KERALA KANI COMMUNITY WELFARE TRUST
India

Equator Initiative Case Studies
Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities
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.
PROJECT SUMMARY

The Kerala Kani Community Welfare Trust is the result of an innovative partnership between a community of the indigenous Kani people, based in the Western Ghats, Kerala, and a private institute that has developed a medicinal product using local genetic resources and traditional knowledge. The discovery of the medicinal qualities of the Arogyapacha plant (*Trichopus zeylanicus*) was based on its local use for its anti-fatigue properties.

A long process of phytochemical, ethno-pharmacological and toxicological research by a local research institute led to the development of a herbal formulation for use in the production of a licensed herbal drug called ‘Jeevani’. Revenues from the license to manufacture the drug and royalties from its sale have been divided between the institute and the Kani community; these funds formed the basis of the trust, established in 1997 to oversee their reinvestment in community welfare projects.

KEY FACTS

EQUATOR PRIZE WINNER: 2002

FOUNDED: 1997

LOCATION: Western Ghats, Kerala

BENEFICIARIES: Indigenous Kani tribe

BIODIVERSITY: *Trichopus zeylanicus*

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India’s indigenous Kani tribe comprises traditionally nomadic communities that have settled in the forests of the Agasthyamalai hills of the Western Ghats, in the Thiruvananthapuram district of Kerala. This area falls within the Agasthyamalai Biosphere Reserve, established in 2001, which covers 3,500km² of moist deciduous forests, montane rain forests and shola forest in the Western Ghats. It is habitat to more than 2,000 varieties of medicinal plants, of which at least 50 are rare and endangered species. Rare animals include the tiger, Asian Elephant, and the Nilgiri Tahr, an endangered Ibex endemic to Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

The Kani tribe of the Western Ghats

The Kani tribe’s traditional occupations include the production of handicrafts such as baskets, mats, and cane works, seasonal collection of minor forest products such as honey and beeswax, and cultivation of edible plants such as tapioca, banana, millets and cash crops such as pepper, coconut, rubber, Areca nut, and cashew nut. The traditional structure of the community was that of a highly coordinated unit under the control of a tribal chief, called the Moottukani. Traditionally the Moottukani combined the roles of the law giver, protector and dispenser of justice, physician and priest. Over time, however, this traditional system of governance was replaced to a large extent by the Panchayati Raj system of devolved village administration. Today, the Kanis live in several tribal hamlets, each consisting of 10 to 20 families disbursed in and around the forest areas of Thiruvananthapuram district.

A local miracle cure: Arogyapacha

In the late 1980s, this tribe received international attention for their traditional use of a unique medicinal plant. The tribe had long known of the anti-fatigue properties of the Arogyapacha plant (Trichopus zeylanicus), eaten by tribe members during long treks in the hilly Western Ghats region. Traditional knowledge of the use of local medicinal plants was passed from generation to generation by tribal healers. In December 1987, a team of scientists from the Tropical Botanical Garden and Research Institute, a centre for plant research in Kerala, undertook a botanical field survey into the forests of the Western Ghats, accompanied by men from the local Kani tribe. They observed the men eating fruits which kept them energetic and agile; the team were later offered these Arogyapacha fruits during arduous trekking and found that they gave them renewed energy and strength.

Trichopus zeylanicus is a small, rhizomatous, perennial herb distributed in Sri Lanka, Southern India and Malaysia. Found in lowland sandy forests near streams in Sri Lanka and in low-lying forests in the Malay Peninsula, in India it grows at an altitude of around 1,000 metres. The subspecies found in India is called trichopus zeylanicus travancoricus, and is endemic to the Western Ghats. Scientific investigations on the plant were carried out at the Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute, revealing that the plant had anti-stress and anti-fatigue properties, and could benefit the liver and the immune system. After seven years of phytochemical, ethno-pharmacological and toxicological research, twelve active compounds had been isolated and used to produce a standardised herbal formulation. This was used in the production of a licensed herbal drug called “Jeevani”, with the profits shared equally between the research institute and the Kani tribe. License to manufacture the drug was subsequently sold to Arya Vaidya Pharmacy, a private limited company, for an initial period of seven years. The license fee – one million rupees, or approximately USD 50,000 – was split equally between the research institute and the Kanis, who also received an equal share of the two per cent royalty received from sales. Between 2002, when the initial license expired, and 2005, the trust received six donations totalling Rs. 60,000 from the Tropical Botanical Garden and Research Institute. Since 2005, the trust has not received any further compensation for the use of the plant.

Access and benefit-sharing in practice

Knowledge of the plant’s medicinal properties was shared by many Kani groups living around Thiruvananthapuram, however, while the benefit-sharing arrangement agreed only included one Kani tribal group. This led to protests from other groups, and initially delayed the full distribution of monetary benefits. As a means of solving this problem and involving the wider Kani community, in 1997 the Kerala Kani Samudaya Kshema Trust was created (Samudaya means “community”; Kshema means “welfare”). This was comprised of a general body with adult tribal members chosen from 30 Kani settlements, an executive committee representing all of the tribal colonies, and a fourteen-member governing council. The aim of the trust was to ensure that the benefits from sales of the Jeevani drug would be equitably shared within the Kani community. To this end, the capital amount was held in a fixed bank deposit, with the interest accruing used for various community development programmes.
Impacts

Welfare programmes planned and implemented by the Kani trust have included an insurance scheme for pregnant women and to cover accidental deaths, and in providing financial support to poorer Kani households for education and marriage purposes. Funds were also used to purchase a vehicle for use by the trust.

**Sustainable cultivation of Arogyapacha**

A scheme was also put in place to sustainably harvest the Arogyapacha plant in its natural habitat, using local labour from the Kani tribe. To prevent overexploitation of the plant for commercial gain, a system was devised in conjunction with the Kerala Forest Department that paid Kani households to cultivate the plant and sell the leaves to the Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute. This ensured the sustainable use of the natural resource, while the sale of leaves would also give the Kanis an extra source of income.

A pilot scheme for cultivation of the plant was carried out with support from India’s Integrated Tribal Development Programme in areas surrounding the reserved forests from 1994 to 1996. Under this programme, fifty families were given around Rs. 2,000 (USD 40) each for cultivating the plant. The Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute purchased five tonnes of these leaves per month from the families and supplied them to Arya Vaidya Pharmacy for production of Jeevani. Through this scheme, roughly half the Kanis secured employment and were trained on in-situ cultivation and harvesting of Arogyapacha to ensure that the plants were not over-harvested. This has been complemented by ex-situ cultivation conducted by the Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute, ensuring that this medicinal plant has been sustainably conserved.

**A case study for Article 8(j)**

This benefit-sharing agreement gained international recognition as an example of equitably sharing the benefits arising from the sustainable use of genetic resources, one of the three objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

The Kerala Kani Samudaya Kshema Trust is a case study of an access and benefit-sharing regime at the local level, and has demonstrated both the challenges to implementation of this idea, and its potential to positively impact local communities.

The lack of one cohesive Kani “community” has meant that there is still little uniformity in Kanis’ perceptions of the benefit-sharing agreement. Tribal groups in different areas of Thiruvanathapuram district, even at distances of around 15 to 20 km from each other, were found to have differing opinions on the role of the Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute in the late 1990s. There were complaints from the Vithura and Peringamala Panchayat areas, where tribal groups claimed to have been under-represented in dealings with the research institute. It has also been claimed that monetary benefits have been slow to reach community members, while lack of transparency in the running of the trust and bureaucratic obstructions have hampered its effectiveness: funds from the sale of the trust’s vehicle were not accounted for, for instance.

Various measures have been proposed to refine the benefit-sharing model and future replications. These include ensuring that the prior informed consent of all relevant local and indigenous community members is obtained for access to biological resources on their lands and use of their traditional knowledge. Other recommendations have covered the scope of the material being accessed, including derivatives obtained from it, and their intended use. While the Kerala Kani Samudaya Kshema Trust remains an experiment in its access and benefit-sharing provisions, it still represents one of the only examples to date of an indigenous tribe benefitting from the use of their genetic resources and traditional knowledge, bringing substantial conservation and socioeconomic benefits to the Kani tribe and their natural heritage.

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**Article 8(j) of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD):**

“Each contracting Party shall, as far as possible and as appropriate:

Subject to national legislation, respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and promote their wider application with the approval and involvement of the holders of such knowledge, innovations and practices and encourage the equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of such knowledge innovations and practices.”

Source: CBD, [www.cbd.int/traditional](http://www.cbd.int/traditional)
FURTHER REFERENCE


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