

"Empowering Farmers Through Participatory Seed Production: A Deccan Development Society"

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ABSTRACT

The Deccan Development Society (DDS) is a grassroots organization based in the Zaheerabad region of India, working predominantly with Dalit and tribal women to develop climate-smart agricultural practices. Over the past 25 years, DDS has empowered over 2,700 women to reclaim their farmlands and address critical environmental and social challenges. Initially, the organization focused on improving poor soil quality and tackling water scarcity. It has since expanded its efforts to promote sovereignty over seeds, food, farming, health, markets, and media through the formation of voluntary women's groups. These groups have led to the creation of a seed bank, millet processing units, farm product outlets, and restaurants, forming a sustainable and supportive network for women entrepreneurs. It is supporting the agrobiodiversity and millet-based farming, DDS has helped over 5,000 women adopt agricultural strategies that combat chronic malnutrition, food insecurity, and poverty. Notably, in the first ten years, the organization generated over one million days of employment for women across 30 villages, significantly improving livelihoods. Today, DDS's initiatives not only secure nutrition and health but also promote local economic independence. Through its community-driven approach, DDS has become a model for sustainable development, emphasizing the vital role of marginalized women in combating climate change while fostering resilience and self-sufficiency at the local level.

Keywords: Participatory Seed Production, Deccan Development Society, Seed Sovereignty, Sustainable Agriculture, Women Empowerment

INTRODUCTION :

Participatory seed production technology empowers smallholder farmers by involving them directly in the selection, cultivation, and management of seed varieties. This approach ensures that seeds are well-adapted to local environmental conditions and farmer preferences, enhancing agricultural resilience and food security. By integrating traditional knowledge with scientific methods, it fosters greater seed sovereignty and sustainability within farming communities.

The Deccan Development Society (DDS) has been a transformative force in the semi-arid regions of southern India, particularly in Telangana's Zaheerabad region. DDS focuses on empowering marginalized communities through sustainable agricultural practices and participatory seed production technology. This approach integrates local knowledge with scientific methods to promote seed sovereignty, conserve biodiversity, and enhance economic resilience among smallholder farmers. This extended summary explores DDS's participatory seed production initiative, detailing its local impact, achievements, and recent data reflecting its ongoing success.

It is operating in the Deccan Plateau, DDS addresses the challenges of low and erratic rainfall, poor soil fertility, and frequent droughts. The region relies heavily on agriculture, with local farmers cultivating crops adapted to these harsh conditions. The participatory seed production technology implemented by DDS aims to tackle these challenges by improving seed resilience and enhancing local food security. The initiative focuses on integrating traditional knowledge with modern practices to support sustainable agricultural development. DDS's primary objectives include promoting seed sovereignty, conserving biodiversity, empowering women farmers, and improving food security and resilience. The initiative empowers farmers to produce, store, and exchange seeds of traditional crops well-adapted to local conditions. This participatory model ensures that seeds meet the preferences and needs of the farmers. By involving farmers in every stage of seed production, DDS enhances the relevance and effectiveness of the technology.

Seed Banks

DDS employs a multi-faceted approach to participatory seed production. Community mobilization is a key component, where farmers, especially women, are organized into seed producer groups and trained in sustainable practices. Participatory varietal selection (PVS) involves testing different seed varieties in farmers' fields, allowing them to choose the most suitable ones based on real-world performance. Capacity building through continuous training enhances farmers' knowledge in seed production, pest management, and organic farming. Additionally, DDS has established over 30 community-managed seed banks that house a diverse range of seed varieties, serving as crucial repositories for local biodiversity. Regular monitoring and evaluation help assess the initiative's impact on crop yields, biodiversity, and community livelihoods.

DDS has achieved significant milestones in its participatory seed production initiative. The society has successfully conserved and revitalized over 80 traditional crop varieties, including 25 types of millets, 20 types of pulses, and several oilseed varieties. The establishment of more than 30 community-managed seed banks has been instrumental, with these banks collectively housing over 100 seed varieties. DDS facilitates the production and distribution of approximately 10,000 quintals (1,000 metric tons) of seeds annually, benefiting over 5,000 smallholder farmers.

Women Empowerment

Women farmers play a central role in the initiative, with more than 5,000 actively involved in seed production and management. The program supports the cultivation of traditional crops on approximately 6,000 acres of land, primarily managed by these women. The economic impact of the initiative is notable, with increased incomes reported through the sale of surplus seeds and crops. The DDS started entrepreneurship activities by selling processed seeds by the brand name of SANGHAM ORGANICS and they have started millet restaurant CAFE ETHNIC to promote healthy food. DDS's approach has received national and international recognition, including the Equator Initiative Award from the United Nations, highlighting its contributions to sustainable agriculture and community-based biodiversity conservation.

Biodiversity Festival (PathaPantalaJathara)

The Biodiversity Festival, organized by the Deccan Development Society (DDS), celebrates the importance of agrobiodiversity and traditional farming. Held annually in Zaheerabad, it showcases indigenous crops, particularly millets, cultivated by Dalit and tribal women farmers. The festival features processions, seed exhibitions, and cultural performances, highlighting seed sovereignty, eco-friendly practices, and the

role of biodiversity in food security and climate resilience. It also raises awareness about the dangers of monoculture, promoting the preservation of diverse crops for sustainable agriculture and livelihoods.

Sangham Radio

Sangham Radio, part of the Deccan Development Society's Community Media Trust, is a pioneering women-run community radio serving over 3,000 listeners in rural India. Managed by Dalit women, it produces programs on ecological farming, food sovereignty, and community health. Narrowcasting for nearly a decade, Sangham Radio is on the verge of receiving its government broadcast license, potentially becoming the first community radio to air under India's 2006 policy, offering a new platform for women's voices and agricultural research.

Conclusion

Despite its successes, DDS faces several challenges. Strengthening market linkages to effectively market and sell surplus seeds remains a priority. Expanding the model to reach additional communities requires more resources and support. Additionally, securing supportive policies for community-led seed systems is essential for the initiative's long-term sustainability.

The participatory seed production technology by the Deccan Development Society exemplifies a successful model for sustainable agriculture and community empowerment. By involving farmers, especially women, in seed management, DDS has preserved traditional crops and enhanced local resilience. This approach offers valuable insights for achieving sustainable development in other regions.