Land Development Programme (CLDP) under Indira Kranthi Padham (IKP) for the development of distributed land to Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) beneficiaries by undertaking bunding, stone removal, jungle clearance, levelling and biodiesel plantations through wage labour.
- The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA), Ministry of Rural Development, for the development of land-based programmes.
- The Land Purchase Programme of Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Castes Cooperative Finance Corporation (APSCCFC) for buying land for SC and ST communities and the World Bank-aided land purchase programme of Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP), an autonomous body of the Department of Rural Development. The aim of these land purchase programmes was to purchase land and allocate it to the landless with a cost and a loan attached to it.
- The SDDPA Collective Action for Sustainability (CAS) for developing livelihood systems for gender equality and sustainable dryland farming.
- The AP Government 90% irrigation subsidy pilot programme involving CSO's - including SDDPA - for the development of biodiesel plantations.

Stage 1

A study was undertaken to identify and document the problems faced by the landless farmers from the weaker communities, the beneficiaries of *bhoodan* land distribution programmes - particularly those from scheduled tribes and castes - and all small and marginal farmers more generally. Unlike large farm owners, small farmers suffered from lack of access to finances and markets for their produce. Differently from small landowners from the upper castes, the small farmers involved in the land distribution schemes (the *bhoodan* beneficiaries) needed to make an initial investment. The beneficiaries of land distribution programmes, in fact, did not only face difficulties in

occupying/claiming land but they also needed considerable financial support to make this land cultivable. Furthermore, the distributed wastelands was not physically demarcated. This resulted in frequent boundary-related conflicts between the beneficiaries and the villagers.

Stage 2

SDDPA began engaging, educating, mobilising and organising small and marginal farmers to address the issues identified in the study by undertaking:

i. Legal training in land reform and land rights

Legal experts educated staff from SDDPA and farmers from 100 villages to make them aware of the land reforms related to the Ceiling on Agricultural Holdings Act and the rights and responsibilities of beneficiaries. The leaders of the farmers' federation and the Self Help Groups (SHGs) learnt:

- How to obtain the village hamlet revenue records and verify the assigned land on the village map;
- How to confirm the name of the land holder;
- Who to apply to for land titles and the allotment of revenue wasteland; and
- Which proof or documents are required to formalise land transactions.

Specialist training was provided in negotiation, mediation and engagement of government officials and power brokers to facilitate an amicable resolution of conflicts in favour of the landless.

ii. Capacity building

- SDDPA's work - still ongoing - has focused on: the organisation of farmers Self Help Groups (SHGs) in Wanaparthy, Pangal, Gopalpet and Khodair *mandals*; the facilitation of SHG members and other village-level action groups to attend state-level training in governance, management and networking; the provision of peer support and of training for the development of skills to liaise with government departments and landlords and to address the conflicts arising from land redistribution policies.
- Open public gatherings have been organised in villages to discuss issues and share experiences related to assigned revenue wasteland and absentee landlords. More than 1400 men and women, especially women from excluded groups, attended these gatherings.
- Training in value addition and marketing and in processing, packaging and promoting agro-products has been offered to over 185 poor women from different groups. More than 6,122 farmers attended one-day orientation sessions on methods for organic farming, use of bio-pesticides and fertilisers. The end goal was to support farmers to improve agricultural productivity of small land holdings.

- SDDPA began collaborating with other community-based organisations (CBOs) to strengthen Self Help Groups (SHGs) and set up farmers' federations. They actively promoted farmers' networks within the Panchayat Raj institutions (a system of governance in which *gram* - village - *panchayats* are the basic units of local administration). This aimed to garner support and awareness about land rights; fast-track the distribution of land; follow up land demarcation; ensure land titling and the identification of land available for further assignment.

Stage 3

In order for land beneficiaries to learn about biodiversity, watershed management and organic dryland farming, biodiesel plantations and demonstration plots for agro-horticultural and organic farming were set up in 20 villages. By participating in the establishment and management of these demonstration plots farmers learnt how to grow biodiesel and agroforestry plants, organise seed banks and manage funding to rotate plants suited to dryland farming. The farmers learnt about the damaging impact of agro-chemicals on agricultural productivity; about turning idle land into productive land; adopting integrated organic farming practices involving the use of vermicompost and permaculture; using traditional knowledge of neem tree products (neem cake, neem powder, neem oil); and becoming certified organic farmers. More experienced growers were encouraged to become mentors for the new land owners.

Importance of the case for people-centred land governance

SDDPA's intervention is people centred and contributes towards:

- Respecting, protecting and strengthening the land rights of women and men beneficiaries of government land distribution schemes; ensuring that they are not deprived of the use and control of the land by the absentee landlords through eviction, expulsion or exclusion, and that the government revenue officials and villagers work together to obtain land titles.
- Ensuring equitable land distribution and public investment that supports small-scale farming systems through the identification of new land for redistribution. This aims to counter excessive land concentration in the hands of rich landlords and private entities, whilst supporting smallholders as investors and producers, for example through farmers' federations and Self Help Groups, partnerships and cooperative agro-business models.

Changes

Baseline

In 2005, 425 families of the weaker sections of the villages of Mettupally and Nandimallagada in the Wanaparthy *mandal* did not enjoy any formal land titles. They had little or no access to the land-related schemes of the government. In 2007 only 57 families had been able to finalise land titles on idle land.

Achievements

Nearly ten years later, more than 87% of the landless households had obtained secure land titles in their name. This new group of independent and better-informed small-scale organic farmers improved their food security, as well as the agricultural sustainability and biodiversity of the private and common land in their village. Over 30,000 men and women farmers in 150 villages across five *mandals* organised themselves into farmers' federations with support from SDDPA. Around 450 SHGs, including women's SHGs, joined the network for direct marketing purposes, in order to bypass money lenders and middlemen in the marketing of agro-products. Over 1,000 women drew economic gains from participating in capacity strengthening programmes in value addition and marketing. More than 250 families currently practice agro-forestry and organic farming in demonstration plots and have planted 120,000 biodiesel seedlings of Pongamia and Jatropha over 101 hectares in 20 villages. In total around 6,122 members from 100 villages attended the legal awareness and capacity building sessions.

Evidence

The collaborative interventions of SDDPA are well documented in the 2007 CEP final report for the ILC; the 2013 study "*Empowerment of the landless: an analysis of land distribution and land purchase programmes of Andhra Pradesh*"; the 2003-2005 Biennial report of the Indian Institute of Chemical Technology; the 2007 Department of Land Resources chapter on Andhra Pradesh; the 2005 AME Foundation Annual report; and the 2014 WASSAN Annual Report.

The table below shows the results of the survey undertaken by SDDPA on the assigned land in the four *mandals* for the final report of the project "Community Empowerment for Poverty Alleviation" implemented in the wasteland distributed by the government.

Assigned Land

Mandal	Beneficiaries	Area (acre)
Wanaparthy	1585	1769.22
Pangal	1514	2513.31
Gopalpet	628	942.23
Kodair	328	646.00

Within the last decade the landless have found support and access to various government schemes through farmer's federations, SHG networks, *Sanghams* (Associations of people) and collective action in the village-level *Panchayati* institutions. Social cohesion in the villages has improved because farmers acquired a voice through legal means.

Lessons learned

Lessons for civil society

Historically, the poor in India - particularly those from scheduled castes and tribes - have developed a culture of silence. SDDPA's experience shows that the different interest groups within a community often try to gain advantage from silencing the challenges coming from the marginalised poor farmers who have become land owners for the first time as a result of land redistribution. The poor can organise themselves and fight against injustice thanks to awareness and relevant training about their rights and responsibilities. Civil society players can have a significant role in organising the farmers and working collaboratively to strengthen them in a way that power brokers, bureaucracy and policy makers start paying attention to their needs.

Lessons for policy makers

In land distribution matters policy makers need to ensure that institutional (governmental and non-governmental) support is developed. This is important to respond to financial and development needs linked with land redistribution. Without a convergence of policies, it is difficult for government-assigned land to become economically viable for the poor. Policy makers need to allocate more resources to education in land rights for women, expand the legal aid and legal literacy programmes, and support the creation of market mechanisms to support the first generation of land-owning farmers from weaker communities.

Challenges

The SDDPA faced a number of challenges that included:

- The lack of legal knowledge about the land distribution scheme by the SDDPA staff. Staff had to acquire technical knowledge on the legislative requirements concerning the government wasteland and the rights of the landless, prior to offering training to the community, the village-level institutions and the farmers SHGs.
- The unhealthy nexus between landlords, land revenue officials and greedy individuals in the community, which delayed and subverted land titling for the poor. SDDPA has worked with the local farmers' federation for a decade to negotiate land titles from the revenue department. Currently, however, many farmers continue to be without a formal land title on the idle land they have lived on and cultivated for years.
- The introduction by the AP Government - without any consultation with the communities or CBOs - of a Comprehensive Land Development Program (CLDP) under Indira Kranthi Padham (IKP) and an irrigation subsidy for agro-forestry programme across 50 hectares.

Follow-up

The SDDPA - as a board member of ILC-India - continues to advocate for the landless and small and marginal farmers. It continues to work with farmers' federations to make their voices heard. The Grama Abhivrudhi Sanghams - the first *Sanghams* formed by SDDPA in 1985 for men and women - are still active. They provide valuable advice, networking opportunities and guidance for small and marginalised farmers. They identify opportunities for the institutional development of other land programmes.

Supporting material

References and further reading

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