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The interplay of ideas, institutional innovations and organisational structures: Insights from group farming in India

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Abstract

An innovative development programme requires ideas at multiple stages, from conception to implementation. Where do these ideas come from, and how do they shape institutional and organisational structures? A recent debate on ideas has focused more on their role in framing public policy, than on their role in designing institutions or the organisational structures needed for the successful functioning of those institutions. Moreover, this debate mostly concerns political institutions in developed countries, and ideas mooted by experts. In contrast, a much older body of work on participatory development emphasises the need for planners to design policy *in interaction with* local communities, taking account of ideas emerging from ordinary people whom the policies will affect. But what kinds of organisational forms can enable villager participation in policy formulation and ensure the creation of viable institutions?

This paper analyses the interplay between ideas, institutions, and organisational structures, using, as an example, an unusual institutional innovation, namely group farming by women in two states of India – Telangana and Kerala. Based especially on the author's interviews with those who shaped and implemented these programmes in each state, it traces how the idea of group farming for poverty alleviation and women's empowerment emerged; how it differed from the historical examples of collective farming globally; and the thinking behind different elements of programme implementation. Although both states focused on group farming, they diverged notably in their ideas about group formation and composition, and the organisational form needed for implementation. The paper traces these differences, and their effect on the economic and social performance of the groups, as well as on institutional sustainability.

Keywords: Ideas, institutional innovations, organisational structures, group farming, gender, India

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1. Introduction

What roles do ideas play in shaping and implementing public policy, or in creating and sustaining new institutions? Equally, what role do organisational structures play in facilitating the emergence of new ideas, and in ensuring that the institutions created by those ideas survive and sustain? Indeed, both institutions and organisational structures are shaped by ideas, are embodiments of ideas, and in turn shape future ideas. In recent years, a growing body of work has sought to examine the role of ideas in relation to public policy, but there is rather little on the role of ideas in creating institutions, and even less on the facilitating role of organisational structures in the successful functioning of those institutions. It is this interplay between ideas, institutions, and organisational forms that is explored in this paper, which also examines: where do ideas come from?

Recent literature on the role that ideas play in shaping policy suggests that ideas can have different 'levels' or scope; they can come from different sources (including transnational); they can gain prominence through different processes; and they can be communicated through diverse mechanisms.¹ Some ideas are broad enough to constitute a new paradigm; others are narrower, focused specifically on solving identified problems through policy definition, solution and implementation (Kingdom 1984). In between, we might see ideas as providing the 'blueprints' for creating new institutions, sometimes requiring the demolition of older, long-entrenched paradigms.²

Much of this recent debate is located in the sphere of politics and political institutions, and occasionally in the sphere of economics, especially around ideas that affect macro-economic policies (Blyth 2002, Hall 1989). Also, these studies are focused essentially on developed countries and applications therein. Most notably, the sources of ideas are traced to state actors, the political elite, think tanks and intellectuals, rather than, say, communities affected locally by such policies. In other words, ideas are seen largely as emerging from above and applied top-down, rather than emerging bottom-up, or through participative processes involving those who will be affected by a given policy. Similarly, in terms of who can influence policy, the emergent literature focuses overwhelmingly on ideas mooted by experts, pressure groups and political parties. There is a notable lack of attention here to ideas emerging from the experience and experimentation of ordinary people, such as farmers or village women, or to the importance of a two-way flow of ideas for designing effective policies and implementing them successfully. Hence, although the ongoing debate provides several conceptual insights which can be applied to developing countries, it also remains limited in scope in this regard.

¹ See, e.g., Béland and Cox (2011); Blyth (2002, 2011), Hall (1989, 1993), Kingdom (1984), Levars (2017), Mehta (2011), Schmidt (2008).

² This is similar to Schumpeter's (1942) idea of 'creative destruction' within economics, but developed further in the context of industrial innovations (see, e.g., Freeman and Louca 2001).

As a counterpoint to this literature is a much older and very rich body of work in the field of development studies, which focuses on participative planning and policymaking, and an equally significant body of work on the diffusion of rural innovations. The importance of people's participation in shaping the institutions that affect their lives is well recognised in the development literature within the rubric of participatory development, which goes back at least to the 1970s (Cornwall 2002, Mohan 2008). Participatory development places emphasis on policy being shaped by planners *in interaction with* local communities, taking account of (but not restricted to) their priority needs. This approach emerged as an alternative to top-down development, which was not only seen as politically undemocratic, but was also subject to state and market failures. In practice, globally, we can find many examples of farmers' innovations, such as the development of bamboo tubewells in Bihar (India) (Dommen 1975); the invention of a small centrifugal motor pump by two farmers in Vietnam (Sansom 1969); and especially the improvement of crop varieties and agricultural techniques in many countries, including India, Bangladesh, Nigeria and Meiji Japan.³ In fact, we may ask: should not the openness to ideas from the bottom up be built formally into organisational structures?

An historically interesting example of this relates to 19th century Meiji Japan. Recognising the worth of ideas generated from below, the Imperial government set in place a system whereby the best of traditional farmer practices were picked up for wider dissemination. Some farmers were even appointed as instructors to tour the country and demonstrate improved farming techniques to other farmers (Johnston 1969). China similarly promoted three-in-one innovation teams, combining workers, technicians and management in the 1960s-1970s, and placed considerable emphasis on establishing a close contact between farmers as users of agricultural machinery and those involved in R&D (Ishikawa 1975). These examples illustrate that ideas seldom emerge full blown from the minds of experts, but often take shape through an iterative process across levels and over time.

Another relevant body of work (unacknowledged in the recent debate) relates to the diffusion of rural innovations, which can be defined broadly to include new ideas and practices. In the 1980s, for instance, the dominant view was that potential users fail to adopt an innovation out of ignorance of its benefits, and need experts to inform and persuade them (see, especially, Rodgers 1961,1977; Rodgers and Shoemaker 1971). The counterview pointed to the failure of top-down methods and the contrasting success of approaches which adapted innovations to user needs, and even involved them in the design process (Agarwal 1983, 1986). In bypassing these insights, the existing debate not only narrows the discussion on ideas, but also elides the importance of organisational forms for sustaining the flow of ideas from below.

³ See Biggs (1980) and Biggs and Clay (1981) for India and Bangladesh; Howes and Chambers (1979) for Nigeria; and Johnston (1969) and Hayami and Ruttan (1971) for Meiji Japan. Also, the 'Honey Bee' project launched by Anil Gupta, Professor at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, gathers information on farmers' innovations.

This paper extends the debate on ideas, institutions and organisational structures, both by applying some of the insights from recent literature to new contexts, and by departing from it in at least four ways:

- It expands on how ideas can shape policy and institutions through a more participative process than is recognised in the politics literature, and on the effectiveness of such a process in policy implementation.
- It focuses on the rural sector of a developing country that has largely been ignored in this debate.
- It examines an institution which constitutes an unusual contemporary innovation, namely women's group farming.
- It evaluates the effectiveness of the organisational structures set up to support this innovation and help sustain it.

These dimensions are examined through empirical material relating to two experiments in group farming in India. One was initiated in 2001 in the state of Telangana (earlier part of undivided Andhra Pradesh), by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Delhi, and the central government in India, and implemented through the Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samatha Society (APMSS) – a quasi-NGO. The other was initiated in the 2000s by the state government of Kerala, under its Kudumbashree programme for poverty eradication. The aim of both experiments was women's economic empowerment through livelihood improvement and poverty alleviation. In both cases, group farming constituted a radical departure from conventional approaches to women's economic empowerment and from the dominant pattern of individual family farming under male heads of households. Yet the two states also diverged from each other in their organisational structures for programme implementation. This divergence enables us to compare their relative effectiveness in achieving their goals.

What ideas shaped these innovative programmes, and in what ways did these converge or diverge between the two states? Although some of the ideas were similar, there are also key differences between the two initiatives in their organisational structures, the composition and size of groups, group autonomy, and scaling up. Many of these differences can be traced to the ideas that underlay policy design and implementation. But at a deeper level, differences also lay in two elements which the Kerala initiative embodied: (i) organisational forms created specifically to enable formal participation of village women in policy formulation, namely the upward transfer of ideas; and (ii) substantial state commitment to the initiative. In turn, these differences impacted on the economic performance of the groups and their ability to survive. In other words, the paper focuses on the evolution of the idea of group farming, the thinking that helped structure what form the group farms should take (social composition, size, etc.), and the organisational pillars that supported programme implementation. No existing research has examined these dimensions in this context.

The discussion is divided into seven sections. Section 2 below provides a brief overview of the history of group farming globally – traced here in terms of five ‘waves’ – and outlines the shifting ideas that underlay each wave. It also highlights how the performance of institutions shaped by past ideas influenced contemporary institutional innovations. Section 3 focuses on the ideational and experimental factors underlying the launch of group farming in the two states, and the role of state and NGO actors. Sections 4 and 5 trace the differences between the states in their organisational structures and the ideas that shaped those structures and group composition. Section 6 summarises the results on the economic performance of women’s group farms, based on the author’s primary survey, and throws light on how differences in programme conceptualisation and implementation impinged on that performance. It also briefly traces the effects on women’s social and political empowerment. Section 7 provides concluding reflections.

The paper draws primarily on in-depth interviews conducted in 2014-16 with key persons involved in the initiation and/or implementation of group farming in Telangana and Kerala (Appendix A gives the list of interviewees). The interviews are supplemented by available documentation on the programmes. In addition, the paper draws on the author’s empirical analysis of her primary data (quantitative and qualitative) collected in 2012-14 for 763 farm enterprises in three districts (Medak, Mahbubnagar, Karimnagar) of Telangana,⁴ and 250 farm enterprises in two districts (Alappuzha and Thrissur) of Kerala.

2. The idea of group farming: History and perceptions

The idea of group farming is not new. When group farming was initiated in Telangana and Kerala in the 2000s, there was already a history of largely failed experiments of collective farming globally. This made governments reluctant to experiment with it. In most people’s minds, group farming was synonymous with the travails of socialist collectivisation and the largely unsuccessful 1960s experiments in newly independent countries, since rather little was known of the more positive experience of some European countries and post-socialist transition economies. How then did these new initiatives emerge and grow? As we will see, both ideational shifts and ground examples of successful group functioning in diverse contexts were contributory factors.

Historically, there have been many ‘waves’ of group farming (with diverse origins, trajectories and features), including contemporary Indian ones, which are the focus of this study. I call them ‘waves’, since they occur within specific time spans and traverse more than one region or country. We can trace at least five such waves, starting from coercive collectivisation under socialist regimes to voluntary cooperation among farmers today. Table 1 gives a broad typology.

⁴ When my research began, these districts were part of undivided Andhra Pradesh, but now fall in Telangana state.

Table 1: Global waves of group farming: From forced collectivisation to voluntary cooperation

Waves of group farming	Motivation	Period of initiation	Countries	Type
First wave	Socialism	1920s	USSR (whole country)	Top-down, coercive, vast collective farms, non-participative
		1940-1950s	Eastern Europe, China (whole countries)	Top-down, coercive, large collective farms, non-participative
Second wave	Non-socialist, agrarian reform	1950s, 1960s	Asia, Africa, Latin America (some countries) and Israel	Semi-voluntary to coercive, ranging from small groups farms to entire villages
Third wave	Non-socialist, community led	1960s	France (across the country) Norway (some regions)	Voluntary, medium-sized group farms
Fourth wave	Post-socialist, decollectivisation	1990s	Russia, Eastern Europe, Central Asia	Voluntary, small to medium-sized group farms
Fifth wave	Empowering farmers	Late-1980s	Andhra Pradesh: Deccan Development Society (a few villages) Kerala: GALASA (a few villages).	Voluntary, small group farms
	Empowering women	Late-1990s, 2000s ongoing	Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh (some districts): APMSS Kerala: Kudumbashree (the whole state)	Voluntary, small group farms
	Empowering marginal farmers	2015 onwards	Nepal, North Bihar, West Bengal	Voluntary, small group farms

The first wave, which is the best known, is that of socialist collectivisation, especially as undertaken in the USSR, Eastern Europe and China. The key features of these collective farms – created by forced pooling of peasant farms by the state – was their non-voluntary nature, very large size (often involving thousands of hectares and farmers), centralised decision-making (with farmers having little voice), and compulsory deliveries of grain to the state. Forced farm collectivisation, for instance, was characteristic of the USSR during 1929-1933, which served as a model for (or substantially influenced) other socialist states, such as Hungary in 1948 (with subsequent reversals), Poland and Czechoslovakia in the 1950s, and China in the late 1950s. In time it came to be widely recognised that the effects of this massive collectivisation on human welfare and agricultural productivity were disastrous in most part, especially in the USSR and China,⁵ albeit to a lesser degree in Eastern Europe, which shifted course early by abolishing compulsory deliveries and allowed households to keep small individual plots.⁶

In the 1960s and 1970s, however, these adverse effects were yet to be recognised globally, and in that period we see a second wave of collective farming, this time in many non-socialist countries of Latin America and Africa, in Israel (the kibbutz), and on a minor scale in India.⁷ These initiatives sought to promote social and economic development through agrarian reform, but were influenced by communist assumptions about the need to socialise private property and the greater efficiency of large farms (Ghose 1983).

There was considerable diversity in these experiments, however (as detailed in Agarwal 2007 and 2010a), mediated by ground realities and individual leadership. In some countries, small farmers were encouraged to pool their land to form large cooperatives (e.g. in Ethiopia and Tanzania). Elsewhere, as in Nicaragua and Ecuador, the state provided land under its control to the landless and land poor (including that confiscated from large owners under redistributive land reform). In some places, we find both trajectories. Also, as implemented, some initiatives involved small numbers, others entire villages (as under the Ujamaa experiment in Tanzania). Most focused on production, but the kibbutz in Israel also sought to organise family life.

Although ostensibly voluntary, in practice state pressure to form collectives was common, and the typically large size and widely heterogeneous class and social composition of the farms made it difficult for farmers to participate effectively in production decisions. Groups formed among relatives, with minimal social

⁵ For the USSR, see especially Robinson (1967), Nove (1969), and for China, see Lin (1990) and Putterman (1997). It was only in the 1980s that China introduced the household responsibility system, which allowed farming families to contract small parcels of land from the communes for individual cultivation.

⁶ See, Swain (1985,); Berend (1990); and articles in Lordachi and Bauerkämper (2014).

⁷ See Borda (1971) for Latin America; Apthorpe (1972) for Africa; Goyal (1966) for India; and Gavron (2000) for Israel.

differentiation, worked better (Borda 1971, Ruben and Lerman 2005). Overall, however, few of these experiments survived.

In India, immediately after Independence, ideationally there was considerable support for cooperatives across political parties (Frankel, 1978). In 1946, the Cooperative Planning Committee suggested the promotion of production cooperatives for joint cultivation, as well as service cooperatives for credit, joint input purchase, machine use, etc. (Goyal 1966).⁸ These experiments were influenced especially by policies in China, which several Indian economists had visited in the early 1950s (e.g. Ganguli 1953).

Resistance to these early experiments in group farming came not at the ideational level, but from material interests, that is from large landowners who constituted an important vote bank for the ruling Congress party. And most state governments shelved the idea, or tried it only on a pilot basis (Frankel 1978). Marketing cooperatives were more common and new ones emerged later, such as the milk cooperatives of Anand (Gujarat) (Mascarenhas 1988) and the sugar cooperatives of Maharashtra (Baviskar 1980). But these did not involve jointness in production.

The cloud of failure that hung over the idea of collective farming was not dispelled by the success of group farming elsewhere, as in France and post-socialist societies, since rather little was known or written about them globally. In France, for instance, in the 1960s, the group farm or GAEC (*Groupement Agricole d'Exploitation en Commun*), was encouraged by the government to modernise family-based agriculture, and was propelled by the Young Catholic Farmers movements, which were seeking a 'third path' that carried 'neither the abuses of capitalism nor the excesses of Marxian collectivism' (Raup 1975:3).

Similarly, rather little was known beyond narrow academic circles and local governments of the fourth wave of group farming which emerged in the 1990s, in the aftermath of decollectivisation in former socialist countries. Here, collective farms were dismantled in varying degrees, with the farm land being divided usually among the members, with each receiving plots that were typically too small to make individual farming viable. Hence, in several countries, such as Kyrgyzstan, Romania, East Germany and Nicaragua, recipients voluntarily pooled their plots among family members or with neighbours to create more viable units and invest in capital equipment. Also, importantly, these group farms were found to be more productive by various measures than individual family farms.⁹

A diversity of ideas underlay these four waves. Very broadly, we might see socialist collectivisation as driven by an antipathy to private property ownership under the

⁸ See also, various issues of the *Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics* from the 1950s to early 1960s.

⁹ See, Sabates-Wheeler and Childress (2004), for Kyrgyzstan; Sabates-Wheeler (2002) for Romania; Ruben and Lerman (2005) for Nicaragua; and Mathijs and Swinnen (2001) for East Germany.

rubric of socialism; by assumptions linking large-scale farming with economically efficient and modern agriculture; and by the need to procure grain for a growing industrial workforce. The 1960s experiments in post-colonial countries were clearly influenced by the socialist experiments transnationally, especially by a belief in the efficiency of large farms, before the negative effects of collectivisation became apparent. But they were also driven by somewhat romantic notions about communities as harmonious units which could cooperate, rather than (as they typically were) stratified by class, caste, ethnicity and gender, and often conflict ridden. In France, too, as noted, GAECs were promoted by the state for modernising agriculture and building harmonious communities. Notably though, both the first and second waves of group farming – created largely by top-down state interventions – failed, while group farms in France and post-socialist countries (the third and fourth waves), based on voluntarism, were much more successful.

The fifth wave took time to emerge, given adverse perceptions of past experience. As the negative impact of the first wave became more widely known, and the poor performance of the second wave came to be recognised, planners and researchers in many developing countries came to see group farming as less and less viable.¹⁰ This created infertile ground for promoting group farming. Added to this was the continued influence of conventional economic theory, which painted a pessimistic picture of people's ability to cooperate. Drawing on the prisoner's dilemma model in game theory, and Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action*, economists argued that guided by individual self-interest, people would tend to free ride, each person expecting the others to do the same, leading to a failure of cooperation. Some economists even argued that it was 'impossible for rational creatures to cooperate' (Campbell, cited in Ostrom 1990: 5). What then explains the emergence of group farming on a notable scale in two states of India in the 2000s, and the departure from the standard male-headed groups to women-only groups in this fifth wave of group farming?

By the early 2000s, when Telangana and Kerala launched their initiatives, much had changed in our understanding of how collective action works, and more ground experience had been garnered in promoting collective institutions. For instance, the scepticism among social scientists (especially economists) about the ability of people to overcome the free riding problem had given way to more optimism, with the recognition that cooperation could be built on trust and reciprocity among prior acquaintances (e.g. relatives, friends, neighbours, etc.).¹¹ This was propelled not least by success stories of group functioning that emerged from micro-finance initiatives and institutions governing common pool resources. (see Ostrom 1990, on the latter). There was also by then a substantial consensus among development practitioners, both in India and globally, that group formation empowers the poor,

¹⁰ For instance, India, which until its Third Five Year Plan (1961-66) was promoting cooperative farming, noted the lack of progress in its Fourth Five Year Plan (1969-1974), and did not propose any new schemes. Ground evaluations too presented a pessimistic picture (Sundaram 1962).

¹¹ See Baland and Platteau (1996) and Agarwal (2010b: chap 4) for discussions on this shift.

although the approaches used to this end may diverge in practice. In addition, there was a paradigm shift in thinking on how development should be brought about, namely away from expert-led top-down approaches towards a citizen-participant approach.

In India, the most important ground developments were the success of three types of groups:

(a) Small groups constituted to promote microcredit among the poor. This took various forms, following from Bangladesh's Grameen Bank programme, in particular Self-Help Groups (SHGs), formed by 10-20 self-selected persons with similar economic and social backgrounds, who pool their savings and rotate lending among members. In the mid-2000s, there were 2.6 million SHGs in India, most of them started by NGOs, with some 80-90 percent constituted only of women (Tankha 2012: 37, 2). Importantly, many NGOs did not see SHGs simply as savings-and-credit groups, but also as entry points to women's empowerment. And many SHGs themselves undertook social advocacy (Nair and Shah 2007, NCAER 2008).

(b) Community groups cooperating for governing common pool resources, such as forests and water bodies. For instance, in 1990, the Government of India launched the Joint Forest Management Programme. In 2001, there were 84,000 community forestry groups across India, which were significantly more successful in improving forest condition than government forest management, with women's participation in such governance further improving conservation outcomes (Agarwal 2010b).

(c) Groups formed to deliver social programmes, such as health, sanitation and adult education, of which the government-initiated programme, Mahila Samakhya, or education for women's empowerment, was an important example (Ravi J. Matthai Centre for Educational Innovation and IIM Ahmedabad 2014), and the one on which the Telangana's group farms were later based.

The success of these groups across diverse contexts made the group approach to programme delivery widely acceptable. But this did not automatically lead to group *farming*, since none of these cases involved cooperation for managing private property resources or resource pooling. Group farming needed mutual trust and the ability to ensure equitable sharing of work, costs and benefits among those cooperating. Hence, while prior experience in group functioning provided better ground for promoting joint cultivation in the 2000s than it did in the 1960s, group farming – which needs what I term 'fully integrated cooperation' – was still something of a leap in the dark. Moreover, groups were likely to require organisational support, and rather little was known about what kind of organisational structures would work best for implementation.

Below I explore the factors which propelled the idea of group farming and the different organisational forms that it took in Telangana and Kerala.

3. Contemporary examples: Origins

When Telangana and Kerala launched their group farming projects, there was widespread acceptance within development policy and practice of three levels of ideas which are relevant here. First, there was a paradigm shift within economic development theory in the 1970s, from the idea that economic development was synonymous with the growth of GDP per capita to the recognition that development was about improving the wellbeing of people, especially the most disadvantaged. A related and parallel shift was the recognition that development programmes needed *women's empowerment and gender parity*. This shift also began in the 1970s and spread transnationally through women's movements, civil society groups, academics and international agencies (especially the United Nations). Similarly, there was a focus on poverty alleviation and basic needs, with an expanding definition of poverty from income poverty to multidimensional poverty.

A second paradigm shift was in the *process* of policy formulation and implementation, away from top-down expert-driven planning towards participative planning in interaction with local communities. Relatedly, the idea of decentralised governance was increasingly accepted. Although, in India, this was initiated soon after Independence from colonial rule in 1947, in practice, decentralisation became more firmly embedded after the 1992-93 constitutional amendments, which devolved greater financial powers to village councils, and reserved one-third of seats for women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). PRIs – India's three-tiered system of local self-government at the village, block and district levels. The term *panchayat* is used here to mean village council, which can sometimes cover several villages.

Another important, if not momentous, shift was the noted increasing openness to using a group approach for programme delivery, and the recognition within economic theory that collective action was possible under conducive conditions. Other related ideas which took root were scaling up by creating federations of village groups, with elected representation at each level.

These ideational and institutional changes, in turn, informed the group farming experiments in India (which grew into substantial programmes), and the organisational structures created to support them.

3.1 The Telangana programme

In the Telangana region of undivided Andhra Pradesh, the group farming project – termed Samatha Dharani (SD) – was initiated, as noted, jointly by the UNDP and the Government of India (UNDP-Gol) in 2001, with confirmed support for five years. The group farms were called Samatha Dharani Groups (SDGs). The initiative was conceptualised as a 'project', without a detailed plan or state commitment on how it might continue after the project period. It was implemented in five districts of what is now Telangana state, through APMSS, which was established in 1993 to empower women through education under the Gol's Mahila Samakhya programme. For this purpose, APMSS created sanghas or women's collectives (one per village) in the

districts where it worked. The village sanghas were then constituted into federations scaled up to the district level (Jandhyala 2012). The all-women sanghas were constituted of women from poor households who belonged mostly to the socially disadvantaged Scheduled Castes (SCs). Group farming was built on this pre-existing sangha structure.

Although there is little written on the ideas that led to the launch of the group farming project, my interviews with those involved in its initiation and shaping provide a picture.¹² The idea emerged from several channels: prior examples of group farming in the region, experiments by village women, activist experience, academic research pointers, and UNDP's and APMSS's interest in focusing on rural women's livelihoods in agriculture – where most women workers were based.

To begin with, APMSS's senior staff was familiar with an important (if geographically limited) early experiment with women's group farming in the 1980s, undertaken by an NGO – the Deccan Development Society (DDS) – in the drought-prone Medak district of Telangana. Initially, DDS worked only with male farmers, but after the village women challenged DDS, asking 'Why don't you work with women?' there was a shift to include women.¹³ Over time, DDS moved entirely to groups of poor, low-caste women. Its main focus was to ensure food security through organic farming, multiple cropping and wasteland development (Agarwal 2003). With support from DDS, women began to cultivate leased land in groups of five to 15, sharing labour, inputs and outputs equitably. Some also took advantage of the state government's subsidised credit-cum-grant scheme, under which low caste women could purchase land in groups and divide it individually, but farm it collectively. Weekly meetings served as forums for planning and enforcing accountability in work sharing. Knowledge of this prior experience influenced APMSS. As Kameshwari Jandhyala (state programme director of Mahila Samakhya) told me:

'I was very familiar with DDS and some of our field staff had earlier worked in DDS.... We invited someone from DDS to tell us about women's land leasing efforts. This was the seed, and from 1996 onwards several ideas were afloat, and there was good cross fertilisation.'

Second, in the early 1990s, some women's sanghas in Medak district leased in land to experiment with group farming themselves, outside the purview of DDS (although probably influenced by DDS's experience). However, this remained limited to a few groups until the UNDP project was launched.¹⁴

Third, there appears to have been some impact of a detailed discussion in my book (Agarwal 1994) on the need to promote women's group farming, given the increasing numbers of women dependent on agriculture for a livelihood. I had also discussed

¹² This includes especially Kalyani Menon-Sen, P. Prasanthi and Kameshwari Jandhyala.

¹³ Personal communication from P.V. Satheesh, founder member and Director, DDS.

¹⁴ Kameshwari Jandhyala and P. Prasanthi, author's interviews.

these ideas in public forums, as well as with key individuals within UNDP and the government's agricultural extension department in Delhi.¹⁵

Fourth, a crucial bridging role, linking UNDP and APMSS, was played by UNDP staff, especially Kalyani Menon-Sen (then gender advisor to UNDP, India) and Neera Burra (then Assistant Resident Representative, UNDP India). Menon-Sen was also an executive committee member of Mahila Samakhya for Uttar Pradesh state and participated in the national debates on what Mahila Samakhya should be doing for rural livelihoods. She was thus a key person when APMSS discussed the SD project with UNDP in 1998-99 (see also Burra 2004). Others who worked on food security in Andhra Pradesh were also part of project conceptualisation. As Kameshwari Jandhyala put it: 'So you see, there was a history. Samata Dharani did not arrive suddenly out of the blue'.

At least in Telangana, therefore, group farming did not evolve from socialist ideas, nor were such ideas evoked by those who conceptualised the project within UNDP and the Gol, or by those implementing the project locally. Rather, economic activity was built on the prior sangha structure created for social empowerment. The women who took up group farming already knew each other through the sanghas. But building the programme on pre-existing sanghas also meant that sangha features, such as large size and shared socio-economic disadvantage, were not vetted to see if they were conducive to a collective *economic* enterprise. As P. Prasanthi noted: 'The SHG model was good for economic programmes, but we were focusing on social empowerment, so numbers mattered.'¹⁶ In fact, APMSS was against the 'SHGisation' of the project more generally,¹⁷ although Andhra Pradesh had been particularly successful in promoting SHGs.

3.2 The Kerala programme

The Kerala group farming project also began in the 2000s, but unlike Telangana many of those who initiated it were influenced by left-wing socialist ideology, although they did not promote large collective farms. During 1987-89, under the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government led by the Community Party of India, Marxist, for instance, Kerala tried group farming in its GALASA experiment (Group Approach for Locally Adapted and Sustainable Agriculture), as a follow-up to the state's land

¹⁵ In particular, I had discussed these ideas with Neera Burra (then Assistant Resident Representative, UNDP India) and also given a talk organised by UNDP India on 18 October 1996, elaborating on the need to promote group cultivation by women. I gave a similar talk at a workshop organised by the Ministry of Agriculture's agricultural extension department. Moreover, in the government's Ninth Five Year Plan formulated in 1996-1997, paragraphs 2.1.130 to 2.1.134 were based entirely on my note to the Planning Commission, in which in para 2.1.133 I specifically discussed joint cultivation by women (GoI 1997-2002). In 2006, as I recall, women officials from the government's agricultural extension department approached me, requesting that I use my contacts to ensure continued support for the group farming programme. However, although I approached the Member (Agriculture) in the Planning Commission, it was too late to make an effective intervention.

¹⁶ Author's interview.

¹⁷ Kameshwari Jandhyala interview.

reform programme (Franke 1993; Devi 2006). It involved households pooling land and cultivating jointly, but the cooperating farmers kept ownership rights to their plots. They were taught improved techniques for transplanting rice and applying inputs. The experiment covered 25 villages (Franke 1993: 282). The group farms saved on labour (Devi 2006) and their yields were estimated to be 30 percent higher than before the scheme (Heller 1999: 146). However, the experiment petered out under the new coalition government. As Devi (2006: 179) observes: 'The enthusiasm lasted only as long as the LDF government lasted (1987-91), and the subsequent government did not follow up with equal vigour, for party political reasons.' In other words, this early attempt was vulnerable to political change, unlike the current initiative of group farming that has survived several changes in government, not least due to its innovative organisational structure, discussed further below.

Its antecedents apart, women's group farming in Kerala also differs foundationally from that in Telangana in other respects. Kerala modified the SHG model to constitute neighbourhood groups (NHGs), located within a multi-level structure of governance, as detailed in Section 4.

Kerala's policy shifts evolved in two stages: first, the establishment of Kudumbashree – the Kerala State Poverty Eradication Mission – by the state government in 1998; and, second, the adoption of group farming as a key component of poverty alleviation and rural women's empowerment. Kudumbashree was based on ideas emerging from three types of initiatives in the early 1990s: (i) a poverty reduction programme in the rural areas of Mallapuram district (Kerala's most backward district), which identified the poor through a nine-point multidimensional poverty index;¹⁸ (ii) an urban poverty alleviation programme and Community Based Nutrition Programme launched in Alappuzha district by UNICEF, which sought to improve health and sanitation among women and children. Since these programmes required community participation, neighbourhood groups were constituted to promote them; and (iii) the People's Plan Campaign, through which the LDF government sought to involve people in the planning process – 'Planning Up',¹⁹ with 10 percent of the panchayat budget designated for women's programmes. In other words, the idea of participative planning and women's inclusion were key elements of policy formulation.

Hence, the base on which group farming was initiated involved an interlocking grid of ideas: decentralisation of management and decision-making, with inputs from the grassroots through community participation, a multi-dimensional definition of poverty, the mobilisation of grassroots thinking by the People's Plan Campaign, and the

¹⁸ Mr T. K. Jose, who played a foundational role as executive director of Kudumbashree (1998-2006) during its formative years, was also district collector in Mallapuram in the 1990s.

¹⁹ The People's Plan Campaign, launched in 1996-97 by Kerala's LDF Government, was a massive exercise in decentralised planning, linked with the devolution of administrative and fiscal powers to the local government. The Campaign involved villagers in assessing their priority needs; set up task forces in village councils to prepare development projects; and constituted expert committees to prepare annual plans at the block and district levels based on these inputs, under the broad oversight of the Kerala State Planning Board (see also Issac and Franke 2001).

budgetary allocation in panchayats for a women's component plan. In addition, there was a growing interest in reviving agriculture, and scaling up. These ideas were shaped and implemented through three parallel but interactive pillars of governance (see Section 4), one representing the Kudumbashree Mission (henceforth called the K.Mission), the second the community, and the third the local government. A special task force of three senior government officials played a key role here, as discussed later.

This organisational framework allowed ideas to permeate from below in the early years of the K.Mission. Examples began to surface in some districts of poor women farming collectively by jointly leasing land. A number of village women also requested that they be allowed to cultivate the land lying fallow. These demands fell on fertile ground, since those preparing the women's component plan were looking for viable economic activities for poor women. As Sarada Muraleedharan (executive director of Kudumbashree Mission, 2006-12) put it:

'For the women's component plan we were looking for ways of enhancing women's livelihoods. We consulted the panchayats, but there was no clarity on what constituted "women's projects". Then grassroots stories of some women doing group farming showed a way forward.'

Vijayananda (former secretary, local self-government, Government of Kerala) elaborates:

'Kerala had a lot of land lying fallow.... We had labour shortages, and hiring labour was costly. The better-off who owned land did not think it was worthwhile cultivating it. Extremely poor women saw an opportunity here to cultivate the fallow land and approached the panchayat for help in acquiring it. They knew how to cultivate. They just needed help. They spontaneously set up informal farming groups.'

These early examples of informal group farming through land leasing took more formal shape in 2010, when they began to be linked with credit under the Joint Liability Group (JLG) scheme of the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD).

The process of programme conceptualisation and implementation thus demonstrated an openness to learning from ground experimentation, and particularly from ideas emerging from village women. This is the opposite of the expert-driven process described in the ongoing debate on the role of ideas.

3.3 State and civil society as actors

In both states, civil society and the government played important roles in programme formulation, but the nature, extent and continuity of state support received by Telangana's SDGs and Kerala's JLGs is a study in contrasts. And although both states promoted similar models, in terms of women leasing in land while also working on their family farms (if any), their organisational structures and ways of implementing the project diverged widely.

At its height, the Telangana programme had 500 SDGs across five districts. The official support under the UNDP-Gol project came essentially from the central government, while the state government's support was limited and inadequate. The government provided financial help (each SDG received a seed grant of Rs. 35,000 as a revolving fund), technical training in agricultural practices, and agricultural implements (some of which were designed to suit women's needs), during the project's heyday. In addition, APMSS received funds to train women in account keeping and financial literacy. The women were also taught organic farming through the state agricultural department, and taken on 'exposure visits' to other states to learn from farmers there.²⁰ In some cases, crop demonstrations were organised in the women's fields.

In *effective* terms, however, the technical inputs and training provided by the agricultural department were limited and lacked continuity, and the SDGs were helped mainly by agricultural experts hired privately through UNDP funds, rather than by government officials.²¹ As Menon-Sen (2012:160) elaborates.

'Ultimately APMSS hired women agricultural graduates. While the performance of these women was outstanding ... their presence cut off the possibilities of sensitising mainstream extension workers to the needs and priorities of women farmers. In the words of one such resource person, "the seed of collaboration did not germinate at all".'

Despite setbacks, the groups continued to farm, overseen by the sangha federations and APMSS under its Mahila Samatha programme. But in 2016, after several decades of functioning, even the Mahila Samatha programme was dissolved, and the future of the SDGs remains uncertain.

In Kerala, state support was built into the programme through the K.Mission and sustained, unlike in Telangana. First, the JLGs were linked to subsidised credit via NABARD.²² Second, instead of giving them outright subsidies, an incentive system was instituted, with area incentives based on the amount of land cultivated and production incentives based on the yields obtained. Third, each CDS received Rs.

²⁰ P. Prasanthi, author's interview; also see APMSS Annual Report 2004-05 and the Reports of other years.

²¹ P. Prasanthi, author's interview.

²² This was an all-India scheme, but was not taken advantage of by the SDGs.

50,000 to buy farm equipment for setting up farmer facilitation centres. Fourth, women farmers were trained in the use of machines, preparing organic pesticides, growing new fruits and vegetables, and other aspects of farming. Agricultural universities were inducted for the training. 'Master farmers' were also trained from among JLG members to respond to JLG needs. Fifth, during 2006-2011, district-level meetings were held to discuss with the women what crops they would like to grow, and how they could specialise in niche crops, such as pineapple and kadukki banana. Ms T.S. Seema (former member of parliament) explained to me:

'When we started, many of the women had been agricultural workers, not farmers, and they lacked adequate knowledge of farming and farm management. Apart from Kudumbashree's training, older women farmers in the community (60-80 years of age) taught the younger ones.'

Moreover, most of Kerala's JLG members are educated. This would have helped them absorb information better than in Telangana.

JLGs were also free to choose their crops, based on market demand and profitability. In Telangana, however, APMSS sought to promote food security via women's self-cultivation. Hence there was pressure on SDGs to focus primarily on foodgrains. This reduced women's crop choices. In some cases, this created tension between APMSS and SDGs, since the SDGs felt that they would have preferred to grow cotton if allowed, given dryland farming conditions (Agarwal 2019).

4. Organisational structure for governance

Perhaps the most important difference between the Telangana and Kerala initiatives was in the ideas that shaped their organisational structures, despite some broad commonalities in terms of process. The commonalities lay, for instance, in the mix of top-down and bottom-up leadership and participative interaction on ideas, and the substantial space given for programme development by village women themselves, although the initial leadership came from programme initiators..

4.1 Telangana

In Telangana, since there were pre-existing sanghas from the Mahila Samatha programme, APMSS launched group farming in villages with cohesive sanghas that had been functioning for many years. All sangha members could join a Samatha Dharani Group in these villages. They held regular meetings, for which minutes were kept. The village level sanghas were represented in federations, which were scaled up to the district level. These federations provided support to the programme. The SD project thus absorbed both the potential strengths and the potential weaknesses of the pre-existing sangha structure. For its part, the UNDP-GoI project sought to bring in local government support and technical help from the state agricultural department, but state commitment at the local level was not automatic, nor structurally assured.

In fact, there were tensions on the sharing of the UNDP funds between APMSS and the Andhra Pradesh agricultural department.

‘The department questioned why the women (rather than the Department) were receiving most of the UNDP funds as well as the limelight. In one instance, we brought 10 sangha leaders to meet the officers of the agricultural ministry. The women challenged and refuted the officers’ claims that they had been visiting the villages. The officers did not like being confronted.’²³

Nandini Prasad (director of APMSS 1999-2003) added: ‘We had a tough time. The state government saw it as an NGO programme, not as a government programme.’ Moreover, once the UNDP funding ended in 2005, even the limited state support ceased.

4.2 Kerala

In contrast, the Kerala case represents both state commitment and support, and the institutionalisation of that support to ensure the programme’s autonomy and endurance. Here the group farming project was implemented through an organisational structure which rested on three pillars. These pillars supported all forms of economic group enterprises under Kudumbashree, but became the backbone of group farming.

The first pillar was the K.Mission, created (as noted) in 1998 at the district and state levels to eradicate poverty through various economic enterprises, of which group farming was an important one. Government officials from relevant ministries were seconded to the Mission. The second and most important pillar was the Kudumbashree community network (or K.Network). This was constituted of neighbourhood groups (NHGs) at the village level, Area Development Societies (ADS) at the ward level, and Community Development Societies (CDS) at the panchayat level. Representatives from the NHGs were elected to the ADS, and representatives from the ADS to the CDS. The third pillar was local self-government (the PRIs) whose members are elected through state-held elections, as elsewhere in India.

Each CDS (with its interlinked structure of ADS and NHGs) is registered as an autonomous charitable organisation to shield it from direct government intervention, while giving it negotiating power with the government on behalf of the community. The K.Network mediates with the PRIs and the K.Mission. The group farms (termed JLGs) are embedded in the NHGs and linked, in turn, with the ADS and the CDS through the K.Network. Group farming via JLGs accounted for 12 percent of the K. Mission’s total expenditure in 2011, making it financially the Mission’s second most important programme.²⁴

²³ Kalyani Menon-Sen, author’s interview.

²⁴ Personal communication, Rahul Krishnan, then thematic anchor for farm livelihoods, K. Mission, Thiruvananthapuram, 2016.

This three pillar model is, I believe, unique in India. The K.Network – separate and autonomous of the PRIs – provides a mechanism for people’s participation in development planning, while also receiving government support through the K.Mission. Moreover, the geographic congruence of the CDS and the panchayats means that they can interface in planning.

A number of ideas intersected to create this structure: decentralised governance; participative planning; economic inclusion by gender and caste; and giving women’s groups autonomy from political interference. Some of these ideas (such as decentralised governance and people’s participation in planning), as already noted, were paradigm shifting in scope.

Several enabling factors led to the conceptualisation of the three pillar organisational form. First, there was the fortuitous coming together of three key individuals as members of a Special Task Force set up by the Kerala government in 1997. All three had long experience in governance, were committed to promoting inclusive development and people’s participation, and had the power and mandate to implement their ideas. These persons were Issac Thomas, a member of the State Planning Board and former academic economist with a strong commitment to decentralisation; Vijayanand, secretary, Local Self-Government; and P. Bakshi, chairman and managing director of NABARD. Together they provided essential leadership in creating Kudumbashree. Their recommendation led to the setting up of the State Poverty Eradication Mission in 1998, named the Kudumbashree Mission (the K. Mission). They also conceptualised the three pillar structure, as noted. Between them, they brought complementary skills to build the organisation, and constituted the fulcrum.

As Vijayananda told me:

‘Dr Thomas Isaac brought political acceptability. I focused on development policy. Both of us were concerned about the power wielded by the local government and sought ways of creating governance institutions to tackle it. Dr Bakshi focused essentially on credit linkages and the economic roles of NHGs.’

In other words, the three elements of the policy process, as framed by Kingdon (1984) – a policy stream, a problem stream and a political stream – all came together fortuitously. Other significant figures who helped shape and stabilise Kudumbashree in its formative stages were the K. Mission’s executive directors, Mr T. K. Jose and Mrs Sarada Muraleedhan, supported by a body of committed local staff.

Autonomy

The K.Network provided independence from the local government, while also linking it with the local government, but not in a hierarchical way. Making the K.Network autonomous of the panchayat was a masterstroke in organisation building.

As Vijayananda elaborated in his interview:

‘We wanted a structure free from political party interference which could distort the identification of beneficiaries and the decisions made; it could become the agency of the panchayat, thus undermining its natural creativity. Basically we thought that if local government starts meddling with the K.Network, it will be sucked into party politics. That would kill it. People will take positions and women will be backseat drivers.

‘We wanted the K.Network to work with the panchayats and not be under the panchayat. By being autonomous, the K.Network would become strong, organised. It could engage effectively with the local government to ensure better governance, but would not be bullied by the local government.

‘The local government was concerned that the women’s groups would be getting a lot of money over which it had no oversight. We assured them that they would have a right to be kept informed. We said: if you are giving money to the women’s groups you can ask for accounts, but you can’t interfere.’

Thomas Issac, in particular, had done considerable thinking on democratic decentralisation and had also co-authored a book on it (Issac and Franke 2001). Although decentralisation and creating an autonomous network met with some resistance from elements of the government, who felt power would go out of their hands, the ideas could not be dislodged. Sarada Muraleedharan notes: ‘There was a debate and decentralisation won. It was a paradigm shift!’

SHGs vs. NHGs

Kudumbashree’s second important organisational innovation was the use of NHGs as the base unit for bottom-up participation and planning. In most parts of India, self-help groups were linked mainly to thrift and credit, drawing on the Grameen Bank model, but in some states, such as Andhra Pradesh, many SHGs went beyond micro-credit to provide community linkages, and used the federation structure for scaling up. In Kerala, however, the SHG model itself was modified to form neighbourhood groups.

This adaptation had several advantages, as elaborated by those involved in establishing Kudumbashree. First, NHGs can go beyond saving-and-credit to become units of micro-planning which can feed into the final plans of the CDS and the panchayats. The plans so prepared with grassroots ideas would also be more relevant and sensitive to local economic and ecological conditions. Second, NHGs

can serve as sub-units of the gram sabhas (village council general bodies), which in Kerala are large and male-dominated, making it difficult for poor women to have a voice. An NHG of 10-20 members enables effective local participation. Third, NHGs ensure inclusiveness, since every household in a neighbourhood can have a representative member, and members who migrate on marriage can join the NHG where they move. The members know each other and mixed-caste neighbourhoods help include low-caste and poor members as well. The idea of neighbourhood groups, similar but not identical to SHGs, continue to provide the bedrock of the first tier of community participation in Kerala. NHG members can start any group enterprise, including group farming. Each NHG can have several group farms.

The move to women's group farming after the formation of the K.Network was not immediate. In 1998, after the K.Mission was launched in selected panchayats, there was a search for creative ideas for improving women's livelihoods. Initially other types of microenterprises were tried, often unsuccessfully, before group farming was launched. In other words, there was experimentation within the programme, and a two-way learning process

Overall, the Kerala experiment was part of the state government's larger commitment to inclusive development and women's empowerment by promoting group enterprises across the state, of which group farming was the most significant. In Telangana, however, the experiment was not a brainchild of bodies which directly involved state government officials. As noted, it came from activist experience and examples, and academic and activist discourse, which led an international organisation – the UNDP – to partner with the state government. In both states, therefore, the ideas came from multiple sources, of which grassroots actors were a key part. However, the implementing organisational structures were vastly different in the two states, reflecting differences in the ideas which created these structures.

5. Institutional form: Group composition

Telangana and Kerala also differed notably in the principles guiding group composition – their gender, heterogeneity and size. Existing collective action theory pointed to the effectiveness of groups that were socio-economically homogenous and small in size (e.g. Olsen 1965), but subsequent theoretical developments, drawing on ground experience, recognised the potential benefits of heterogeneity in certain contexts (Marwell and Oliver 1988, Baland and Platteau 1996). The discussion on group homogeneity and collective action, however, was focused largely on *household-level* differences (of class, caste, ethnicity, etc.) and not on *individual-level* gender differences. In prior non-socialist experiments of group farming, too, the family rather than individuals constituted the cooperating unit, and women remained largely embedded in supportive rather than leadership roles. In India, the family was represented by the male household head, except in female-headed households, and the 1960s cooperative farms were constituted of family units. Moreover, the collective farming experiments in the first four waves did not seek gender parity, either within socialist regimes or elsewhere. In USSR's collectivised farms, 85 percent of women

employees relative to 66 percent of male employees worked in unskilled jobs, which carried lower pay than skilled jobs (Swain, 1985: 99). In China, again, women earned lower work points on the communes than men (Swain 1985). The shift to women-only group farming in this fifth wave was therefore a strong break from the past.

5.1 Why only women?

The idea of women-only group farms was propelled not only by an interest in women's empowerment, but also by the success of women's groups over men's groups in other contexts. For example, in micro-finance, women-only groups had better loan repayment records than men's groups, and the Grameen Bank, which began with both women's and men's groups, ended up almost entirely with women-only groups. The SHG movement also ended up with almost 90 percent women's groups. Moreover, many NGOs believe women's groups work better, as emphasised both by P. Prasanthi and Kameshwari Jandhyala in my interviews. The latter noted:

'I do think that women's groups work better. Whether it is the Mahila Samatha²⁵ or the DDS, they are more willing to work in collectives. Their lives are so difficult, and I believe their life experience has shown that if they are together, they can deal better with the issues that affect them.'

In any case, since the Mahila Samatha programme was focused on women's empowerment and SDGs were based on the pre-existing sanghas, all-women groups were a natural corollary for setting up group farming.

In Kerala, the NHGs were not initially confined to women, but it was soon realised that rather few women attended gram sabhas due to restrictive social norms, while the SHG movement contained mostly women. Hence, to ensure women's inclusion, the K.Network decided to focus specifically on women, as explained by Thomas Isaac and Vijayananda, respectively:

'With NHGs constituted of both men and women we found that the meetings were not regular. In contrast, SHG women met once a week for economic transactions. Moreover women needed a space to sit for 3-4 hours. So we decided to go for women-only NHGs where women could identify their priorities, and make suggestions to the gram sabha.'²⁶

'The move to all-women NHGs was based on our understanding that women tend to recognise the implications of poverty better. They understand savings better. They are more careful with thrift ... And, especially in Kerala, the women's groups tend to function more harmoniously than men's groups, which get divided by politics. Men tend to come under diverse political influences.'²⁷

²⁵ This was the name given to the Mahila Samkhyas programme in Andhra Pradesh.

²⁶ Author's interview with Thomas Isaac.

²⁷ Author's interview with Vijayananda.

Sarada Muraleedharan adds another dimension: 'Initially, NHGs had men talking and women serving the tea. So we mooted the idea of women-only NHGs.' The group farms were constituted by women who were NHG members or belonged to their families.

5.2 Heterogeneity

On the question of group heterogeneity, again, Telangana and Kerala diverged. In my sample survey, 86 percent of Telangana's SD members belonged to SC/ST communities, with virtually no upper-caste women (Agarwal 2018). The SDG composition reflected APMSS's emphasis on constituting sanghas of poor women from relatively caste-homogenous backgrounds. In Kerala, by contrast, 14 percent of JLG members in my sample were upper-caste and only 9 percent were SC/ST,²⁸ the rest being Other Backward Castes.

In their decisions on group composition, neither state was driven by collective action theory, which would have supported socially homogenous groups of small size. Rather they were driven by specific aims. APMSS rooted for the lowest caste and most disadvantaged women when they formed sanghas (prior to group farming), since social empowerment was their primary goal. As Kameshwari Jandhyala explained to me:

'In the districts where we are working, the marginalised and excluded are the dalits, and if you want to promote leadership and more equal participation in local community affairs and governance, you need to start with them. You can't have mixed groups.'

'Our view was that multiple groups of poor women organised into mixed caste SHGs would not go far, since leadership would always go to upper-caste women. In the sangha model, we wanted to create one platform for dalit or marginalised women, but disadvantaged Muslim women were also included in districts which had them.'

Kerala proactively deviated from this modal and encouraged a degree of heterogeneity. This decision arose partly to promote inclusiveness, since the groups were embedded in neighbourhoods which in Kerala are less segregated by caste and religion than in Telangana; and partly for ensuring leadership. Hence Kerala's JLGs were more caste and class diverse (although within limits, since the majority were still backward caste and poor).

According to Thomas Issac:²⁹

²⁸ Overall also, only 9.1 percent of Kerala's population is SC, compared to 15.5 percent of Telangana's population, where another 9 percent is Scheduled Tribe.

²⁹ Author's interview.

‘Local women’s leadership does not come from the poorest of the poor. It comes from those who have some education and are just above the poverty line. In Kerala, poverty did not decline solely by the actions of the poor, but the joint actions of the poor and less poor. So we were strictly against homogeneity based only on the poor. Anyway, Kerala farmers are small, normally owning 35 cents or so of land.

‘Some did argue that the better-off will capture the organisation. So we stipulated that NHG meetings where tea is served would rotate across households – poor and less poor, upper and lower caste. Such practices help ensure that no section captures the group.’

Ms T. N. Seema (former member of parliament) recounts a case where some upper-caste women were not attending meetings held at the homes of SC members. ‘We asked two of them: “How can you be part of Kudumbashree without going to an SC member’s house? Are you in or out?” They returned in two days to say they would go to the SC woman’s house.’³⁰ According to T. K. Jose (executive director of K.Mission, 1998-2006): ‘Caste is not a big problem for Kerala. SCs in Kerala are not living in their own hamlets Moreover, in Kerala poverty prevails in almost all religions and castes, although it is dominant in SCs and STs.’

Valsala Kumari (executive director of K.Mission, 2012-16) adds: ‘Economic incentives also help break caste barriers and get people to cooperate.’

When Kudumbashree began, its membership was restricted to poor families, but later it became more economically heterogeneous, as explained by T. K. Jose:³¹

‘Initially Kudumbashree was oriented to be a poverty eradication programme through women’s empowerment. Rather few members owned cultivable land. But around 2007-2008, the orientation was changed from being mainly a poverty reduction programme to a women’s empowerment programme. So women did not need to come only from very poor families.’

Others who shaped Kudumbashree, such as Mr N. Jagajeevan, who was deeply involved in the People’s Plan Campaign, also emphasised that heterogeneity was advantageous, ‘because then NHGs and JLGs have more social connections, are better accepted by different segments of society, and provide an economic cushion to the group’.

³⁰ In the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), similarly, it was found that within a year of forming groups, poor women overcame their caste-related discord (personal communication, Renana Jhabvala, National Coordinator of SEWA).

³¹ Author’s interview.

5.3 Group size

Telangana and Kerala also differed in their ideas about appropriate group size. In Telangana, since all sangha women could join, most SDGs were large, the average size in my sample being 25 (ranging from 10 to 54 members). And since there was one sangha per village, there was only one SDG per village. According to P. Prasanthi:³²

‘The APMSS understanding is that a large group can influence the panchayat and local policy better than a small group, so we went for one sangha per village. Also the confidence of SC/ST women tends to be low, so we thought a bigger group would strengthen them and give them voice in the community.

‘We continued with this idea for the livelihoods programme... At that time nobody thought a large size would be a constraint. At times, we did feel that more than 30 was perhaps too large and 20 or so would be better, but we did not think of groups as small as six to seven members.’

In Kerala, however, JLGs are of smaller size, limited both by economic considerations and NABARD specifications of four to 10 members. It was also recognised that larger groups would reduce per capita returns. In my sample, the average JLG size was six and the range was three to 12 members.

In short, a variety of ideas and assumptions underlay the differences between the two states in terms of organisational structures, as well as group heterogeneity and size. But in Kerala these issues were more carefully thought through and debated, while in Telangana group size was determined by default by the previous size of the sanghas, and homogeneity was dictated by considerations of social empowerment and social structure, rather than economic effectiveness.

6. Implications

The differences between the Telangana and Kerala programmes in their organisational structures, group composition, and state support had implications, especially for the economic performance of the group farms, as judged by their productivity and profits, relative to individual farms in the sampled districts of each state. Effectively, the comparison was between all-women groups cultivating leased-in land and individual family farms, 95 percent of which were male-managed in both states, cultivating mostly owned land. The economic results are important, not only for judging the potential success of the institution of group farming, but also because they are likely to influence the views of policymakers on the desirability of replicating group farming elsewhere.

³² Author’s interview.

6.1 Economic results

The detailed results are given in Agarwal (2018) and summarised here. In Kerala, the group farms did significantly better than individual farms: their annual average value of output was 1.8 times greater and annual average profits were five times higher.³³ They did especially well in bananas, entering into contracts in niche markets for special varieties. In Telangana, however, group farms performed much less well than individual farms in terms of average annual productivity, although they made up for this to a notable extent in their annual net returns per farm (which were broadly on par with individual farms), by saving on purchased inputs, especially hired labour.

Notably, in both states, group farms performed much better in commercial crops than in traditional foodgrains such as rice, in the cultivation of which individual (typically male) farmers have an advantage, especially due to their owning good quality land and their long experience in paddy cultivation. In Telangana, farm enterprises which devoted a larger percentage of their land to cereals (compared to non-food crops) tended to generate a lower total value of output per hectare. Since almost all SDGs devoted all or much of their land to cereals, due to APMSS' strong emphasis on foodgrains, the economic returns of most SDGs were adversely affected by the crop choice.

Moreover, since Telangana's SDGs were constituted largely of poor SC women, they faced difficulties in leasing land. Upper-caste landowners were less willing to lease to SDGs, and the geographic distance of SC communities from upper-caste settlements also reduced SDG access to land near their homesteads (see also Agarwal 2017). On this count, APMSS could provide them rather little support. By contrast, the caste heterogeneity of Kerala's JLGs gave them a wider social circle to draw upon. They also sometimes received informal support from the K.Network for accessing land. Hence 71 percent of the SDGs were cultivating land leased only from within the group, while in Kerala this percentage was 13, the rest leasing from landlords in whole or in part (Agarwal 2018).

Overall, Telangana's groups faced a variety of constraints, including inadequate state support (technical and financial), difficulties in accessing good quality land, the catalysing effect of NGOs' emphasis that SDGs cultivate foodgrains for food security rather than cash crops, large group size, which made coordination more difficult and reduced per capita gains, and groups being constituted almost entirely of SC women, many of them illiterate, which limited their economic and social reach for accessing land and inputs. In contrast, Kerala's group farms enjoyed support from the local government and the K.Network. They had bank linkages for subsidised credit; financial incentives for high performing groups; freedom to choose their cropping patterns, including commercially profitable crops; small group size; high literacy among group members; and socio-economic heterogeneity in group composition, which broadened the women's social networks and economic reach in accessing

³³ Calculated by subtracting all paid out costs from the annual value of output.

land, procuring inputs and marketing. Some Kerala groups even used their profits to purchase land collectively.

In 2015, when I asked P. Prasanthi what she thought they should have done in hindsight, she observed:

‘We should have trained some sanga women in agricultural practices to constitute a technical support team for the SDGs. We should also have tied up with the government’s agricultural department for continuous support to sanghas and asked them to place a mandal level team to back the SDGs. We could also have better used the government’s ATMA programme, which had a particular emphasis on women farmers.³⁴ Another aspect was water supply – we did not look at the potential for rainwater harvesting. Moreover, the groups were too large. We should have limited the numbers and formed two groups per village for viability.’

Nevertheless, the two states converged in terms of broadening the women’s economic, social and political horizons. Women in both states emphasised that group farming greatly improved their familiarity with, and ability to access, economic institutions such as banks, governmental agricultural departments, and markets for land and inputs. They also reported improved knowledge of new cultivation practices, which they used for their family farms as well (Agarwal 2017, 2018).

6.2 Social and political implications

Socially, too, in both states, women reported being more respected by their communities and families (Agarwal 2017). This is especially important in Telangana, where the women face substantial caste-related disadvantage. Also, for empowering women socially, large groups can be more effective. The social cohesion of the sanghas and the causes that they took up (such as domestic violence and child marriage) had a strong uplifting effect in Telangana, whereas Kerala’s JLGs were not especially active on this front.

In addition, in both states, political empowerment is reflected in SDG and JLG members standing for and winning in local panchayat elections. However, in Kerala this effect is stronger, since every political party is now reported to seek candidates from the K.Network for panchayat elections.³⁵ This increases JLG women’s political clout, and strengthens the synergy between the K.Network and the panchayats, as was anticipated by those designing Kudumbashree’s governance structure.

³⁴ ATMA is the Agricultural Technology Management Agency, supported by the central government in seven Indian states, including Andhra Pradesh. It is responsible for all technology dissemination to farmers at the district level, and expected to pay particular attention to women farmers, and use a group approach.

³⁵ Author’s interview with Jagajeevan.

6.3 Sustainability

In Telangana, the UNDP project period ended in 2005; and with the dissolution of the Mahila Samatha programme in 2016, APMSS' support to SDGs also petered out. The programme suffered not only from the very short-term commitment of the central government and UNDP, but also from the political changes at the state level, including the bifurcation of undivided Andhra Pradesh in June 2014.

In contrast, Kudumbashree's organisational framework has provided a foundation for sustainability. In particular, the creation of an autonomous K.Network, with formal links with the K.Mission, has enabled the programme to weather political changes. Indeed, since the mid-1990s, we see a veritable seesaw between the LDF government, with the communist parties in dominance in 1996-2001 and 2006-2011, and the UDF (United Democratic Front) government, with the Indian National Congress in dominance in 2001-06 and 2011-16. In 2012, Kudumbashree faced a particular political challenge under the UDF, when the then minister for rural development announced plans to launch the National Rural Livelihoods Mission in Kerala through all 'competent NGOs', remarking that the K. Mission was 'not competent enough to implement the national scheme'. This move to undermine and replace Kudumbashree by other agencies provoked protests by activists, researchers and many ordinary citizens of Kerala, leading to the proposal being shelved (*The Hindu*, 2012). The protests underlined the extent to which Kudumbashree had been able to garner support from a wide section of the elite and middle classes, not least due to the reach of its programmes, including sanitation and waste management in urban areas (Kumar 2014).

7. Reflections

This paper examined the interactions between ideas, institutions and organisational structures, using, as an example, an innovative form of farming, namely group farming by women, in two states of south India. It also examined the divergence in ideas between the actors initiating the programmes in the two states, which led to quite different group compositions and organisational forms for programme implementation. Moreover, the implementing actors differed in their ability and effectiveness in garnering state support. These and other factors impinged, in turn, on the economic, social and political outcomes of the programmes, and their sustainability. In this concluding section, I broadly retrace the pathways from ideas to outcomes, and how divergent ideas can produce divergent results.

To trace this process, it needs recognition that the success of a development programme, undertaken to solve an identified problem, requires not *one* idea but a *range of ideas* at each stage, from conceptualisation to implementation. For instance, the starting point in this study was the idea of group farming as a pathway to alleviate poverty and economically empower poor rural women, and (in Kerala) also to revive agriculture. In both states, this idea was not imposed fully formed from the top. It developed through interactions between activists, academics, international agencies

and government bodies, influenced by academic writings as well grassroots experience, and experiments by village women themselves.

This participatory process of developing programmes was itself an idea with deep roots in developmental practice, but which was given particular shape in Kerala's People's Plan Campaign, that provided a mechanism of community involvement in generating ideas. It also enabled the identification of group farming as a key programme in that state.

Once it was agreed that group farming would be initiated, a second set of ideas was needed to answer the question: what model of group farming should be followed? Here the two states broke with past models of collective farming and embraced new ones, adapting them to local use, such as women's collectives and self-help groups, of which India had had substantial experience. At the same time, the two states diverged in how the groups should be constituted.

In Telangana, APMSS kept its existing sanga structure – created for women's education and social empowerment – assuming it would also prove effective for *economic* empowerment. The large size and socio-economic homogeneity of the Telangana groups stemmed from the primacy they gave to social change, to which the economic aspect was added. Kerala focused on economic empowerment as a *means to* social empowerment, paying considerable attention to the kinds of groups that would work best, as well as other aspects, such as the linkages with NABARD for credit and with the government's agricultural department for technology and training. This difference in emphasis also underlay the shaping of women's collectives in the two states. APMSS went for a 'social movement' approach, which needed larger groups. Kerala chose to create NHGs as an adaptation of the SHG model, and went for small heterogeneous groups, using a more livelihood-oriented approach.

A third set of ideas was then needed for creating the organisational structure that would support the women's groups. Although leaders in both states sought to create organisations that could serve as a bulwark for the collectives against local power centres, the organisations they built were different. Both states built federated structures, but the sangha federations created by APMSS in Telangana were pre-existing, and depended on the legitimacy of its social programme and larger numbers for dealing with the power held by panchayats and upper-caste households. In contrast, Kerala had no pre-existing federations. It created the K.Network as an organisational structure that was autonomous of both panchayats and political parties, and was thus able to withstand pressure from both, while also being able to bargain with both. Moreover, the height of the K.Network was made level with the panchayat, so that it could engage with the latter on an equal basis.

A fourth set of ideas related to subsistence vs. market-driven approaches to agriculture. Although both states encouraged organic farming, APMSS emphasised

foodgrain cultivation for food security, within a framework of subsistence farming, while Kerala encouraged crops that had expanding markets, including niche varieties of fruits and vegetables.

These differences between the states arose not least from the professional backgrounds, experience and capacities of the principle actors who shaped and implemented the programmes. In Telangana, they were women activists of APMSS with long experience and a deep commitment to women's social empowerment, but they had limited clout with the state government. In Kerala, the programme designers were predominantly male, but what mattered was less their gender than the official positions they occupied. They held government positions and had significant administrative experience, social capital and authority. They brought acumen that covered the political, bureaucratic and financial spheres. In addition, the initial executive directors of the K.Mission were also from the government, but with prior experience in developing innovative community programmes. In other words, apart from their ideas, Kerala's implementing actors had the power to carry them through.

The ideas that shaped different elements of the programmes, their institutional form and organisational structures (we could see these institutions and organisations as embodiments of ideas), in turn, influenced outcomes. As we found, in economic terms, Kerala's group farms did much better than individual farms, especially in commercial crops, while SDGs in Telangana had mixed results, doing worse than individual farms on some counts, although equally well on other counts, especially cash crops. Socially, the Telangana groups – which faced layers of disadvantage (caste, class and gender) – traversed longer distances than the Kerala ones. But politically, although women in both states gained visibility, the organisational structure created by Kudumbashree paid Kerala's women greater dividends in outreach and results.

In addition, there were clear differences between the states in programme expansion and sustainability. The Telangana programme remained confined to the five districts in which it started; and after the UNDP-GoI involvement ended, many groups stopped farming collectively. When I first visited the area in 2011, only three of the five project districts still had substantial numbers of SDGs. Of course, given the challenges they faced and the limited state support they received, even the fact that some 50 percent of the SDGs survived was remarkable. But it also revealed the vulnerabilities of the programme, which should normally have expanded rather than contracted. In contrast, in Kerala, group farming has been expanding over time and now covers all districts of the state. Although they also have groups which have ceased to function (unfortunately no precise numbers are available),³⁶ new groups have emerged and, overall, the programme continues to grow in numerical strength and geographic spread. Moreover, since Kerala's NHGs are also units of micro-

³⁶ Kudumbashree keeps up-to-date records of new groups, but not on groups that have become inactive.

planning, they help sustain a participatory and bottom-up process of finding solutions, and not one that is mainly expert driven.

As the results of these experiments percolate, they will feed into the body of existing ideas about collective farming, and can help overcome the historical negatives. Kerala's experience, in particular, provides considerable scope for optimism on this count.

In conclusion, this paper contributes several aspects to the debate on ideas, institutions and organisational forms. It demonstrates that ideas are needed at multiple levels and stages of programme formulation and implementation. It also demonstrates that ideas are contributed not only by experts, but also by the grassroots. However, for grassroots ideas to get a hearing, we need permeable organisational structures which allow for a two-way conversation. Further, even when negative associations with certain ideas/policies take the form of widely accepted philosophies (e.g. that collective farming cannot succeed), the past can be overcome if the ideas/policies are reinstated innovatively through an entirely new pathway. For example, the current wave of group farming was built on the successful experience of women's collectives, rather than on the failed experience of socialist collectives, and on voluntarism rather than imposition. These examples also highlight the need to create synergies between broad philosophies and the practical thinking that goes into building innovative institutions and organisations that will sustain in developing countries. In particular, we need organisational mechanisms that can empower communities to tackle local power structures and political unpredictability.

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Appendix A: Persons interviewed^a

State and person interviewed	Designation of person interviewed
Telangana	
Ms Kameshwari Jandhyala	Project director, APMSS, 1992-1996 National consultant for Mahila Samakhya, 1996-2000, 2003-2006
Ms Nandini Prasad	Project director, APMSS, 1999-2003
Ms P. Prasanthi	District resource person, 1997-1998; state consultant, 1998-2000; state resource person for Mahila Samakya, 2000-2004; state project director APMSS, 2004-2016
Ms Kalyani Menon-Sen	Gender advisor to UNDP, India, during project period, 1997-2004. Executive committee member of Mahila Samakya, Uttar Pradesh.
Ms Neera Burra	UNDP, India, 1995-2007: assistant resident representative for 10 years and special advisor on poverty for two years
Kerala	
Mr Issac Thomas	Member, State Planning Board, during Kudumbashree's initiation period. Member of the three-person special task force set up in 1997 for identifying pathways to poverty eradication in Kerala. The task force conceptualised and initiated the establishment of Kudumbashree's institutional structure.
Mr S. M. Vijayananda	Secretary, local self-government, Govt. of Kerala, 1996-2001, 2004-2011. Member of the 1997 three-person special task force mentioned above. Chairman, executive committee, Kudumbashree (1998-2001, 2004-2011 Special secretary, rural development, Government of India, 2012-2015.
Dr P. Bakshi	General manager, NABARD, 1994-1999. Member of the 1997 three-person special task force mentioned above.
Mr. T. K. Jose	Executive director, Kudumbashree Mission, 1998-2006 ^a
Ms Sarada Muralidharan, IAS	Executive director, Kudumbashree Mission, 2006-2012
Dr K. B. Valsala Kumari	Executive director, Kudumbashree Mission, 2012-2016
Mr N. Jagajeevan	Linked with Kudumbashree since 1998. Worked in

Ms T. N. Seema	expert cell of State Planning Board and in charge of training in the People's Plan Campaign, 1996-2001 Member, Rajya Sabha, 1996-2001. Active in the State Planning Board during Kudumbashree's initiation period
Ms Mridul Eapan	Member of State Planning Board, 2006-2011. Now retired professor, Centre for Development Studies. Thiruvananthapuram
Mr Sabir Hussain	ADMC, Pathanamthitta district, 1998-2004 Kerala state backward classes development corporation, Pathanamthitta 2004-2006 District MC, Alappuzha; then Pathanamthitta, 2012 onwards
Mr Liby Johnson	Kudumbashree State Mission, 2009–2013. Team leader, programme officer; Kudumbashree National Resource Organisation operating officer, 2013-2016

Note: All interviews were conducted during 2014-16. The interviewees agreed to be cited by name in the paper.

^a The first executive director, Mr James Verghese, only served briefly in 1998.

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