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# AHARAM TRADITIONAL CROP PRODUCERS' COMPANY

India



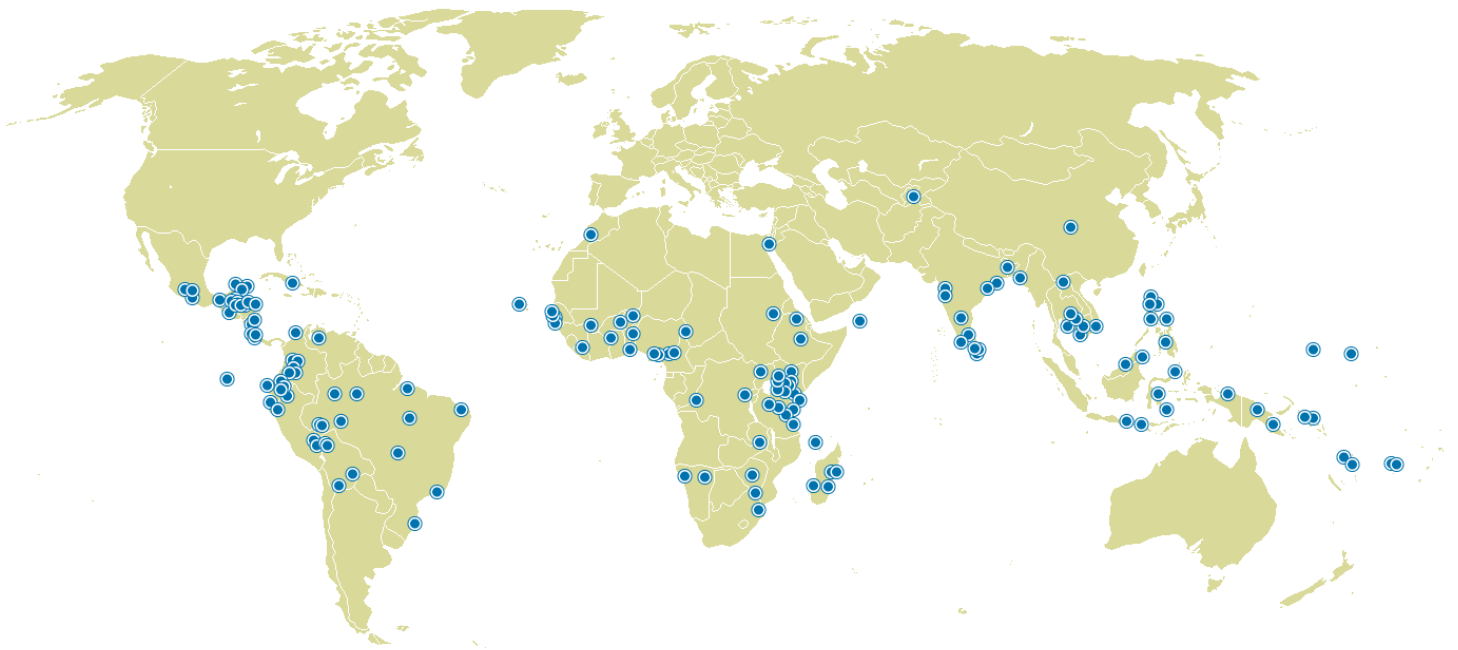
## Equator Initiative Case Studies

Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities

# UNDP EQUATOR INITIATIVE CASE STUDY SERIES

Local and indigenous communities across the world are advancing innovative sustainable development solutions that work for people and for nature. Few publications or case studies tell the full story of how such initiatives evolve, the breadth of their impacts, or how they change over time. Fewer still have undertaken to tell these stories with community practitioners themselves guiding the narrative.

To mark its 10-year anniversary, the Equator Initiative aims to fill this gap. The following case study is one in a growing series that details the work of Equator Prize winners – vetted and peer-reviewed best practices in community-based environmental conservation and sustainable livelihoods. These cases are intended to inspire the policy dialogue needed to take local success to scale, to improve the global knowledge base on local environment and development solutions, and to serve as models for replication. Case studies are best viewed and understood with reference to *'The Power of Local Action: Lessons from 10 Years of the Equator Prize'*, a compendium of lessons learned and policy guidance that draws from the case material.



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# AHARAM TRADITIONAL CROP PRODUCERS' COMPANY

India

## PROJECT SUMMARY

Aharam Traditional Crops Producers' Company works with socially marginalized rural producers to conserve biodiversity in the semi-arid Ramnad Plains of Tamil Nadu state. The initiative uses a producer group model focused on women and landless labourers to promote organic farming practices that improve crop diversity and agro-biodiversity. The group's work has aimed at reducing dependence on cotton cultivation by increasing the commercial viability of farming small-scale crops and harvesting medicinal plants. The company is able to add value to these processes through supply chain management and secondary processing, thereby guaranteeing a fair price for organically-certified commodities bought in bulk directly from producer groups.

As well as supplying training in organic farming practices, the initiative has encouraged the formation of savings and micro-credit self-help groups, as well as supporting fledgling micro-enterprises.

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## KEY FACTS

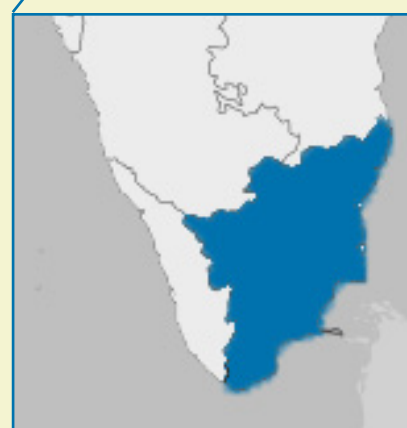
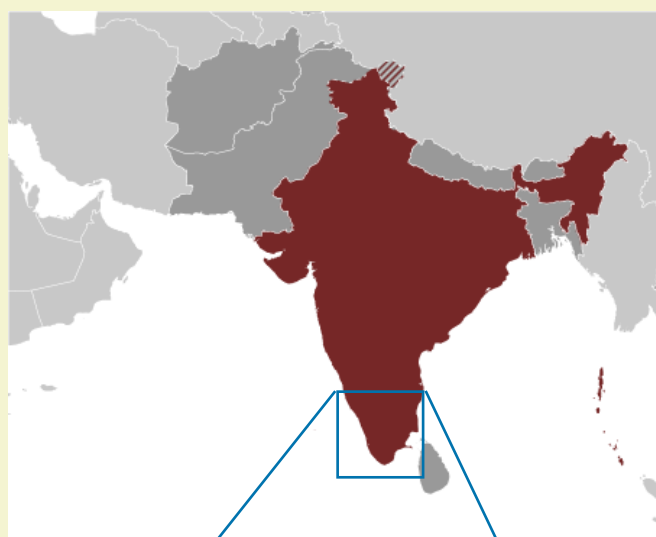
EQUATOR PRIZE WINNER: 2006

FOUNDED: 2003

LOCATION: Tamil Nadu state, southern India

BENEFICIARIES: 15,000 rural small-scale producers

BIODIVERSITY: drylands and agrobiodiversity



# Background and Context



Aharam Traditional Crops Producers' Company was founded in 2003 by the Covenant Centre for Development (CCD), an NGO working in Kariapatti, Tamil Nadu state, southern India. The area lies within the semi-arid tract known as the Ramnad Plains, and is characterized by severe droughts and rural-urban migration. CCD was founded in 1993 to promote rural community-based enterprise development, with the majority of its work focused on women. Aharam is one of three community-managed enterprises founded by CCD to confront the challenges of providing healthcare, sustainable energy, rural livelihoods, and food security for the Ramnad Plains' marginalized and landless poor. The aim of the Traditional Crops Producers' Company is to promote the marketing of small-scale farm produce at a fair price. To date, their work has benefitted an estimated 15,000 rural producers. Enhanced incomes have motivated families to conserve their agro-biodiversity, while the crops produced have improved the nutrition and health of urban consumers.

## *A marginalized and impoverished region*

The Ramnad Plains, situated close to the city of Madurai, receive only 600 mm of rainfall during the monsoon period (August-November), while the rest of the year is hot and dry. The ecosystem type is characterized by sparse grassland and forest. Palmyra palm trees (*Borassus flabellifer*) and thorny Acacia bushes are common. Mesquite (*Prosopis juliflora*), grows wild as an invasive species. Its high water consumption and shade make it difficult for grasses to grow. In turn, this has reduced fodder for livestock; its leaves are also unpalatable to cattle. The plains are home to a select variety of wildlife species. Peacocks and crows are common, as are Common Mynas, Little Green Bee-eaters, and sparrows, especially near human habitations. Other bird species include vultures, Blue Jays, fowls, doves, warblers, and babblers. Mammals include mongooses, Asian Palm Civets, Black Nape Hares, jackals, and mouse deer, while reptiles such as Monitor Lizards, Rat snakes, Russell's Pit Viper, and Checkered and Olive Keelback snakes are also found.

While cotton is grown as a cash crop in the rain-fed region, subsistence farming faces the challenges of low rainfall and poor irrigation in the dryland areas. An additional source of income during the summer months is derived from livestock products: cattle and goats are herded in the areas with sufficient grassland. Other sources of income include medicinal plants and charcoal made from Mesquite trees. Approximately 80% of families own landholdings of two hectares or less, while 40% of families live below the national poverty line, earning less than USD 1/day. Many of these families are socially as well as economically marginalized, while there are also high numbers of landless labourers. The plains are home to the nomadic Valayar people, who have traditionally been of low social caste, extremely poor, and have lacked a political voice in India. Some of these communities have been displaced from land by development projects such as dams or power plants. Recent policies have aimed at helping the Valayar, however, providing them with subsidies for education and food. Welfare schemes for improving access to water, sanitation, and electricity have also begun to reach them.

## *Tackling food security and agricultural productivity*

CCD identified various catalysts for their interventions in the region. Traditionally, diets had been well-balanced, with a diversified mix of grains, pulses, beans, vegetables, oil, milk, poultry and meat all produced locally through organic farming methods. As farm prices have fallen, however, 30% of farmers have replaced nutritious but low-income subsistence crops such as millets – sorghum, pearl millet, finger millet – and greens with less nutritious, higher value crops, such as sugarcane. Meanwhile, productivity has declined by approximately 10-15% due to a reduction in organic inputs, as farmers depend more heavily on chemical inputs. The combination of these cash crops and chemical fertilizer and pesticide use has impacted soil health, while micronutrient deficiency and food scarcity have caused multiple health problems for the population. Market failures in cotton and other cash crops have further harmed local livelihoods.

### *A focus on empowering women producers*

The Covenant Centre for Development was initially successful in organizing rural women into savings and micro-credit self-help groups. In total, 640 groups have been formed, with 10,000 members altogether, from 242 villages in the region. CCD provided loans at interest rates of 2% per month. Collective savings totaled around Rs. 24 million (USD 535,000 at 2011 prices). Access to credit allowed these women to start micro-enterprises, with CCD also supplying training and support to these groups.

The micro-enterprise model was then used to encourage aggregation of subsistence farmers into producer groups, using sustainable

methods and organic farm inputs that conserve agro-biodiversity, with Aharam Traditional Crops Producers' Company working in supply chain management and marketing. One of the early challenges Aharam confronted was breaking existing traders' monopolies and eliminating corruption in weighting and pricing, which were barriers to small-scale farmers entering these markets. Aharam also facilitates value addition and access to urban markets. Demand for welfare measures such as savings, affordable credit and insurance has broadened Aharam's scope of work, incorporating disaster resilience into their socio-economic goals. Finally, linking producers to government credit schemes allows them to purchase high quality agricultural inputs, which increases producers' yields and incomes.



*“Climate change has occurred faster and has been more damaging than expected. Traditional crops and natural resource management techniques, coupled with appropriate modern tools, are sustainable means of combating these changes.”*

*Utkarsh Ghate, Covenant Centre for Development*

# Key Activities and Innovations



Aharam's work focuses on three key areas: aggregation of producer groups and quality management; value addition; and providing wholesale and retail market access. The two main sectors they have worked in are agriculture (including mangoes, coconuts, and farm grains) and healthcare (herbal medicines), although their work with Tamil Nadu coastal communities has also involved producing artisanal goods for the tourist market.

## *The producer group model*

Producer groups usually consist of 15-20 individual producers. These producer groups are organized into clusters of five or six, with 10-15 clusters making up a federation. This aggregation allows for the bulk buying of produce. Producer groups serve to regulate the quality of their produce, as well as acting as collective credit, savings, and insurance groups. Using producer peer groups to ensure quality management and organic quality certification has been an important innovation for Aharam. Producer group members check each others' agricultural inputs and methods of storage and transportation, to control for chemical use or contamination. The producer groups themselves also undertake peer reviews of neighbouring groups' operations. A local or regional committee keeps records of these results and issues certificates annually. This process, known as the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS), is not unique, but has been pioneered in India through Aharam. CCD was a founder member of the national body, PGS India, and has helped to promote this technique for ensuring organic quality standards through collective guarantee. As it is also voluntary and low-cost, PGS is preferred to third-party certification, which typically involves urban-based accredited inspection agencies that charge heavy fees.

## *Diversifying and improving crop yields*

Several activities have focused on increasing producer yields. Aharam has encouraged collecting and cultivating a broad range of

seeds through community seed nurseries. Around 50 varieties of fifteen crop species have been grown to date, encouraging farmers to diversify their agricultural output. Women landless labourers have been given training in collecting up to 45 species of wild herbs from wastelands or fallow farms during the dry season. These are processed into eight primary healthcare medicinal products for sale. Some common medicinal herbs that are collected include:

**Table 1: Medicinal plants and their common uses**

<i>Medicinal herbs</i>	<i>Used for</i>
<i>Eclipta alba</i>	Skin care
<i>Occimum sanctum</i>	Fever, coughs
<i>Tribulus terrestris</i>	Kidney stones
<i>Boerhavia diffusa</i>	Liver tonic
<i>Evolvulus alsinoides</i>	Immune system

*Source: Covenant Centre for Development, 2011*

Alternatively, these herbs are bought in bulk from the collectors and sold to prominent Indian pharmaceutical companies for sale in India or export overseas. These companies include Himalaya Drug Pvt. Ltd (Bangalore), Natural Remedies Pvt. Ltd (Bangalore), Cavin Care (Chennai), and Sami Labs (Bangalore).

Organic farming methods have been promoted through training sessions: specific methods have included multi-cropping, and the "on-farm" generation of fodder, manure, and crop protection inputs, to reduce the costs of cultivation and generate higher farmer profits.

## *Seed multiplication*

The Covenant Centre for Development's partnership with the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid-Tropics (ICRISAT) has enabled some farmer groups to become seed producers. ICRISAT provided CCD with high-quality paddy and groundnut seeds, with a guarantee to buy back a portion of the seeds produced. In turn, CCD gave trainings to Aharam farmer groups in techniques for produc-

ing high-quality seeds. These techniques include selecting bigger grains to replant, trimming branches to retain fewer seeds that receive more nutrition, and cutting off diseased seeds and branches. A portion of the seeds produced are then sold back to ICRISAT, with the balance being sold to local farmers. These high-quality seeds are highly profitable, costing 30-50% more than the grains sold for consumption. The producer groups taking part in this scheme have now been certified as seed producers by the government, and are also able to purchase seeds from local departments of agriculture, selling them back at a profit. This venture was reviewed by Access Livelihoods Consulting (ALC) India in 2011, on behalf of the Ford Foundation, and was recommended as viable for investment for scaling up.

### *Diversifying livelihoods; value-added processing*

Coastal communities have been helped to develop artisanal goods from local resources, including coir, seashells, seaweed and palm and banana fibers. The Bhagawati coir trust ensures secured livelihoods for over 500 coir workers and 250 shell craft artisans in Nagapattinam and Kanyakumari districts on the Tamil Nadu coast, where communities were severely affected by the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004. Coir yarn is developed using a traditional method, in which green fibers are soaked in salt water over time, and sold to farmers for tying tea plants in plantations, or used in making goods for tourist markets.

Value addition has been enabled through Aharam's mango pulp factory. This initiative collectively purchases quality mango fruits from dryland orchards and extracts their pulp, which is then packaged and sold to urban companies at a higher price for processing into juices. This allows the fruit to be stored for a longer period of time as opposed to in its natural state, while guaranteeing income for the

producers during the lean season. It also removes the advantage of foreign commercial imported fruit, which is of higher quality in terms of colour and size. Buyers pay in advance for the pulp, ensuring it can be supplied in time and in sufficient quantity and quality.

### *Connecting rural producers and urban markets*

Supply chain management has allowed producers to reach 2,000 rural and urban consumers. Aharam's grocery retail programme involves bulk purchasing of crop produce from farmers, followed by value addition by women's groups at Common Processing Centres. These finished products, including traditional varieties of millet, spices, and pulses are then sold on to rural consumers at a fair price, improving nutritional health.

The target population for Aharam's work is approximately 10,000 small farmers and landless labourers in the central drylands, and 5,000 coastal families. The total population being helped by Aharam's work is therefore estimated at 75,000 (at an average family size of five), of which around 35,000 are active producers. One quarter of these producers benefit from better market access, while the remainder benefit indirectly from higher prices or welfare options. Aharam also directly employs twenty-five staff.

To date, seven federations of producer groups have been created. There are two mango and cotton farmer federations in Ramnad, two coastal farmers' federations in Nagapattinam district, and federations of artisans and coir workers from Kanyakumari. The final federation is made up of women's medicinal plants gathering groups, and is represented on the Aharam governing board. Between them, these federations have taken on much of the administration of Aharam.



# Impacts



## BIODIVERSITY IMPACTS

The biological diversity and ecological integrity of the drylands have benefitted primarily through the promotion of traditional agricultural practices. Increased use of organic fertilizers and natural pest control measures has limited the harmful effects of chemicals on soil quality.

By adding value to traditional, nutritious crops, Aharam has been able to increase their production compared to higher-value commercial cash crops such as sugar cane. Millets, for instance, have been processed into flour, while women's groups and school children have been encouraged to purchase this crop for its nutritional benefits. Fears over diabetes in urban centres in particular have helped to increase the demand and the price of millet. Other traditional crop varieties have been promoted through seed nurseries, and have increased the agricultural biodiversity within the region.



### *Organic farming: enhancing agrobiodiversity*

Producer groups regulate the use of organic practices by small-scale farmers, who must meet quality standards to market their produce at higher prices. Organic farming techniques include inter-cropping, pest trap crops, and natural fertilizer use. Instead of using expensive inorganic fertilizers, farmers have been educated on how to make and use organic fertilizers from the bird droppings and mulch. In addition, farmers have been advised to use guinea birds for controlling pests in mango orchards, rather than farmers spraying insecticides on the plants. Reduction in chemical inputs has allowed for more insect species and more birds to frequent farmed areas. The lack of pesticide residue allows birds such as doves, pigeons, parakeets, warblers and babblers to eat grains, and bee-eaters, drongos, mynas, and bluejays to eat insects and worms. Beehives are common in organic farming areas, as bees can pollinate and tap honey from crops such as pulses and oilseeds in the winter months, if grown organically.

Medicinal plant gatherer groups have been given training in sustainable harvesting, ensuring that only mature medicinal plants are cut. This is a requirement to meet the "good collection practices" certification for selling plants through the Gram Moolige Company Ltd, CCD's medicinal plants community-based enterprise.

### *Marine and coastal conservation through CCD*

The Covenant Centre for Development has also worked with poor communities in areas of the coastal tract affected by the Indian Ocean tsunami. Sand dune conservation and mangrove restoration work has been undertaken with coastal communities by Aranya, a partner NGO of CCD, in the area of Puducherry. Parts of sand dunes have been planted with mangroves and other trees to protect them from erosion by the sea. Responsible fishing codes have been introduced for Nagapattinam and Kanyakumari fisher communities. Seasonal and site-specific fishing restraints have allowed fishing stocks

to regenerate. These stocks were impacted heavily in the aftermath of the tsunami, when charities donated large numbers of fishing boats to affected communities, leading to over-fishing along the coast.

## SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACTS

The social and economic benefits from Aharam's work have been extensive, varied, and sustained. They include greater food security and better nutrition, higher incomes, empowerment of women, and increased resilience to disasters.

Aharam's outreach has grown rapidly since its formation. From an initial 500 producers, the organization now has 15,000, with a total of 75,000 estimated beneficiaries. These families live within three regions: Madurai, Kanyakumari, and Poompha. Of these, an estimated 70% are women, specifically targeted through Aharam's work with women's self-help groups and landless female labourers. This has significantly empowered women within households, and has improved their decision-making powers and social standing. Approximately 30% of the beneficiaries are considered indigenous, located around Madurai; 90% of the target population lives in rural areas.

### *Increased household incomes; improved rural resilience*

Livelihood security resulting from advance payments for bulk purchases, allied to constant demand, has guaranteed predictable and consistent incomes for rural producers, reducing anxiety and worry for beneficiaries. Between 2003 and 2008, studies showed that daily incomes of Aharam producer groups members had increased from around Rs. 20 to over Rs. 50 (USD 0.44 to USD 1.12), representing an increase of 150%. While up to half of this increase could be due to inflation or the introduction of other income-generating activities, Aharam's interventions account for at least 50% of this effect, through higher prices for processed agricultural goods, representing a substantial increase in earning capacities for producer households. Coastal artisans, meanwhile, now receive approximately Rs. 50-70 (USD 1.12/1.56) in daily income for coir yarn or shell crafts they produce.

Disaster resilience has been increased through the provision of welfare tools such as savings, credit, and insurance mechanisms via the Covenant Centre for Development. Prior to Aharam's founding, nearly 45% of the farmers in the plains owed debts in the range of Rs. 10,000 to 25,000 (USD 220-USD 555) or up to two years of their annual income. Private moneylenders trapped farmers by charging heavy interest rates of up to 8% per month, while formal credit institutions such as banks are scarce (approximately one-quarter of families have access to a formal bank.) This indebtedness and poverty multiplied the effects of frequent droughts, pest attacks and crop failures. CCD provides low-interest loans through self-help groups at 25% of the market rate, or 2% monthly, thereby reducing producers' indebtedness, enhancing their savings capacity, and reducing vulnerability to risks such as poor harvests or droughts.

Finally, Aharam's work has also reduced rural-urban migration, which imposed significant emotional burdens on families. High numbers

of men were previously forced to migrate to cities daily or seasonally to find work; higher rural incomes and entrepreneurial opportunities in the plains now allow more men to remain with their families.

## POLICY IMPACTS

Aharam's work has had little direct impact on policy at either the local or national level, although it has served as a successful example of a rural producers' enterprise. This model is now recognized as a vital rural development tool, on a par with cooperatives, whereas previously producer companies were seen as highly politicized and unpopular.

A key innovation of Aharam's work has been its use of a Participatory Guarantee System through its producer groups to ensure their agricultural produce meets organic and quality standards. While this has not been reflected in government policies, the organization has pioneered this concept as a form of quality management for small-scale rural processing. Being recognized by the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid-Tropics (ICRISAT) has also raised Aharam's profile within India.

Aharam contributed to India's National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plan (NBSAP) planning process through sharing its experiences with biodiversity-friendly business development as a strategy for conservation. They suggested organic farming, herbal medicine, and community enterprises as strategies for development. While these recommendations were not taken on board, the work of the Gram Moolige Company Ltd. has been recognized by India's National Biodiversity Authority.

Other national policies have acted as barriers to Aharam's success, however. India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), along with cheap food ration programs, are believed to dampen rural entrepreneurship, by ensuring employment opportunities in the non-farm sector and leading to labour shortages for small-scale farms. For instance, under NREGA, families in rural districts have been provided with employment in development projects such as digging ponds and laying roads. Daily wages for these activities are around Rs. 150 for men and Rs. 120 for women. This is two to three times the increase in wages for Aharam's producers noted in 2008.

Aharam TCPC has achieved a high degree of recognition outside India, and has contributed to numerous knowledge-sharing processes on biodiversity conservation, medicinal herbs, and community-based enterprises. Aharam representatives have been included in regional consultations involving other Indian voluntary organizations on the subject of empowering small producer agencies. These discussions have been organized by the International Institute of Environment and Development (IIED) and the Dutch NGO Hivos, and have focused on health and equity issues for small-scale producers. Aharam representatives also contributed to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, and were cited in the Indian Urban Resource Millennium Assessment by Naturalists study, initiated by the World Resources Institute. Finally, in 2006, Aharam TCPC was a winner of the UNDP Equator Prize, recognizing its efforts to reduce poverty and conserve biodiversity.

# Sustainability and Replication



## SUSTAINABILITY

Aharam Traditional Crop Producers' Company is a revenue-generating enterprise. In five years, its annual turnover increased from Rs. 1.3 million in 2004 to Rs. 12.5 million in 2008 (almost USD 280,000 at 2011 prices.) Mango fruit and pulp is estimated to account for around 60% of its annual sales, with other grocery retail accounting for 15%, cotton for 10%, seeds for 5%, and coir yarn 5%. Simultaneously, its beneficiaries have been growing in number, and it has accessed a growing number of markets. It has estimated that its local growth potential is still two to three times its present reach in villages neighbouring its current producer groups.

The two main drivers for Aharam's continued success are ensuring access to urban markets, and tapping local markets for raw produce. The value-addition stage is vital for increasing the viability of the small-scale producers: simply aggregating raw produce has not been found to be sufficiently profitable.

### *Strategic interventions for sustained impact*

Partners' support is vital for Aharam's continued growth. The various buyers of Aharam's produce contribute around 30% of the company's budget through advances for processed fruits, concessions for bulk purchases, and investments in infrastructure, such as a factory constructed to process cotton. Buyback assurances also make up a significant in-kind contribution that motivates farmers to produce high-quality goods. International donor agencies such as Oxfam, Ford Foundation, Tata Trust, and Christian Aid contribute another 30% in the form of trainings and marketing expenses. The farmers themselves also contribute an estimated 30% in the form of production, while CCD's support accounts for 10% of Aharam's budget.

Diversification is another key to sustainability, as it permits the rotation of limited working capital in community enterprises at



**Table 1: Funding and replication sites**

<i>Funding organization</i>	<i>States and Union Territories</i>
Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)	Orissa
Ford Foundation	Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Lakshadweep, Karnataka, Orissa, Tamil Nadu
Tata Trust	Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Tamil Nadu
UNDP-implemented Global Environment Facility (GEF) Small Grants Programme (SGP)	Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand
Leadership for Environment and Development India (LEAD)	Nicobar Islands
Oxfam	All of the above locations

Source: Covenant Centre for Development, 2011

different times of the year. For instance, millet is grown during the monsoon season, coir is harvested during the winter, as it absorbs moisture and is therefore unworkable during the monsoon, and mangoes are picked in the summer.

## REPLICATION

The success of Aharam's eco-enterprise model has motivated many rural development donors to fund its replication in other biodiversity rich and poverty-stricken regions of India. CCD has been asked to develop the capacity of local community groups to implement small-scale sustainable businesses along the lines of Aharam's producer groups. These replication efforts have involved training in community organization, technical skills, financial linkages, and market access, and have also consisted of visits to Aharam's organic producer sites. One of these Ford Foundation-funded projects, Samudram Women's Federation of Orissa, was a UNDP Equator Prize 2010 awardee.

## PARTNERS

Donors such as the Ford Foundation, Miserere, Christian Aid, Oxfam and Tata Trust have played a role in Aharam's growth in Tamil Nadu. Progressive industry buyers such as Nadukkara Agro Processing Company, set up by the Kerala state government, have also been fundamental to growth in urban consumer markets. Nadukkara and Parle Agro have been the main buyers of mango pulp. Coir yarn has been sold to tea planter associations and traders.

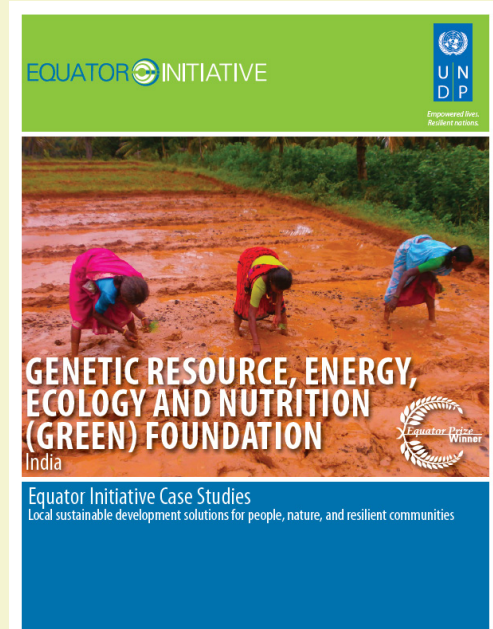
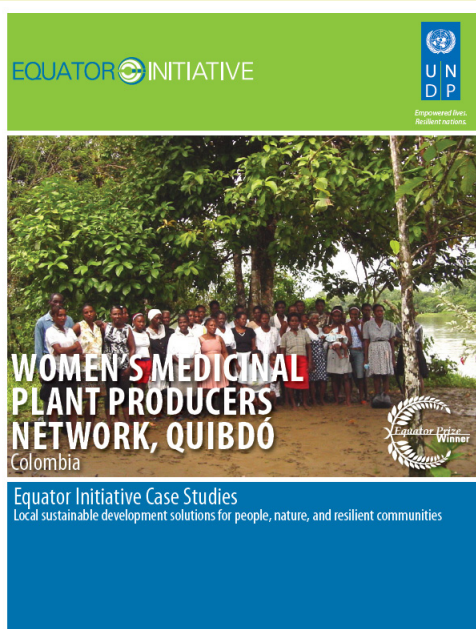
Various service providers have helped Aharam's work through the timely delivery of services such as transport and packaging. Media outlets have promoted the organization's work at different times, while training agencies have helped to develop the skills of producers. Local traders have assisted through purchasing Aharam's excess stock, or supplying raw materials when Aharam farmers' produce was in shortage.



## FURTHER REFERENCE

- Covenant Centre for Development website <http://www.ccdgroups.org/index.php>

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