Women farmers lead the way: pathways for climate resilient farming

Report on Agroecology Programme in Yavatmal district, October 2024 to October 2025

Background

Over the past year, the Agroecology Programme has entered a phase of growth and reflection. After four years of steady engagement, the focus has now shifted from introducing new ideas to strengthening systems that ensure local sustainability and resilience.

Women farmers across five districts of Maharashtra - Akola, Beed, Hingoli, Parbhani, and Yavatmal are now leading by example. They are testing new practices, saving their own seeds that support both livelihoods and ecological balance.

Through regular field-based learning, peer-to-peer exchanges, and collective discussions, we have seen that the programme has brought about a positive change on women's farms, in their diets in their knowledge and understanding of soil health, biodiversity, and self-reliant farming. Moreover, it has built confidence in them since they are collectivised.

The programme

The programme is being implemented in the five districts of Maharashtra – Beed, Hingoli, Parbhani, Akola and Yavatmal. The programme is being implemented in collaboration with Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch (MAKAAM).

Ms Niranjana Maru of Chetana Vikas, Wardha provides knowledge inputs to the programme.

The programme is supported through a pool of resources. In 2025-26, the programme was supported through People for Progress in India (PPI), American Jewish World Service (AJWS), and Bharat Agroecology Fund (BAF).

Scope of the programme

In its fifth year, the programme supports 236 women farmers practicing self-reliant, agroecology-based farming across drought-prone districts of Maharashtra. Of these, 59 women from Yavatmal are supported through the PPI grant. These women are actively demonstrating sustainable practices like mixed cropping, soil health improvement, and seed saving serving as examples for others in their communities to adopt self-reliant farming.

District	Block	Village	Total
Akola	1	6	50
Beed	1	2	42
Hingoli	2	3	50
Parbhani	2	4	35
Yavatmal	2	8	59
Total	**8**	**23**	**236**

Learnings

New Tools and games

New participatory tools were introduced in the agroecology training sessions to help women farmers better understand the agroecology model and the importance of mixed farming. These tools encouraged interactive learning, enabling farmers to visualize farm diversity, crop interlinkages, and soil–water–biodiversity relationships, thereby deepening their practical understanding of sustainable and resilient farming systems.

In addition**,** interactive games such as *"*Identify the Wild Uncultivated Vegetables*"* and *"*Sequence the Farming Tasks*"* were introduced to make learning more engaging and experiential. Many wild vegetables have disappeared from local diets, but through this programme, women farmers are bringing them back. To highlight this important revival, the Wild Uncultivated Vegetables game was created, helping others recognise their nutritional and ecological value. These games fostered participation, strengthened learning, and deepened appreciation for women's ecological knowledge.

Block-Level Trainings

Through our experience, we realised that many women farmers needed more accessible and locally relevant training opportunities to better understand agroecology (AE) principles and the importance of mixed farming. This learning led us to start block-level trainings in all programme districts Akola, Beed, Hingoli, Parbhani, and Yavatmal.

These locally organised sessions had two main objectives. First, to reach women who could not travel to Wardha for earlier trainings. Second, to conduct the sessions just before the sowing season so that participants could immediately apply AE practices in their fields. The impact of this change has been very positive — the block-level format encouraged greater participation, deeper discussions, and stronger connections among women farmers.

The primary goal was to ensure that every participant clearly understood agroecology principles, farming patterns, and their relevance in local contexts. The specific objectives were:

- To explain agroecology principles in simple, local language
- To build women's confidence in using eco-friendly, low-cost farming methods
- To encourage learning through stories, hands-on activities, and demonstrations
- To strengthen the network of Champion Women Farmers at the block level

Champion Women Farmers played a key role by sharing their experiences and practical insights. They explained important AE practices such as the logic behind mixed cropping, border crops, and natural pest management. The confidence and clarity with which women articulated scientific reasoning behind their farming choices reflected the strong impact of these trainings.

For example, a woman farmer from Yavatmal described her sowing pattern in detail — explaining how cowpea helps control pests in moong, how pigeon pea acts as a bird halt, and how nitrogen-fixing crops like moong and urad enrich the soil naturally. Another farmer spoke about the importance of biomass, comparing soil nourishment to human nutrition and highlighting how organic manure provides all 13 essential nutrients to the soil.

These examples show that women farmers are not just implementing agroecological practices but are deeply understanding and internalising them. Overall, the block-level trainings emerged as one of the most effective learning models of the programme deepening understanding, improving participation, and strengthening women's confidence to take forward agroecological work in their villages.

Chetana Vikas farm visit

During the summer March 2025some women farmers received training on self-reliant farming. However, we realised that when women see these practices directly on a farm, the learning becomes much more practical and impactful.

To strengthen this understanding, newly joined women farmers who started self-reliant farming for the first time this year visited Chetana Vikas Sanstha farm. The main aim was to help them observe mixed farming practices and other sustainable methods being implemented on the farm. A total of 11 women from Yavatmal participated in this visit.

Achievements

Seed Saving for Self-Reliant Farming

Women farmers from Yavatmal have successfully preserved their own seeds for this year. Since the beginning of the agroecology programme, continuous discussions have been held with the women on the importance of seed saving. As a result, this year they have retained seeds from the crops they cultivated themselves. Before sowing, the women also conducted germination tests of these preserved seeds to ensure their quality. This marks a significant step towards strengthening self-reliant and sustainable farming practices.

Ranbhaji Utsav – Festival of uncultivated vegetables

In Yavatmal district, women farmers from Varud village organised a uncultivated vegetables Festival (Ranbhaji Mahotsav) under the agroecology programme. They invited students and teachers from the local Zilla Parishad Primary School to introduce them to local biodiversity, traditional food systems, and the value of wild and farm-grown vegetables.

Women farmers displayed a wide variety of wild uncultivated vegetables from their own farms, explaining their characteristics, nutritional benefits, and how these plants naturally grow on their fields. Through these interactions, they also spoke about self-reliant farming and its importance.

To build on this learning, students from classes 5 and 6 visited the farm of Champion Woman Farmer Chanda Ghodam, where they observed diverse crops and sustainable farming practices.

Exchange visit

In Yavatmal, Champion Women Farmers led exchange visits within their village where women farmers visited each other's farms to observe sowing patterns, crop growth, and overall farming practices. During the visit to Vanita Tai's farm in Tirzada, the women observed that her sesame crop was too dense. They suggested thinning the plants and replanting them in empty spaces. Vanita Tai had also used the ridge and furrow method this year, which effectively prevented waterlogging during heavy rains and kept the crop healthy. Impressed by these results, other women farmers decided to adopt this method in the next season.

In Bhulgad village, Vibha Mangi had faced damage to her moong crop caused by wild boar. The other women suggested that she should replant moong between the cotton rows so that the cotton crop could benefit from the nutrients provided by the moong.

These exchange visits encouraged reflection and learning helping women compare practices, identify challenges, and find collective solutions. Each woman shared her experiences, making the visits a strong space for peer learning, problem-solving, and collective growth**.**

Activities so far

State Convention

In December 2024, a three-day state-level workshop was held in Pune with participation of 70 women farmers and representatives of partner organisations. The workshop focused on reviewing the program's progress and planning for the future. Key activities included district-wise group discussions, farm visits by champion women for knowledge sharing, and sessions on economic models, marketing of agroecology produce, and soil health with a focus on composting. Based on expert inputs, a program for the 2025 Kharif season was outlined, which included identifying and deepening in two villages per district where the numbers of women would be increased. SOPPECOM is also committed to developing awareness materials to support the outreach of the program.

Additionally, the film ‘One Seed at a Time,’ showcasing the transformation in the farm and lives of women participating in agroecology self-reliant farming, was screened, followed by a discussion. This film features two women from Yavatmal, Chandatai Ghodam and Neelima Renghe. One of the key successes of the workshop was the exhibition and sale of the women farmers farm produce. They brought leafy vegetables, pulses, and products such as lentils, flour, spices, papads etc. The women collectively earned ₹27,000 from the one-day sale.

Champion Women Farmers Step into Leadership

In this program, a total of 14 women farmers are champions in five districts. Five are from Yavatmal. In February, a special meeting was held with the Champion Women Farmers**.** The meeting focused on their roles and responsibilities, such as: Actively participating in meetings and trainings, and sharing knowledge with other women, awareness and promoting self-reliant farming at the village level, and supporting new women to join the programme.

To take this work forward, the Champion Women Farmers prepared their own action plans**,** that include summer farm visits to check manure quality, awareness meetings with local stakeholders, informal dabba parties to exchange farming experiences, regular follow-ups with women farmers, and peer learning visits.

As part of their action plan, some Champion Women Farmers were visited other women's farms to check whether manure was applied properly. They also supported women farmers in identifying good-quality manure. They hold a meeting at the village level to inform women farmers of block-level training. Organised wild uncultivated vegetable festival and the exchange visits. Through these hands-on efforts, the Champion Women Farmers are emerging as strong pillars of the programme, ensuring that agroecological practices are followed on the ground and helping the work grow within

Training of new women farmers

A four-day residential training was held in March 2025 at Chetana Vikas, Wardha, with 45 women farmers from different districts participating. The training focused on key agroecological concepts, including soil health, root systems, soil and water management, mixed cropping, the role of pulse crops, natural fertilisers, seeds, and pest control.

Seeing agroecological practices in action on the Chetana Vikas demonstration farms helped the women connect theory with practice. Each woman participant created a detailed map of her own farm to identify specific issues related to soil and water management. This exercise helped them think practically about the changes needed on their own farm, in pre sowing and during sowing.

Direct support

Direct support of manure and seeds has been provided to 59 women farmers from Yavatmal. Nine women farmers are new this year; they were encouraged to apply manure themselves. Like every year, the seed kit includes a mix of cash crops (non-BT cotton/ soybean), food crops, vegetables, and plants.

Monitoring

Like last year, a monthly diary system was used to track progress and outcomes on selected farms. Data was collected by coordinators using a mobile app to ensure accuracy and consistency. This system enabled regular monitoring and provided reliable insights into on-ground changes, helping us analyse the impact and learning from each farm's experience.

Field Visit and Review of Progress

Niranjana Maru (Chetana Vikas), along with members of SOPPECOM, visited a few sample fields and held meetings with women farmers to review the ongoing agroecology work.

During the field visit, the team observed the farms and noted how much the Champion Women Farmers have learned and progressed over the years. After four years of continuous experimentation on that plot, the visit focused on identifying visible changes in crop diversity, productivity, and resilience, and on discussing areas where water and soil management could be improved.

In the meetings, data from the previous year was shared and discussed with the women. Together, they reviewed the results to understand the income earned from agroecology (AE) farms, reflected on their progress, and shared ideas to strengthen their work further.

Monthly Meetings – Staying Connected and Moving Forward

Regular monthly meetings are held with district coordinators to follow up on ongoing work, address challenges, and plan next steps. In addition, calls and check-ins are conducted with Champion Women Farmers to understand how activities are progressing on the ground.
These meetings and conversations play a crucial role in keeping the programme on track. They not only help us gather updates but also provide insights that inform future planning. This continuous feedback loop ensures timely support, encourages problem-solving, and strengthens the collective momentum of the programme.

Other activities of the agroecology programme

Here are some of the activities that have been done as part of SOPPECOM's work around agroecology:

Participation in National Coalition for Natural Farming (NCNF)

NCNF is a national coalition of organisations working towards promoting agroecology based farming in India. NCNF and MAKAAM co-convened a national-level conference in August to initiate a dialogue on a women and agroecology roadmap. To take this process forward, a final workshop was held on 29–30 January 2025.

We participated in this workshop, which brought together civil society organisations, researchers, and network members from MAKAAM, NCNF, and RRAN. We shared

our experiences related to women's empowerment, gender discrimination, and the potential of agroecology to address these challenges.

Cultivating futures: a multimedia exhibition

Cultivating Futures: A multimedia exhibition based on the experiences of women farmers was held in Pune from 21st to 23th March 2025. This event was more than a display of photos and films, it was a space where rural women's voices, stories, and innovations came alive for urban audiences.

The programme unfolded over three days, combining exhibitions with thematic discussions and cultural performances: -

1)21st March**:** The exhibition was inaugurated by women farmers from Punjab and Maharashtra. The inauguration was followed by a panel discussion on "Organising Women Farmers amid Agrarian Distress"**.**

2)22nd March**:** A vibrant cultural evening featured poetry by Kalpana Dudhal, selected stories from the book *Pushkala* – The Plentiful were also read out, followed by open conversations with the women whose stories were featured. And the documentary One Seed at a Time was screened during the event. After the film, the audience had a chance to share their thoughts and interact with the women farmers who were part of the film.

3)23rd March**:** Senior journalist and PARI founder P. Sainath delivered a keynote talk on "Women Farmers and Their Work" powerfully addressing the structural invisibility of women in agriculture and calling for urgent policy recognition and support.

One section of the exhibition highlighted the agroecology programme. This part included powerful photographs of their self-reliant farms, along with short narratives about their journeys and experiences. Also, one of the key attractions was an interactive game. Two games were designed to help visitors understand the women's work interactively:

- Identify the Wild Vegetables **-** introduced visitors to uncultivated vegetables that women farmers are bringing back through their farming.
- Sequence the Farming Tasks **-** helped people learn about the different steps in farming through play.

Both games received a great response, especially from urban visitors, many of whom were encountering this knowledge for the first time. During the wild vegetable game**,** it became evident how disconnected many middle-class participants were from local food cultures, and they struggled to identify the vegetables or recall their names. older visitors recalled eating these greens in their childhood, but remarked, "*These vegetables are no longer seen in the markets.*" Younger participants, on the other hand, were unfamiliar with many of the names altogether. Women farmers responded proudly, explaining not only the names of the greens but also their farming practices, nutritional value, medicinal importance and recipes.

These interactive moments sparked rich conversations. For instance, when a visitor failed to recognise *phodshi* or *chaakwat, etc*, a woman farmer shared how these wild greens, once staples, had nearly vanished from diets but were now being revived through agroecological practices. Recipes were shared on the spot, and visitors eagerly noted them down, expressing surprise at how nutrient-rich and accessible these foods were.

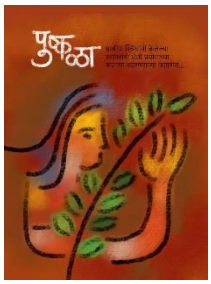
The exhibition received an enthusiastic response, with over 300 visitors engaging with the artworks, discussions, and film screenings.

Women Farmers: Identity, Resilience, Transformation – a three-day national conference by MAKAAM

This three-day national event was held in May 2025 in Pune, which was attended by around 500 participants – women farmers, activists, and members from civil society and academia. As part of the conference, a panel and parallel session on “Feminist Approaches to Agroecology” were organised, addressing the gendered challenges in dominant farming systems and highlighting agroecology as a feminist, ecological, and political alternative. Women farmers from across India shared strategies and experiences rooted in justice and sustainability. A major highlight was the “Seeding Futures” Seed Fair, where over 20 groups from across India showcased the diversity of seeds and agroecological practices.

Publications

Case Stories



As mentioned last year, we documented the inspiring stories of 12 women farmers practicing the self-reliant farming model based on agroecological principles. These stories highlight their struggles, successes, and innovative approaches to sustainable farming.
Now compiled and published as a booklet titled *Pushkala (The Plentiful)*, the collection amplifies their voices and inspires more women to adopt self-reliant farming. The booklet also serves as a valuable resource for learning, sharing experiences, and celebrating the crucial role of women in transforming farming practices.

Documentary film

As part of our outreach and documentation efforts, we produced a documentary film titled *One Seed at a Time*. The film captures the experiences of women farmers practising Self Reliant farming, highlighting their challenges, resilience, and successes in transforming themselves, their farms and communities. It showcases how they navigate gender norms and caste and patriarchal barriers while adopting sustainable farming practices. This documentary serves as a call to action to inspire more women to join the movement and to engage policymakers, stakeholders, and the broader community in discussions about sustainable agriculture. The link of the film is given below.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbC4JYIHq44

Final comments

The agroecology based self-reliant farming program has transformed the lives of women farmers, extending beyond sustainable farming practices to support food and nutrition security, redefine gender roles and social norms, and advance land ownership among women. Over the years, women have embraced agroecology not just as an alternative farming method but as a means to reclaim control over their livelihoods, knowledge systems, and community relationships.

Change in women's confidence- collectivisation

As we update from last year one of the programme's most important achievement is the strong collectivization among women farmers. Over the course of the programme, there has been a visible change in women farmers' confidence and sense of collectivisation. Earlier, many women were hesitant to take independent farming decisions, but now they speak with assurance. We will do this self-reliant farming ourselves.

Women farmers are also transforming their communities by challenging and breaking barriers of gender/patriarchy. Neelima, from Zadgaon, Yavatmal whose husband died by suicide, had to fight her in-laws to take control of her land. At first, they doubted her farming skills, but when she improved the farm using agroecological methods, they began to respect her abilities.

Change on farms

Women who have participated in the programme for the last 3-4 years have noticed significant changes in their farm. They have observed that the soil texture is more fertile and soft, making it easier for weeding. It also retains more moisture, and this change is also reflected in the standing crops. For example, this year, Anita Tai from Yavatmal shared that she noticed a number of earthworms along the bunds of her field. She said, "I now worry that our working in the field might harm them. I haven't seen so many earthworms in my farm for years.

Change in diets- food and nutrition diversity

Women now grow a diverse range of crops, ensuring a richer and more nutritious diet for their families. Many shared that they would have never bought such a variety of vegetables from market. The presence of naturally growing uncultivated vegetables on their farms has further strengthened their household food security and dietary diversity.

This crop diversity is also reflected in their daily meals. Women proudly shared that earlier they would buy very little green gram in a year, but now, with their own production, they often prepare *khichdi* and other dishes. A similar change was seen with vegetables—earlier, they would hesitate to buy them due to limited availability or cost, but now, growing them on their own has increased both access and consumption. Many women also spoke with pride about sharing vegetables from their farms with neighbours, relatives, and friends.

Change in knowledge and understanding

Over time, there has been a notable shift in women farmers' knowledge and understanding of agroecology-based self-reliant farming. They are now not only practicing agroecological methods but also understanding the science and purpose behind them. Women can confidently explain why crops like green gram are important — how they enrich the soil with nitrogen, improve soil fertility, and support sustainable farming.

Women have also developed a clear understanding of the importance of crop residues. Earlier, they used to burn crop residues or discard weeding waste along the farm borders, but now they plan to reuse them to improve soil health.

For example, Chanda Ghodam has started making compost from crop residues. She shared that this compost has improved her soil's texture and fertility, and she finds earth warm in the farm. These practices reduce her dependence on chemical inputs and help her move closer to self-reliant farming.

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30/10/25