

Application form submitted by the initiatives to participate in the Transformative Cities People's Choice Award (2021-2022)

GENERAL INFORMATION	
Location:	Hyderabad, Vishakhapatnam, India
Title of the Transformative Initiative:	Sahaja Aharam: Linking Urban consumers to Rural Producers
Name of organization:	Centre for Sustainable Agriculture (CSA)
Type of organization:	Centre for Sustainable Agriculture is a not-for-profit organization. Sahaja Aharam is a Collective of Farmers registered as Farmer Producer Company.
Website:	https://csa-india.org/about-us/ & https://sahajaaharam.com/about-us
Category and Edition:	FOOD. Transformative Cities Award 4 ^o edition (2021-2022)
STORYTELLING	
Summary	
Sahaja Aaharam is an Independent Farmer Produce Company under CSA to connect and create awareness among the farmers and the consumers through producer co-operatives thereby ensuring maximum financial and economic benefit to the farmers, nutritional food choices to the consumers and ecological benefit to the environment.	
Context and problem definition	
The problem was two-pronged. On one hand, the producers/ farmers were having challenges on using pesticides that led to the deterioration of their land and health due to occupational hazards. On the other hand, the consumers are unaware of the quality/ nutrition of food and how their food choices affect their health and environment. At a larger scale, the concern of the environment and the impact of pesticides and fertilisers led agricultural practices contribute significantly to climate change. Therefore, CSA intends to find ways to address the concern of food vs environment, food vs farmer, food vs consumer simultaneously.	

For this CSA through Sahaj Aaharam (SAPCO) organized producers into cooperatives and provided linkages to the urban areas by directly selling to the consumers through dedicated stores. In addition, CSA organized not only the nutritional information but also the information on the ecological footprints to the consumers.

Approximately about 500 of farmers were impacted and over 3000 consumers signed on to this.

Design and Implementation

Design

Sahaja Aaharam Producer Company (SAPCO) was established in 2014 as federation of the producers Co- operatives and registered as Farmer Producer Company. It started with 16 cooperatives and now works with over 60 cooperatives. The products which are grown and processed organically were sold through retail stores owned by Sahaja Aaharam, online sales and mobile van stores. These farmer co-operatives are also supported through knowledge centres called Farmer Service Centres where the consumers can meet the farmers and dieticians who provide nutritional counselling and any required information at Food Info Marts as part of the stores.

At the consumer end, the products are priced 20% more than the local market price. They also maintain the time by which the fresh vegetables reach the consumers within 18 hours from harvest. They also benefit from certified organic produce and better awareness of their choices and ecological footprint. There is proper traceability as to who produced it and how it is produced which helps in better choices.

The initiative focused on three fronts; the nutritional front for consumers, the ecological front for the environment, and the economic front for farmers. It was thus designed to provide maximum financial benefit to the farmers as much as up to 20 per cent over the market price or 50 per cent over the production cost whichever is higher.

The consumer co-operative was active from 2009 to 2014 but was later merged with producer co-operative. Sahaja Aaharam also conducted studies on how much ecological footprint one can reduce by switching to organic food.

Issues faced

Since it is farmer-owned initiative, raising capital was an issue. Individual farmers are exempted from tax but producer companies were not, so there were no incentives for

producer companies until 2019. Thereafter Farmer Producer Organizations (up to 100 crore turnover) were exempted from income tax) which was a major legislative/ policy benefit.

Also, up till 2020, there was no proper regulation for the organic food industry. After mandatory certification and traceability regulations were introduced, quality consciousness increased which increased sales. COVID pandemic also created awareness about healthy food choices for consumers.

Besides, there was a positive effort from the part of the Government based on our advocacy (2019) to mainstream Farmer Produced Organizations and be tax exempted in case of value additions.

Results achieved and Evaluation

In 2021-22 the sales crossed over 2 crores (20 million) Indian Rupees.

Own Food Processing Units are established which was until now outsourced. All expenses are now met from the sales proceeds. The same year also saw bulk sales market to the producers being established which is paving way for export opportunities to UK and USA.

Having begun the initiative with 16 farmer cooperatives, CSA (through Sahaja Aharam) now operates with 60 Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs-registered either as cooperatives or produce companies) and supports 150 FPOs as a resource organization where farmers are provided with training and ways to help build their market. Since the onset of the initiative, there has not been a single farmer suicide or pesticide poisoning case in the villages where the co-operatives have been functioning. Community benefits as well as policy changes that resulted through advocacy are:

- SAPCO helped mainstream Organic Farming and helped scale up initiatives on both the organic and natural farming front.
- SAPCO helped mainstream Farmer Produced Organizations. The Government of India (GOI) now has a Policy of establishing 10000 FPOs.
- SAPCO enabled scaling up initiatives in the rest of the country.
- SAPCO facilitated inclusion of FPOs in tax exemption.
- Since the onset of the initiative, there has not been a single farmer suicide or pesticide poisoning case in the villages where the co-operative has been functioning.

Political Strategies

- The initiative focused primarily on small and marginal farmers since collectivizing is very critical for their sustenance.
- Exclusive women cooperatives were established along the way.
- Evidence-based advocacy was implemented both at grassroots as well as policy levels.

SAPCO did not face too many obstructions, however, the current policy framework which provides access to capital was not in favour of FPOs. The institutional banking policies did not have a product designed for FPOs.

The bureaucratic approach of the governments was also an issue.

Cut-throat competitions from startups with venture capital who under cut the prices killed the markets for FPOs. (Polimeras, Big Basket, Ninja cart are some such startups in the same space).

Procurement policies of the Government such as promoting certain food crops, subsidies for chemical fertilizer-based farming, etc also added to adversaries.

Also Agriculture Research Institutions that focused on technology at the cost of ecology and economics were some other obstructive challenges.

Supportive

- Livelihood departments and Rural Development departments which were not technology-driven but directed at livelihood strengthening contributed immensely to this initiative.
- The contributions from NABARD has been instrumental.
- Media helped by regularly covering stories, developing articles/ talk shows etc. has helped in getting the word around. The initiative attracted 5 TEDx talks and was shown in Satyameva Jayate (a television show host by a movie star which had very high traction of viewers).
- There was also a huge volunteer influx of as many as 150 and student interns counting to 25 each year from both National and International universities. As a result, partnerships were established with universities such as MONASH - Australia, Sheffield – UK, Harvard - the USA amongst others.
- Donor agencies and other philanthropic initiatives like Azim Premji Foundation, Swiss Aid, Aid India, Hivos have shown ample support.

Successful:

Taking a scientific approach to Organic Farming has helped us to help a large number of farmers shift to Organic Farming. Bringing in community management has enabled to build farmers' collective much more efficient and was thus awarded the Best Rural Innovation

Awards in 2014 for Community Managed Sustainable Agriculture and Non Pesticidal Management (growing crops without chemical pesticides from Bihar Rural Innovation Forum and Maharashtra Rural Innovation Forum both supported by World Bank.

Sahaja Aaharam's awareness effort about consumer footprint, direct sales to consumers etc. has helped build credibility and its long term growth prospects.

The "Inti panta (translation as Home produce)", an Urban Gardening initiative which began in 2011 in partnership with Sakshi (a news channel), to influence urban consumers to grow their own food, proved successful where they were trained on cultivation, composting, etc., especially in Hyderabad.

In one way the consumer's voice for safe food has increased manifold which can be seen in the success of our efforts to stall commercialization of the Genetically Modified Bt Brinjal campaign and Pesticides and the Impact on Health campaign. Such advocacies which are based on evidence have a higher impact which may be direct or indirect. Some of them include improvement in the labelling systems, restriction on harmful technology etc.

We had also helped women-led cooperatives such as be'Nishan in Telangana to become a federation like Sahaja Aaharam which is now selling almost 15 tons of vegetables per day.

Access to loans which is based on land records and not based on cultivation does not provide loans to tenant farmers who also do not receive insurance. Hence if there is a farmer suicide case they do not receive compensation as there is no proof of cultivation. To address these distress issues and improve the governance of public services to farmers, CSA started a helpline called Kisan Mitra (Farmers' Friend) to provide support access services such as credit, insurance, subsidy, facilitation to finance etc. This facility is now being integrated into Sahaj Aaharam FPOs as well.

Less successful

Marketing through the regular retail chain did not prove effective as their expectations of price margin are higher.

Some of the stores in small towns were not successful which attributes to reasons lack of awareness pertaining to organic transitions, nutrition etc. The Consumer cooperatives couldn't stand the test of time. It was rather too early to start due to the lack of mobilization factor which did not provide an incentive for investment but will be restarted eventually. Home deliveries were also not successful in the initial days of 2009-14 but have been brought back to the table now.

Communication and Cultural Strategies

A feature film called [Mitti - back to Roots](#) was produced as a means to create awareness.

[Krishi TV](#) is a youtube channel run by CSA which produce and share various short videos on food and agricultural practices in local Indian languages.

The mainstream media has taken up the cause of these initiatives very well. A popular TV talk show Satyamev Jayate (Truth only Triumphs) made an exclusive show on [Toxic food](#) which became very popular and featured work by CSA.

TEDx platform featured five talks on the issue of food, farmers and environment by Dr. G. V. Ramanjaneyulu:

- [Poison on Plate](#) | TEDxHyderabad
- [How you can help ensure a secure income for farmers?](#) | TEDxNAVALKHA
- [Caring for those who feed the nation](#) | TEDxCBIT
- [What is Wrong with Our Food Today?](#) | TEDxSCETW
- [Zero Farmer Suicides - Let's make it happen](#) | TEDxHyderabad

Resources, Financing and Transformative Economy

The entire initiative started as a voluntary effort to bridge the gap between producers and consumers, their understanding of food production and its impact on environment and health and marketing channels which can help producers get access to better share in consumers' price.

Seeing the success of the initiative, small entrepreneurs started partnering to launch stores selling organic produce directly from farmers, Government of India started supporting formation of farmer cooperatives and producer organisations. This helped in a big way to scale up the initiative.

Now government of India has launched larger initiatives to promote organic/natural farming.

The bilateral and multilateral agencies are supporting various such initiatives across the country and CSA has been partnering with many of these initiatives.

Private agencies are also coming forward to buy directly from farmers and farmer cooperatives.

Related legislations

Two important initiatives based on this experience are:

1. Promotion of Farmer Produces Organisations by creating support systems
2. Promotion of organic/natural farming as a major policy

Contraints:

- Skewed support to chemical agriculture in terms of fertilizer subsidy
- Restrictions on direct marketing and market related taxations

Ecological Transitions

The initiative is focused on building collectives of producers and connecting them to the urban consumers directly. In the process efforts are being made to correct several asymmetries in the society. The collectives focused on getting women, small and marginal farmers specially from down trodden communities. While economic sustainability is the main focus, an effort has been made to make producers understand that production systems like agriculture which are heavily dependent on natural resources and environmental factors can only sustain if the ecological sustainability is built into the production systems.

Similarly, at the consumer end, efforts have been made to make them understand that their choices of food and where they buy has an impact on the environment and their own health.

Lessons learned

- Collectivisation is key for sustainability of small farmers livelihoods
- Shift towards organic/natural farming only can sustain farming livelihoods
- Business models build on direct reaching out to consumers are helpful for both producers and consumers.

EXTRA INFO

Supporting documents

YOUTUBE MOVIE: [Mitti – back to roots](#)

