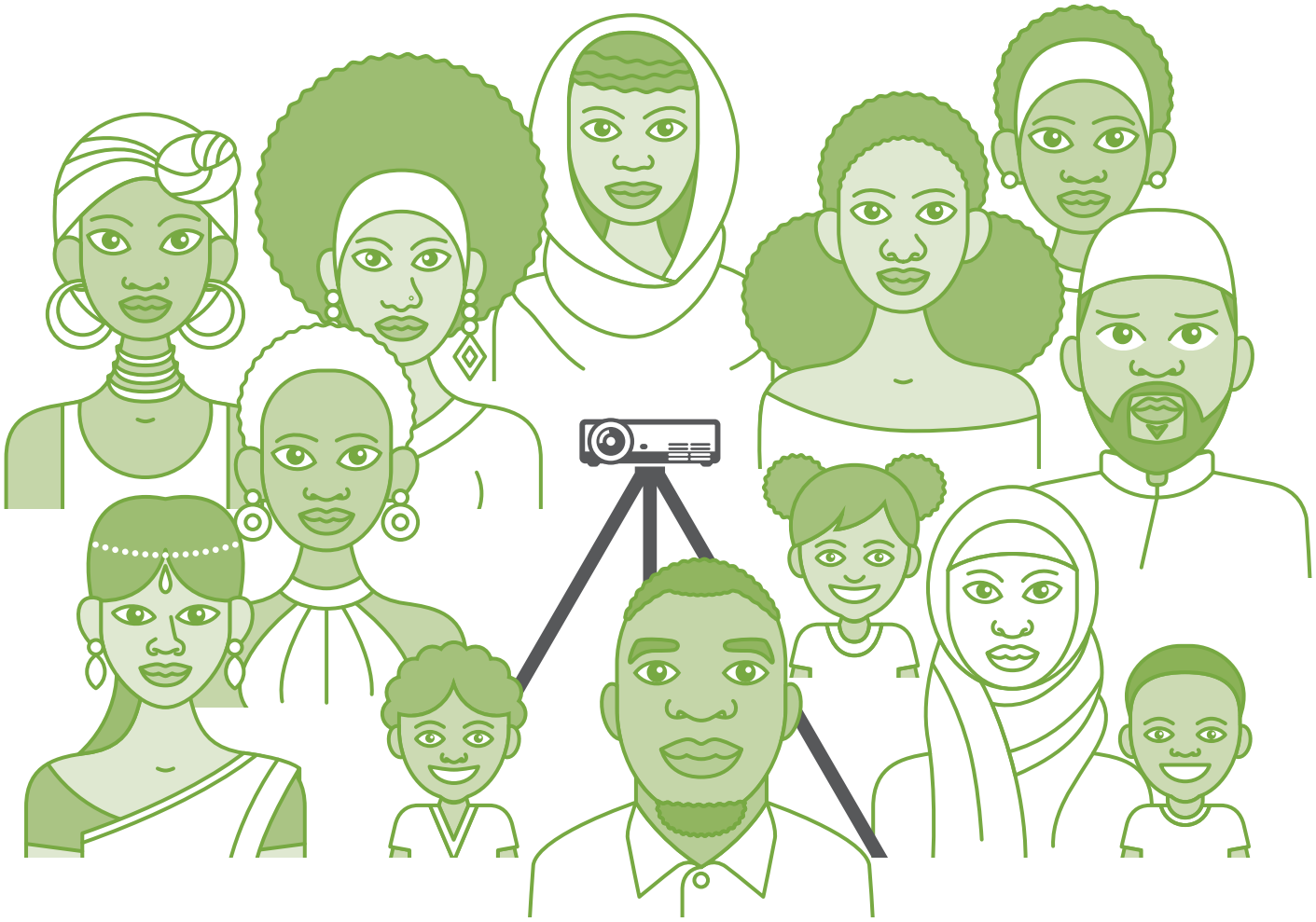
Young changemakers



Scaling agroecology using video in Africa and India

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About Access Agriculture

Access Agriculture is an international non-profit organisation that works across all developing countries to enable the South-South exchange of and access to quality farmer-to-farmer learning videos to promote agroecological principles and rural entrepreneurship. Access Agriculture builds capacity for the production of videos and, upon demand, translates any video hosted on its platform into any local language. It enables access to these videos for multiple stakeholders, including rural advisory services, education systems, media houses and farmer organisations. By improving access of youth, women, smallholder and marginalised farmers to relevant knowledge, Access Agriculture aims to contribute to more resilient food systems that can counter the changing climate and the erosion of our natural resources.

For more information on Access Agriculture, visit *www.accessagriculture.org*

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Foreword

The issue of youth engagement in agriculture is a critical concern in both Africa and India. Traditional perceptions of agriculture as a low-status, unskilled occupation, coupled with limited access to resources and market opportunities, have contributed to a significant disinterest among young people in pursuing careers in agriculture.

In Africa, the rapidly growing youth population presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the agricultural sector. With the aging farming population, there is an urgent need to engage and empower young people to participate in agriculture and agribusiness. Similarly, in India, there is a need to inspire and educate the youth about the potential of agriculture as a viable and rewarding career option. Efforts to promote agroecology and sustainable farming practices can serve as a catalyst for engaging and inspiring young people to contribute to the transformation of food systems in both regions.

Addressing the issue of youth in agriculture requires comprehensive strategies that encompass education and training, access to finance and resources, mentorship and networking opportunities, as well as policies that create an enabling environment for youth participation and innovation in agriculture. By recognising and supporting the potential of rural youth in driving positive change in food systems, it is possible to build more resilient and sustainable agricultural systems in Africa and India.

Access Agriculture has been at the forefront of empowering rural youth to transform food systems through its innovative last-mile delivery model. From 2019 onwards, the organisation has empowered over 120 teams of young Entrepreneurs for Rural Access (ERAs) across 17 countries in Africa and India. These ERAs have been equipped with a solar-powered smart projector containing a vast video library, enabling them to serve as private extension service providers and facilitate the dissemination of knowledge on agroecological practices to farming communities. The ERAs have emerged as dynamic changemakers, demonstrating their commitment to promoting agroecology and sustainable agricultural practices. This book serves as a testament to the resilience, creativity, and dedication of these young individuals, who have not only embraced agroecology but have also become catalysts for positive change in their communities.

The stories captured in this book reflect the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the ERAs. From those who left school at a young age to university graduates, and from individuals with no prior agricultural experience to those already running small businesses, the ERAs represent a wide spectrum of young people who have been driven by a common goal – to make a meaningful impact in their home communities. Their journeys have been marked by challenges, including the global energy crisis and the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, these challenges have also served as catalysts, igniting the desire among farmers to embrace ecological farming practices and reduce reliance on expensive inputs.

The impact of the ERAs has been profound, as evidenced by the success stories shared in this book. From training child mothers in Uganda to become beekeepers, securing user rights for youth to access local forests in Malawi, setting up community-managed tree nurseries and addressing deforestation, establishing farmer cooperatives and promoting

organic vegetable production to creating demand for training and fodder production, the ERAs have demonstrated their ability to drive change and create new opportunities for sustainable agriculture. Their efforts have not only led to increased agricultural productivity but have also contributed to the preservation of local food culture and biodiversity.

commitment to sharing knowledge and fostering positive change. Yet, their perseverance and dedication have earned them the respect and trust of local farmers, paving the way for meaningful engagement and collaboration.

As we celebrate the achievements of the ERAs, it is essential to recognise the critical role of hope, inspiring others to join hands in creating a more sustainable and equitable future for agriculture and rural communities. As we embark on this journey of transformation, let us continue to support and empower the next generation of changemakers, ensuring that their voices are heard, and their efforts are recognised and celebrated.

Together, we can unleash the power of rural youth to transform food systems and build a more sustainable and resilient future for all.

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One of the key strengths of the ERAs has been their ability to engage with diverse target audiences, including rural women, youth, and marginalised communities. By leveraging the power of video-mediated learning, the ERAs have been able to reach out to those with limited mobility and literacy, providing them with valuable knowledge and skills to enhance their livelihoods. The impact of their work extends beyond agricultural practices, encompassing areas such as education, health, and environmental conservation. Nonetheless, the journey of the ERAs has not been without its share of challenges. They have had to overcome scepticism and mistrust in rural communities, demonstrating their

played by Access Agriculture in supporting and nurturing these young leaders. The organisation's coaching and support have been instrumental in equipping the ERAs with the skills and resources needed to succeed in their endeavours. The video library provided by Access Agriculture has not only served as a valuable knowledge resource but has also inspired the ERAs to think creatively and innovate in their approach to promoting agroecology.

In conclusion, the stories of the ERAs stand as a testament to the potential of rural youth to drive meaningful change in agriculture and food systems. Their dedication, resilience, and innovative spirit serve as a beacon

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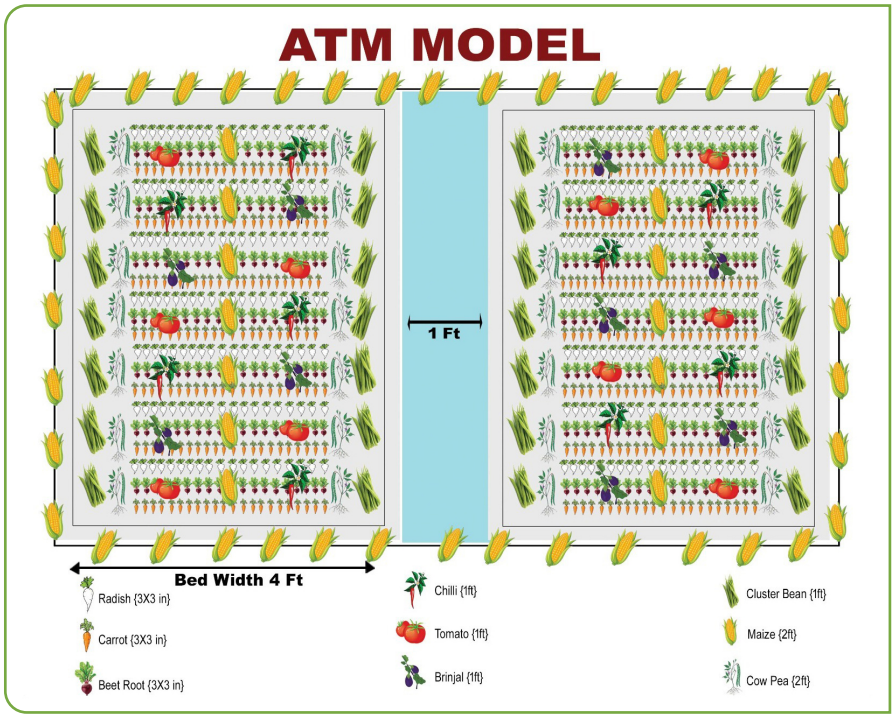
Reaping health and wealth benefits from nutri-gardens

Janaki Bobbili

Janaki Bobbili from Veerabhadrapuram village in Andhra Pradesh, India, is one of the champions of the nutri-garden initiative, which seeks to increase farmers' income, while enhancing the health and well-being of rural families through better access to diversified, nutritious food across seasons. The initiative is creating a powerful wave of change across rural India and has emerged as an effective tool for empowering rural women.

Despite improvements in food security in rural India, undernutrition, especially the deficiency of micronutrients, remains a big concern. Hence, in 2021 the Ministry for Women and Child Development launched the nutri-garden initiative. It promotes well-planned kitchen gardens under the motto 'grow what you eat and eat what you grow.' The initiative encourages the cultivation of indigenous varieties of vegetables, fruits, herbs and spices, without the use of chemical inputs. It also promotes the recycling of kitchen waste into organic manure. As such, the initiative helps conserve precious agrobiodiversity and water.



However, there are a lot of differences in the way the nutri-garden initiative is implemented across the country, depending on the environment and farming traditions. For instance, the APCNF (Andhra Pradesh Community Managed Natural Farming) programme, which promotes farming in harmony with nature, introduced nutri-gardens under its ATM (Any Time Money) model.

The ATM model aims to attract rural youth into farming by promoting relay cropping of a variety of crops on the same plot, using natural farming methods. This ensures harvests at different times and a steady stream of income, starting from within a couple of weeks after sowing. *"Before young women establish their nutri-gardens, we train them on every step along the way,"* says Janaki who has been actively involved in awareness campaigns and training programmes relating to the ATM model.

Janaki knows well the challenges faced by women farmers as she comes from a farming family. After obtaining a Bachelor of Science degree in Chemistry, and keen to deepen her knowledge of farming techniques, she participated in a livelihood enterprise development programme, organised by Sabala, a local NGO.

Soon after, in 2016, Janaki joined Sabala to help form and train farmer producer organisations. As one of the resource organisations for the APCNF programme, Sabala focuses on natural farming, organic production and empowerment of vulnerable women.

Through multiple activities, including biodiversity fairs, Sabala also promotes local production, consumption and procurement of millets, a family of drought-resistant, nutrient-rich grains that are part of India's traditional food culture. Having been neglected for a long time, millets are gradually making a comeback.

In 2022, when Janaki heard about the Access Agriculture Young Entrepreneur Challenge Fund initiative for Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, she decided to apply, along with her colleagues Syamala Bobbili and Kommu Eswara Rao. *"Sabala creates awareness among the rural women and local tribal youth on natural farming and agricultural biodiversity, so this motivated us to apply,"* Janaki recounts.

She was delighted when her team was selected as one of the young Entrepreneurs for Rural Access (ERAs) in Andhra Pradesh. During a three-day training workshop, her team received the smart projector, containing the full library of Access Agriculture training videos. She felt especially honoured when Dr. P. Chandra Shekara, Director General of the National Institute of Agricultural Extension Management (MANAGE) told all the selected ERA teams: *"With this magic box in your hands, you are now superheroes as you can convincingly show to*

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farmers the benefits of agroecology and natural farming."

Janaki and her team members realised the truth of this statement when they saw the enthusiasm of women farmers and tribal youths after showing them the quality farmer-to-farmer learning videos in the Telugu language. To empower women, Sabala has established a Millet Sisters' network with about 1,200 women farmers from 40 villages and a millet processing unit under the name 'Arogya Millets,' which trains its members to make value-added millet products. *"The smart projector is like a weapon to build the capacity of all these members,"* Janaki says.

The Sabala ERA team has been screening relevant videos in many villages to promote improved practices on soil fertility, water conservation, plant health and organic composts. These include: *Compost from rice straw*, *Coir pith*, *Managing mealybugs in vegetables*, *Managing the rice leaf folder* and *Killing fall armyworms naturally*.

As integrated farming and nutri-gardens have been major thrusts of Sabala, other popular videos shown by the team include *Intercropping maize with pigeon peas*, *Grow row by row*, *Making a good okra seeding*, *Taking care of okra*, *Staking tomato plants*, *Good handling of tomatoes*, *Storing fresh and dried tomatoes*, and *Drying and storing chillies*. The video shows are always followed by group discussions on how to adapt the practices to their context.

The Sabala ERA team use the smart projector to raise awareness about the ATM model, which includes vegetables, flowers, millets, pulses and oilseeds. The farmers can choose what they want to grow on their plot, but they must select at least one variety from each category recommended by the ATM model. Farmers are being encouraged to include a wide range of local vegetables, such as brinjal (aubergine), okra, tomato, chilli, onion, radish, carrot, sweet potato, various types of gourds, curry leaf, coriander and leafy vegetables, like spinach and fenugreek leaves. Even during very hot summers, the crops under the ATM model survive, ensuring food security.

"Farmers generally grow these crops on small plots of around 400 square metres and as they can harvest throughout the year, they earn money on a weekly basis. The farmers mostly sell their entire produce in their own villages and if there is any excess produce, we link them up with potential buyers from other districts," explains the Sabala team.

Sappala Prameela, a woman farmer from Kotanuvaripapem village, set up an ATM model farm with their help on a plot of 4,000 square metres with an investment of 9,600 Indian Rupees (106 Euros). She chose to grow 13 types of vegetables, 3 types of legumes and marigold flowers. Thanks to this, she earned a weekly income of 3,500 Indian Rupees (38 Euros). In just four months, she earned 45,000 Indian Rupees (500 Euros). In addition, she saved money by not having to buy vegetables and her family was able to eat chemical-free, home-grown vegetables.

With this magic box in your hands, you are now superheroes as you can convincingly show to farmers the benefits of agroecology and natural farming

The ERA team also use the smart projector during visits of schoolchildren to raise awareness about food production and biodiversity.

Within one year after receiving the smart projector, Janaki and

her colleagues screened videos to about 1,000 people, of whom 68% were women and 78% were youth.

To encourage members of farmer organisations to set up nutri-gardens, they also show their own videos and successful case studies from APCNF on natural farming. During the follow-up group discussions, Janaki – a practising farmer herself – convincingly motivates other farmers to adopt the new model. In August 2023, seeing her commitment and experience, Janaki was invited to join APCNF as a Cluster Activist, where she continues to promote natural farming.

Making food systems more resilient to climate change requires a holistic approach. In addition to promoting natural farming and nutri-gardens, Sabala plans to use the smart projector to raise awareness about the value of millet-based food and also use it to boost its own bio-resource centres and processing units for millet, jackfruit, groundnut and turmeric.

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