NAME: Empowering and Building Capacity of Tribal Communities of Four Gram Panchayats of Laxmipur Block of Koraput District in Odisha to Increase Food Security, Strengthen Social Cohesion, and Enhance Climate Resilience

PERIOD: 1 April 2014 to 31 October 2016

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Through integrated sustainable farming practices and agro-ecological approaches the project is improving the health of soils, diversifying crops, and enhancing the villagers’ livelihoods and well-being. The heart of the project is the campaign ‘Grow Your Own Food’ to counteract so called “Climate Smart Agriculture” (CSA) techniques. CSA encourages the use of modified seeds, chemical pesticides, and synthetic fertilizers, as well as high-risk technologies such as synthetic biology, nano-technology and geo-engineering. This imposition of new biotechnology has been particularly damaging for farmers in Odisha.

The Grow Your Own Food campaign has two key components: a community learning element incorporating eco-village approaches, combined with seed preservation and distribution of seedlings of various fruits and vegetables. The campaign is continually developing new climate-resilient agricultural approaches rooted in traditional ways of growing food. Drought tolerant plants combined with mulching, fortified composting, vermiculture and vermi-composting, herbal pesticides and green manures have improved the productivity of soils and the nutritional value of meals. Members of the tribal communities also participate in annual eco-village design courses which incorporate locally relevant components of sustainable food production, including mixed cropping, nitrogen fixation, bio-fertiliser preparation and seed-bank development. Villagers are developing their own kitchen gardens, which will continue to grow after project completion. Tribal women attend seminars to enhance their skills in leadership, mediation and advocacy as important elements for peace-building, conflict resolution, and sustained social-ecological resilience.
High yields in participating villages were the result of community engagement, access to water & new skills acquired through agro-ecological capacity building activities. Villagers who experienced success in the first year by earning supplemental income through the sale of surplus produce encouraged and influenced fellow community members on subsequent years. The project reached a total of 750 tribal families over 2 1/2 years.

In 2015, a late and insufficient monsoon impacted the kitchen gardens activities. Instead of the usual two-and-a-half months of rain, the region received only 15 days. The women still managed to plant their saplings but the harvest suffered the impact of water shortage. As consequence, new water-use efficiency techniques for vegetable cultivation were introduced through the training programmes, and biochar techniques were incorporated to maintain soil moisture when rain is insufficient.

The continually changing environment of Odisha creates an imperative for ongoing learning through participatory methods which empower villages to take action for sustainable development through well-informed, locally adapted responses as sources of creativity and innovation.