

BOLANGIR – Livelihoods, Agriculture & Food Security

CASE STUDY: A Farmers' Committee goes organic

One group of farmers in rural Bolangir district, Odisha, are making a brave experiment. They are turning away from cash-crop cultivation and back to traditional methods of organic, sustainable agriculture.

About a decade or so ago, swathes of farmers across India began farming crops that were apparently an attractive, easy income option. Big multi-national companies, such as Monsanto, offer seeds, pesticides and chemical fertilisers, drawing thousands of indebted farmers into their cultivation methods. In Bolangir district, fields that were once covered in a rich range of plants, mostly for local food production, are now full of clones of the same crops. Stretching into the hazy, humid horizon is a sea of genetically modified cotton.

Yet, over time, local communities have witnessed the productivity of the land reducing, soil erosion, pesticide-related health issues and food shortages. Because less rice is being produced locally, farmers are forced to buy it where they had earlier produced enough to feed themselves year-round. Food security has been further exacerbated because the farmers are vulnerable to the fluctuations of the open market for the sale of their cotton, making their incomes insecure. Adding to this strain are the noticeable changes in climate over the past few decades, with increasingly erratic rains, decreasing water levels and changes in crop and animal diseases.

RCDC has been working in Maral since 1996 on land and water management. Prior to RCDC's partnership with the village, the farmers were not aware of the government schemes they are entitled to. RCDC linked them with the Horticulture Department, who provided each farmer with three years' support, which they have used to convert to organic mixed-cropping. The Horticulture Mission has also supported them with training, and its representatives have attended village meetings, on top of the financial support. A Food Security Committee was set up in the village in 2002, with RCDC's help, to prioritise and provide linkages to the government.

The farmers who received the grants have purchased mango trees, seeds, boundaries and other essential items to help them convert successfully. Out of 30 farmers in the village who were cultivating cash crops, 19 have now converted to mixed cropping. They're growing various pulses and mangoes.

In order to improve the productivity of their rice paddies, many of these farmers have adopted a method introduced to them by RCDC. Systematic Rice Intensification (SRI) is a simple and cost-free way of increasing the output of rice production. It has been working in Maral village with great results, according to the farmers.

Using mixed-cropping and organic fertilisers, the land is better nourished and productivity will remain steady. This method also promises to make these farmers better equipped to cope with the gradual effects of climate change. When asked if they are pleased with the change, these farmers smile and nod excitedly. For a one-time investment they are confident their futures are more secure than their peers who are stuck in cotton farming. They now have food to eat, rather than cotton to sell, and they can make some profit from any surplus they take to market.

Although the change is slow, more and more farmers are hearing of the work RCDC has done in this area and are interested in learning more about mixed-cropping and its successes. In an area of around 42 acre, the fields no longer look like a sea of monoculture cotton – it's now interspersed by patchwork squares of fields full of vibrant, organic pulses and trees.
