SWAYAM SHIKSHAN PRAYOG (SSP)
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. The Equator Initiative aims to fill that gap.

The Equator Initiative, supported by generous funding from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), awarded the Equator Prize 2017 to 15 outstanding local community and indigenous peoples initiatives from 12 countries. The winners were recognized for their significant work to advance nature-based solutions for sustainable development in marine, forest, grassland, dryland and wetland ecosystems. Selected from 806 nominations from across 120 countries, the winners were celebrated at a gala event in New York, coinciding with Global Goals Week and the 72nd Session of the UN General Assembly. Special emphasis was placed on scalable, nature-based solutions to address biodiversity conservation, climate change adaptation, disaster risk reduction, gender equality, land rights, and food and water security to reduce poverty, protect nature, and strengthen resilience.

The following case study is one in a growing series that describes vetted and peer-reviewed best practices intended to inspire the policy dialogue needed to scale nature-based solutions essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.
PROJECT SUMMARY

Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP) empowers grassroots women’s collectives to move from ‘Margin to Mainstream’. Over the past 20 years, SSP has built robust partnership ecosystems that support women-led entrepreneurship and leadership in sustainable development. SSP works in low-income, climate-threatened communities across India. Since 2009, SSP activities have reached over 5 million people, and empowered over 145,000 women to revitalize local and household economies. SSP has built a movement of grassroots women leaders who see opportunities in challenges such as agriculture, health, and water and sanitation. SSP’s engagement with a diverse range of partners has enabled grassroots women’s networks to develop their skills and access entrepreneurship, finance, technology, and marketing platforms. SSP has empowered women farmers and entrepreneurs to take leadership to fight climate change by ensuring food security, increasing incomes, creating jobs, boosting local economies, and advocating with government. As a result, grassroots women are no longer perceived as beneficiaries; instead they have emerged as partners in driving local initiatives and creating lasting impact.

KEY FACTS

Equator Prize Winner
2017

Founded
1998

Location
Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Bihar, Assam, and Odisha States in India

Beneficiaries
145,000 women

Areas of focus
Climate resilience, food security and agriculture, livelihoods, clean energy, health, water, sanitation

Sustainable Development Goals addressed

The designations employed and the presentation of material on this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations or UNDP concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.
BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reports 43 percent of the labour force in agriculture in developing countries are women. When we shift our focus to India female participation is even more. A Press Information Bureau (PIB) release states 79 percent of rural women in India are engaged in agriculture, as compared to only 63 percent of rural men.

In Maharashtra, there are only 93,000 marginal women farmers out of 539,000 total marginal farmers working on landholdings of one hectare or less. In case of small farmers operating on landholdings of between one to two hectares, the number of woman farmers further plummets to 54,000 as compared to 257,000 male small farmers. Small and marginal women farmers in Maharashtra hold 112,000 hectares of land out of a total of 695,000 hectares of land.

Located in central western India, the Marathwada region is a part of Maharashtra State, which is the third largest state in India and plays a major role in the country’s economy, both through industry and agriculture. The climate in the region is generally dry, with annual rainfall ranging from 675 to 950 millimetres. Because it has been repeatedly affected by lower rainfall and sustained drought since 2012, Marathwada is included in the Drought Prone Areas (DPA) of India.

In climate-threatened regions of Maharashtra, India, marginal farmers are at great risk and grow mostly cash crops such as soy and cotton, which require more water, chemical fertilisers, and pesticides. The result is long-term damage to their land, health, and the environment. Compounding this crisis are the few livelihood opportunities available outside of agriculture. In fact, the region is sadly notorious for its high rate of farmer suicides due to their failed crops and inability to pay agricultural loans.

Traditionally, women in this region, despite being actively engaged in agriculture, have been only considered as farm labour, with no decision making role in their farms and no support from government extension programmes targeted towards building the capacity of women farmers. To address these multiple issues, Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP) piloted its women-led climate resilient farming model starting in 2014, has upscaled it over the last few years. This project focused on women and their families from among the marginal and landless groups in the Marathwada region.

Origin and structure

Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP) is a leading learning organisation established in 1998 and based in Pune, India. Though formally launched in 1998, it drew strength from its early origins and learnings in a community-led reconstruction partnership after the Latur earthquake in 1993. The Latur crisis and reconstruction of houses gave local people the opportunity and impetus to mobilize rural women for large, community-centred efforts. These women were recognized as effective facilitators for the extensive reconstruction of infrastructure in the disaster-struck communities. In time, SSP mobilized these women into self-help groups. Leveraging the insights gained following the quake, SSP developed a replicable model for building women’s leadership in post-disaster reconstruction that was applicable in India as well as globally. Gradually, SSP honed their expertise in recovery and started creating models for building community resilience.

Through the years, SSP created large-scale programmes with the government that were aimed at development centred around women’s participation and leadership. SSP built a support system of village level networks of entrepreneurs – known as Sakhis, which means ‘friend’ – and social enterprises and that offered business skills, financial services and marketing and distribution opportunities. SSP encouraged these women to assume
larger leadership roles. Trained women leaders partnered with local governments and guided their communities towards resilient development, through new livelihood opportunities that increased household assets and incomes.

SSP’s unique approach is to carve out an opportunity for rural women to be repositioned as problem solvers and agents of change across high-impact sectors.

At present, SSP’s core focus areas are:

- Climate resilient farming
- Skill building and entrepreneurship
- Women’s leadership
- Clean energy
- Health, water, and sanitation

SSP has a well-defined governance structure, with a Governance Board made up of eight members and a council of advisors who meet on a quarterly basis. In addition, the organisation has a total of 104 staff supporting core programmes and functions. SSP’s senior leadership team consists of seven experienced members including the Executive Director, Associate Directors and programme managers across its various programme areas. Prema Gopalan, SSP’s founder and Executive Director, spearheaded SSP’s development across the poorest districts in Maharashtra in the 1990s and has played a key role in building the organisation into what it is today – a powerful force that impacts thousands of women in climate threatened regions.
The Marathwada region suffered from a five-year consecutive drought between 2012 and 2016. This was the longest dry spell in the history of the region and had rendered agriculture completely unviable, especially for the small and marginal farmers. In order to extract more profit with diminishing resources, farmers chose to grow crops with more chemical inputs, resulting in not just loss of incomes but also soil fertility in this belt.

Women farmers, who are often completely left out of the agriculture decision-making process, were faced with a double burden of risks due to climate change and the responsibility to provide food for the family. Despite being actively engaged in agriculture in this region, women are only considered as farm labour even on their own farms and have no decision-making roles regarding what to cultivate, in how many crop cycles, and which inputs to use, among other choices.

Additionally, in India, women are considered as caretakers of the family, with the result being that their own health is often neglected. Traditionally women and girls are the last to eat in the family.
LOCAL RESPONSES

Climate resilience, gender equality, and sustainable agriculture

In the context of drought, SSP has developed a multi-pronged farming approach to food and income security that positions women as farmers and decision-makers. This approach builds women's capacity to practice sustainable agriculture and water conservation with the aim of enhancing food and income security for marginal farming households.

In 2011, SSP partnered with Sri Ratan Tata Trust in Washim district to combat growing suicides in over 3,000 small farmer households cultivating soy and cotton. The main focus of this initiative was on sustainable agriculture practices and water conservation by formation of farmer groups assisted by village level cadres of Krushi Sakhis.

SSP was supported by the GFDRR-World Bank to explore climate resilient approaches for farming and livelihoods across 100 communities. This project allowed SSP to explore and innovate various models by training and unleashing cohorts of women agriculture and health leaders. The project also established a women’s federation-led Community Resilience Fund to fund grassroots innovations and enterprise in agriculture to reduce the impact of climate change in the States of Maharashtra, Tamilnadu and Bihar.

Insights from the above two projects established that empowerment, better health, and nutrition are linked closely to cultivating food crops, and that women farmers need to take the lead. Since 2014, the Marathwada region has faced continuous drought that has made farming unviable, creating intense food and income insecurity leading to migration. In this context, SSP promoted women’s leadership in nutrition-sensitive agriculture with improved access to food, livelihoods, health, and sanitation services for women and small farmer households in rural Maharashtra and Gujarat. SSP developed a set of farming practices and defined the criteria for adoption of the SSP model with the support of Misereor Germany.

Taking the opportunity to scale up the model, SSP is also implementing the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) initiative from 2016 to 2019 with the Government of Maharashtra to support over 21,000 women farmers to adopt improved agriculture practices across two districts in Maharashtra through a cadre of Community Resource persons, chosen from SSP’s cadres of agriculture leaders.

Sustainable farming and food security

In this drought-prone region, SSP has helped grassroots womens groups to introduce innovative practices like drought and flood resistant crops and to promote climate resilient farming through organic farming methods. This model promotes the use of the farmers’ own seeds, bio-pesticides, bio-fertilizers, vermicompost, and diverse crops (mixed and intercropping to increase crop production), which not only reduce the cost of farming and ensure food security for the household but also improve soil fertility. As a result, women farmers are taking up efforts in afforestation, increasing pasture land, and improving groundwater resources, among others.

One of the major objectives of this programme has been to improve the health and nutrition status of women in general and of adolescent girls and pregnant/lactating women in particular. Food security was threatened in the Marathwada region after five consecutive years of drought. Women here had neither the availability of good food nor enough information to make choices related to nutritious food. A key feature of this initiative was to completely switch from cash crops to mixed nutrition-rich crops such as vegetables, pulses, cereals, and millets, diversifying to between six and eight crops to increase their yields and crop cycles.

Through this programme, women are ensuring that their families, including girls and women, have access to nutritious food. They have also increased their own incomes by selling surplus food crops and undertaking other diverse businesses such as livestock rearing, dairy production, and seed processing.
**Women’s empowerment**

The most innovative aspect of this model is to put rural poor women who are treated as mere labour on the centre stage as farmers and decision-makers. This project seeks to empower and recognise rural women as farmers, as changemakers, and as mentors for innovation transfer and replication to scale-up the impact and outreach of the project in new areas.

This initiative focuses on women and their families from among the marginal and landless groups (possessing between zero and 1.6 hectares of land) in the Marathwada region. This initiative grants participating women land, usually starting with 0.2 to 0.4 hectares, on which they practice water-efficient, organic farming. Women lead the complete decision-making process regarding what to cultivate, what to sell, where to sell, and what to keep and eat, thus gaining control over income. In this context, SSP has pioneered a women-owned-and-managed seed fund to fuel climate smart agriculture and enterprise innovations.

**Water management**

In partnership with government agencies and agriculture universities, SSP provides farmers with information on water management and resources for infrastructure creation through recharging bore wells, desilting canals, building farm ponds and trenches, and planting trees. The organisation also promotes the use of water-efficient irrigation techniques such as drip irrigation and sprinklers instead of flood irrigation. These practices have led to improvement in the groundwater levels and soil fertility.

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### KEY IMPACTS

**Climate resilience, gender equality, and sustainable agriculture**

- SSP has empowered 48,000 women farmers in climate-resilient agricultural practices. These women are now active decision-makers in agriculture as well as their households and communities.
- Adoption of the model by women farmers’ households has resulted in annual income/savings of INR 35,000 (approximately US$497) per family due to consumption of food from their farms.
- The women-owned federation created by SSP has disbursed loans of INR 2.79 crores (approximately US$393,000) for water conservation structures and bio-farming.
- 300 water sources have been improved in 50 villages of the Osmanabad and Latur Districts through water-efficient techniques including building farm ponds, bunds, and recharge structures.
- There has been a 25 percent increase in crop yield due to the use of mixed cropping methods and organic inputs.
- Savings of 25 percent per crop per cycle have been achieved due to use of bio-inputs.
- 14,265 hectares of land are managed using organic methods of farming and water and soil conservation measures.

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**Women’s entrepreneurship and leadership**

Over the last decade, SSP has fostered a robust partnership ecosystem that builds skills and capacities of young girls for employability and for women as farmers and entrepreneurs. At the same time SSP’s training and mentorship team, usually successful business leaders, give back through supporting women to go to markets and banks, and negotiating terms jointly as networks.

The Women’s Initiative to Learn and Lead (WILL) acts as a very local ecosystem that is centred around WILL centres to improve women’s access to marketing and distribution platforms, social finance, and start-up capital and government programmes, which are much needed for women to succeed in underserved areas.
In the field of clean energy, for example, SSP partnered with BP Energy to co-design clean cookstoves with grassroots women, who became advocates of the cookstoves as a healthier and safer alternative to kerosene and firewood. Additionally, SSP has developed a network of rural women entrepreneurs for marketing renewable and solar energy products in their communities. These women have placed the issue of clean energy at the centre of community development by motivating and converting all households across six districts in Maharashtra and four districts in Bihar into clean-energy users. Through building women’s entrepreneurship, SSP is opening up new rural markets that create social value.

Women entrepreneurs supported by SSP – who were once marginalized – are now able to set up and scale ‘responsible’ businesses that vastly improve the quality of life of not just their own families but their entire community. The SSP group of ventures is a consortium of four enterprises; a federated network of women; a social microfinance institution (MFI) that offers financial services to women-led businesses; a rural school of entrepreneurship for women; and a market aggregator that provides dedicated warehousing, branding, marketing, and distribution services to last-mile businesswomen. Together, the consortium nurtures the entrepreneurial ecosystems and value chains that women need to succeed in remote and opaque markets.

KEY IMPACTS
Women’s entrepreneurship and leadership

- SSP’s initiatives have reached women and community members across underserved areas in the states of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Bihar, Assam, and Odisha.
- SSP teams have supported over 145,000 women to launch microenterprises in high-impact sectors such as clean energy, health, and agriculture.
- The wPOWER programme, a USAID India-supported clean energy initiative, supported village-level entrepreneurs who launched businesses and services to market clean cookstoves, biofuel, and solar lamps and lights. This initiative impacted the lives of people across the states of Maharashtra and Bihar.
National policy impacts

Due to the tremendous impact of climate change on agriculture, government programmes in India are increasingly supporting small farmers to shift to sustainable farming and protection of water and natural resources. Taking advantage of this enabling policy environment, SSP has raised awareness on the connection between the empowerment of women and both food and income security. This has resulted in a larger behaviour change of farming households towards both using environmentally-friendly inputs in farming and making nutritional dietary choices. Women who started practicing this model with 0.5 hectares of land often convince their families to adopt this model on their entire farms.

As a major step towards policy change, the Government of Maharashtra has recognized SSP’s model and has not only adopted the approach but also selected SSP to implement the *Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana* (MKSP) initiative (which runs from 2016 to 2019) to support over 21,000 women farmers. Women are involved in core decisions around growing crops, increasing biodiversity, and conserving natural resources. Witnessing the effect of SSP’s work on women and communities, the Government of Maharashtra requested SSP to create a cadre of experienced women farmers trained as community facilitators in three districts in the Marathwada region. This model has created a larger awareness among the communities on linkages between climate change and natural resource management.

Additionally, over the last few years, SSP was selected as a resource organisation, and thus has influenced the design and implementation of a flagship programme of the national government on livelihoods and agriculture. In the design phase of the national Start-up Village Entrepreneurship Programme (SVEP), the government sought an innovative model to empower women and communities. SSP was selected in 2015 from among 50 organisations to lead this programme in one of the largest states in India.

SSP believes bringing government authorities and grassroots women together is critical to affecting sustainable change. They promote two ways to make this connection and influence work at both national and grassroots levels: (1) by bringing policymakers, officials to the villages where they can see initiatives in action and develop personal ownership and connection; and (2) by engaging grassroots women leaders in dialogues and workshops in government offices, where they can engage directly with policymakers and district/state officials to understand the collective power of their work.

Contributions to global agenda

SSP’s contribution to women’s empowerment and sustainable agriculture has been recognized globally through several UN and international awards received by both the organisation, its founder Prema Gopalan, and more recently by women leaders from its network. Gopalan’s vision has gained her recognition as Community Participation Advisor with the Government of India, the World Bank, UN agencies, and global networks to mainstream rural women’s perspectives and decision making in micro-finance, disaster risk reduction, healthcare services, water and sanitation, local governance, and poverty reduction strategies.

In addition, SSP’s work directly supports several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda, including no poverty (SDG 1), zero hunger (SDG 2), gender equality (SDG 5), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), affordable and clean energy (SDG 7), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), responsible production and consumption (SDG 12), climate action (SDG 13), and life on land (SDG 15).
RePlication, Scalability, and Sustainability

RePlication

SSP’s initiative for climate-resilient agriculture has been replicated in the states of Bihar and Odisha starting in 2016. In Bihar, 12 local NGOs have women’s groups who have implemented this model. SSP has organised Peer Learning Exchanges and Dialogue Fora at the state and national levels to transfer the knowledge of climate change adaptation practices to new communities.

SSP has created a cadre of thousands of women farmer leaders who can successfully transfer learnings and strategies to other contexts. The organisation has also developed a mentoring scheme through which one mentor can assist other women farmers to practice and replicate this model.

According to SSP founder Prema Gopalan, women operate with abundance-thinking and share their ideas, practices, and resources with other women. This helps them to enhance their well-being, increase trust, and deepen collaboration. These women’s collectives have shown that trust is the new currency, which grows when exchanged between women’s groups to build circles of learning and deepen collaboration.

Small changes matter, they say. Working on prototypes such as small farms allows women to experience power and control over what they can create and to demonstrate their capacity as change makers while empowering others to take similar action.

Scalability

Given the proven benefits of their model, through their network of successful women farmers SSP will reach out to new districts which are water scarce and to new states through government and key stakeholder partnerships to advocate for climate resilient farming led by women.

Through this approach, the organisation hopes to encourage other farmers who are still using chemical inputs to shift towards climate resilient agriculture.

SSP teams from Maharashtra will continue to act as a knowledge hub, with resources, trainers and successful women farmer and agri-entrepreneurs who will be crucial for scaling up this model through the state and the region.

Through these actions, SSP hopes to impact the soil fertility and productivity of the entire region. The organisation provides an adaptive sustainable farming model that can be scaled up to include any climate-threatened geography in India due to the fact that small-scale, marginal farmers represent a large contribution to agriculture throughout the country. Furthermore, through learning exchanges and workshops, teams of SSP and grassroots leaders will transfer strategies and lessons learned to like-minded organisations and groups in Asia and Africa.
**Sustainability**

As a key resource organisation in climate resilient farming, SSP functions on a revenue-based model by building capacities, knowledge, skills and expertise of different stakeholders including government and non-government organisations. This provides a self-sustaining funding for programmes on the ground. SSP also receives support through its partnership with the Government as well as through the support and commitment of a rich network of funding agencies, donors, and businesses – through their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) departments.

**FUTURE PLANS**

By growing and sustaining the vibrant Women’s Initiative to Learn and Lead (WILL), SSP and its associated social enterprises, community-based federations, and women-led producer companies will strive to reach their desired outcomes on livelihoods, food security, and access to basic services while ensuring the well-being of women and girls in vulnerable communities. The future definition of success will focus on SSP’s overall strategy, which advocates building the higher-level leadership of women as changemakers.
PARTNERS

- **Azim Premji Philanthropic Initiatives (APPI):** Provides support for the Sakhi Food Secure Agriculture project, which will build the capacities of small and marginal women farmers in climate-resilient farming practices and provide marketing linkages by forming farmer producer groups. The project aims to reposition women as farmers and decision makers with increased roles and influence in bio-farming, increased leadership in their households and communities, and improved access to food and markets.

- **Dalyan Foundation:** Provides support to create a new definition and aspiration for entrepreneurship and leadership among women from low income households by recognizing them as resource and knowledge creators. The approach is based on a holistic community driven sustainable model empowering women as entrepreneurs and change agents/leaders of the communities. The program identifies and trains women and girls belonging to low income households in rural and peri-urban areas in entrepreneurship, education, financial and digital literacy, and offers leadership and business development support together with access to credit, technology, and markets.

- **Great Eastern Shipping Company Ltd. (GES):** Provides funds for the Community Resilience Fund (CRF). SSP-promoted federations utilise the CRF to provide small loans to women farmers to practice smart agriculture. The company also contributes to a project focused on enhancing income and food security by practicing low input agriculture, promoting water conservation, and enhancing diversification of livelihoods. Supported by SSP teams, women farmers take on roles as changemakers and community leaders.

- **Huairou Commission:** The Huairou Commission supports grassroots women’s leadership in the development of resilient communities through global and local initiatives. The goal of its collective action is to institutionalize grassroots women’s public leadership. This means ensuring that grassroots women are driving forces in setting the public agenda and standards of political accountability in the context of poverty reduction and equitable and sustainable development along the urban/rural continuum.

- **Maharashtra State Rural Livelihoods Mission (MSRLM):** Provides support for the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (Sub-mission on Empowerment of Women Farmers). SSP is a key knowledge partner to train community resource persons (CRP) who will support women farmers to adopt best practices, access credit, and market produce.

- **Misereor Germany:** Provides support for a project to improve the socioeconomic conditions of women from poor households in India, with a focus on building women’s leadership and entrepreneurship by recognizing women as farmers and innovators. Empowered farmer’s groups lead community-driven local action in health, agriculture, and nutrition and sanitation.
UNICEF: The wSHARP-Women-led Sanitation, Hygiene and Resilient Practices Project with technical support from UNICEF aims to improve community resilience. At the core of this effort is building women’s leadership in promoting decentralised climate risk governance and enhancing the well-being of women, girls, and families. Result areas include improved access to nutritious food through agriculture and backyard gardens, better water security for safe water, sanitation, hygiene for 10,000 vulnerable households in climate threatened regions in Maharashtra.

**SOURCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES**


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UNDP partners with people at all levels of society to help build nations that can withstand crisis, and drive and sustain the kind of growth that improves the quality of life for everyone. On the ground in nearly 170 countries and territories, we offer global perspective and local insight to help empower lives and build resilient nations.

The Equator Initiative brings together the United Nations, governments, civil society, businesses and grassroots organizations to recognize and advance local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities.

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