



# TIMBAKTU COLLECTIVE (SOUTH CENTRAL INDIA)

## An IPEN Case Study

## Lush Spring Prize 2017: **Established Project**

### Project Summary

The Timbaktu Collective works for sustainable development in the drought prone Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh (A.P.) in India. They work with some of those most affected by chronic drought, unproductive land, unemployment and poor infrastructural facilities in the region. Among them are landless people and small and marginal farmers, with an emphasis on women, children, youth and dalits.

‘Timbaktu’ means ‘where the earth meets the sky’



Community participation and ownership is the underlying theme



### Permaculture & Agroecology Lessons

Timbaktu Collective's work has high importance for:

- Seeding and growing effective systems of organisation (i.e. cooperatives) that address the food, economic and social needs of specific disadvantaged groups.
- Linking action-oriented education and demonstration projects that build connections between organic agriculture, effective systems of organization and the development of rural enterprise
- Long term education systems that enable personal, community and environmental change, founded on specific techniques that enable the regeneration of degraded land.
- Building social capital amongst and with some of the most marginalized communities in Southern India.

### The Changes Achieved

The Timbaktu Collective have achieved wide-ranging impacts, including:

- Serving over 21,000 marginalised families, enhancing the livelihoods of landless labourers, the rural poor, and marginal farmers, particularly women, children, youth, dalits and the disabled;
- Working in over 172 villages of the Anantapur district;
- Regenerating more than 9,000 acres of community common lands into biodiverse savanna grasslands and tropical thorn forest.

### The Collective's story is long and rich

Over 25 years, a few key milestones were:

- **February, 1990:** 32 acres of barren, degraded land was purchased by the founders of Timbaktu Collective.
- **December, 1991:** Masanobu Fukuoka's "One Straw Revolution" translated into Telugu. This created a core text so that Fukuoka's approach and permaculture were the basis of much of the regeneration work. A percentage of the book's sale price helped to start a fund to plant and care for trees.
- **January, 1998:** Adisakthi Mutually Aided Thrift Cooperative Society (Adisakthi), the first women's cooperative of the collective, with 1,466 members - a key point for understanding the need for organic farming training.
- **November, 1998:** Organic farming experiments were initiated on a demo plot at Eetavanam, through which they learnt and understood what works and what doesn't in the local ecosystem and what efforts are really needed.
- **November, 2005:** Organic farming groups were initiated in 8 villages with 300 farmers.

Throughout the project, working with and helping to establish and grow women's groups, and working with children and schools, has been critical to the Collective's growth, success and effectiveness.



The Militha (“inclusion”) programme advances the rights of Persons with Disabilities

## Timbaktu Collective Goals, Strategy and Values

**Vision:** Rural communities take control of their own lives, govern themselves and live in social, gender and ecological harmony while maintaining a sustainable lifestyle.

**Mission:** Enable marginalised rural people, landless labourers, and small and marginal farmers particularly women, children, youth, dalits and the people with disabilities, to enhance their livelihood resources, get organised and work towards social justice and gender equity and lead life in a meaningful and joyous manner.

**Strategy:** With local self-governance as the underlying theme, the Collective develops models that address the rights of the most disadvantaged rural people. The models include: ecological restoration of waste lands; organic farming and marketing; alternative banking, credit creation, legal aid and counselling for women; child friendly education and spaces; livelihood through animal husbandry; and disability support. As part of its strategy, the Collective has formed numerous village-based organisations for the rural poor, promoted producer owned mutually aided business enterprises and revived the Cooperative movement.

**Values:** Celebration of Life; Faith in people and their wisdom; Cooperation; Excellence.

## Golla’s Story, a Beneficiary

*“In the beginning when I had just sown my field everyone who saw my farm mocked me, they were all dismissive. But as my crops neared harvest and my land appeared lush and green, passers-by wanted to know what I was growing! We were among the first farmers to start growing millets. We began with half an acre and expanded gradually each year.”* The Collective *“informed and shared with us techniques of organic farming. We chart a seasonal crop plan and go to farmers’ field school where we are told about friendly and unfriendly pests and come up with the right organic manure for each crop.”*

Golla uses Neem leaves for its antibacterial properties, and Thorn Apple and Swallow Wort leaves for their pest and insect repellent attributes.

## Siddarth Rao’s story, a project team member

*“I am an ecologist and I have worked with the collective in various capacities for the past six years. I am humbled and amazed with the quality, impact and reach the Timbaktu Collective has achieved to date. As someone who cares for the land and nature I am always joyful to see how we have collectively managed to get some of the most disadvantageous communities to regenerate, protect and conserve nature in spite of all odds.”*

## The Collective’s Good Practise: WHAT It Has Done

**When the Project Started:** The ravaged and ruined soil was as hard and unforgiving as concrete, so degraded that not even a blade of grass could grow. Robbed of the ability to produce food, the region suffered widespread debt, poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition, resulting in nearly 700 farmers committing suicide in the space of ten years; a monumental crisis in an already sparsely populated part of the country.

**Now:** Timbaktu Collective has made an overwhelming difference to the environment and communities of Anantapur, through actions and strategies described in the sections below, that build on each stage of project development to create significant cumulative change over time. These include:

- Breaking down social stigmas and barriers to engagement
- Widespread restoration of wasteland
- Promoting and teaching organic farming techniques
- Creating alternative banking and credit creation opportunities
- Facilitating legal aid and counselling for women
- Supporting the disabled and promoting cultural activities
- Creating over 45 child friendly spaces and founding one residential school for underprivileged children

## Timbaktu Collective’s Ways of Achieving Good Practise: HOW It Is Done

**How it is done with people:** The social work that Timbaktu has done was essential to do first, to be able to get the land work off the ground. In particular, breaking down social stigmas (cast, womens’ role and access to finance, representation at meetings, etc) was a key part of the work. Building from this starting point, important ways of working which have enabled the Timbaktu Collective’s approach to be effective are:

- To identify and repeat patterns of economic, social and legal organisation (i.e. Cooperatives) that are very effective for building participation, breaking down social barriers and stigma, and tackling the needs of particular groups (women, people with disabilities, children);
- To create cooperatives to tackle particular social and land issues, such as tree planting, watershed improvement, improving marginalized farmer livelihoods and rural enterprise opportunities;

- To develop education, training, demonstration and support systems which enable individual and group progression within those cooperatives and for specific social groups, to continue to break down social stigmas;
- To create an alternative education system which focuses on experiential learning while also teaching the conventional Indian syllabus in the Collective's school (which enables progression in wider society), as well as additional subjects and activities such as local dance, agriculture, craft, ecology, music etc.

**How it is done with the land:** 'if it works for farmers it works for us', not aligning to one technique or movement.

- **Protection:** Protecting the soil and plants temporarily by fencing it with thorn bushes, and explaining their efforts to trespassers, has stopped grazing to a great extent and tree cutting almost totally. For larger tracts of land, the approach has been to focus on 'social fencing' measures, where physical barriers are not used.
- **Fire Fighting:** Deliberately burning 15 to 20 ft wide fire lines across the hills as a grid, prevents fires from spreading uncontrollably, coupled with building awareness among the villagers about reducing fire risks.
- **Rainwater harvesting and soil conservation:** Initially, small earthen bunds and small rock-filled check dams were made all over the land, to plug gullies, reduce the run-off and keep the water on the land. Later bigger check-dams and rock-filled dams were built along the larger streams, to save as much rain and soil as possible.
- **Revegetation:** Thousands of trees have been planted, with pits dug, natural manure applied and better soil added to the pits, to help small plants establish themselves. The survival rate has now reached 85%. Protection and non-disturbance has also enabled the existing plants and grasses to propagate themselves.
- **Seed Collection:** A seed collection initially stocked about 120 key tree, bush, herb and grass species to distribute and plant during the rainy season in regeneration areas, to test their viability for providing green cover for economically productive species. The Collective follows the principle of ecological succession and has observed its effectiveness over the years.
- **Kitchen Gardens:** Kitchen gardening and bio-intensive gardening is a regular activity in Timbaktu especially by the children of the residential school, and provides a valuable contribution to the nutrition of the children. Methods of composting that suit the area provide excellent fertiliser for the fruit trees and vegetable plots.
- **Farming:** The collective has leased land where various natural and organic farming practices are being trialed. The Collective aims to and has learnt from the farmers' traditional knowledge, acquired over many generations, and has developed new approaches with them.

## OUTCOMES Achieved

Outcomes for people, with a focus on effective systems of organisation:

- **Women's Cooperatives:** Mahasakthi federation of Cooperatives (also a registered Cooperative) with 4 member cooperatives - around 22,600 members and a total capital base of around 240 million Rupees.
- **Tree-growers' Cooperatives:** Kalpavalli tree-growers' cooperative has regenerated 9,000 acres of barren community common lands into a community managed wilderness, home to endangered species such as the Indian Grey Wolf and providing livelihoods to over 1,000 people.
- **Farmer Cooperatives:** Dharani, a federation of farmer cooperatives with over 2,000 members that procures, processes, value adds, markets and sells members' produce, with revenues around Rs. 30 million.
- **Cooperatives of People with Disabilities:** Prathibha, a Mutually Aided Thrift Cooperative Society of people with disabilities with 1400 members. It provides loans to its members at reasonable interest rates along with health and rehabilitation services.
- **Children's Cooperatives:** The Collective runs a small residential school for disadvantaged children and a resource centre for children and youth. It is working in 48 villages to educate 2,024 children (including 918 girls) and their parents on children's ecological rights, helping them set up 31 community vegetable gardens.
- **Enabling Rural Enterprise:** The collective has established two new enterprises. Bhavani is a livelihood initiative for young rural women who are high-school dropouts, disabled, widows, abandoned by their husbands or from difficult backgrounds. It is a vibrant group with nine young women who are establishing a market for themselves. They spin, dye and weave pure khadi handloom sarees and material with a range of natural dyes such as anar (pomegranate rind), alizarin (rose madder), katha (catechu from acacia), rattan jyoti (alkanna tinctoria) and indigo. Prathiba is a cooperative for people with disabilities and has established a handmade soap enterprise as a model for livelihood generation.

Outcomes for land and nature around Timbaktu:

- A large number of trees and other plants create a sharp contrast to the barren lands and hills nearby - in summer much of Timbaktu and surrounding hills remain green and are full of wildlife. Groundwater level in wells has risen from 50-60 feet below ground to 20-25 feet.
- Monitoring shows that soil quality is steadily improving, trees are healthier and plant types have changed. Species diversity increased rapidly initially, and plant diversity has now stabilised at about 320 species.
- Bird diversity has increased from about 40 species in 1992/93 to about 240 species now. 76 species of reptiles, amphibians and mammals can be found in Timbaktu and surrounds. These include leopard, sloth bears and endangered black buck antelope.

## Permaculture Principles & Design in Action

The Timbaktu Collective is valuable for demonstrating the following:

**From patterns to details:** patterns of organisation that can be repeated, so that the detailed needs of particular groups or issues can be addressed by their own cooperatives (as economic organisms) at the local level.

**Removal of limiting factors:** removal of key limiting factors for women (e.g. legal aid, effective organisation as cooperatives, finance), children (education, rights, facilities) and the land (e.g. water; organic material).

**Growing a local ecosystem of effective organisations:** to fill specific niches, overcome specific challenges or limitations and develop opportunities; they interact to meet needs with each organism being multi-functional and manifesting the principles: observe & interact; multi-supply; small change for big effects; relative location.

## From Inspiration to Action

The Timbaktu Collective provides lessons about linking education to effective systems of organization, which are appropriate to particular social groups, and that can be used, repeated and adapted to address specific needs.

What lessons from the Timbaktu Collective could help your project, community or network in relation to:

- Project development and evolution, and scaling-up benefits in valuable ways at the local level?
- Permaculture and agroecology education, teacher training and demonstration that relates to local needs?

## Summary of the Difference arising from the Lush Spring Prize

The support has helped give the project publicity, reach larger audiences, bolster the project's credibility and increase the team's motivation to continue to do regenerative work, aided by new staff members that have brought a new sense of enthusiasm into the working groups. Within 2017/18, it has also helped 12 organisations and over 300 individuals from across India to learn about the cooperative model and about implementing similar work in other areas of the country.



## Legal Status, Structure & Size: Start date: February, 1990 - degraded land was purchased by the founders

The Collective is a Registered Society, governed by a Board of seven General Body members and five Managing Committee members who are responsible for all policy decisions. The operations are managed by the Steering Committee, Thematic Working Groups, and the Timbaktu Panchayati - the full-time functionaries of the Collective.

## More Detailed Information on the Collective including its Structure, Funding and Finance

A great deal more information on the Timbaktu Collective as a whole, including financial information, and information on specific projects that operate under the umbrella of the Collective, is all contained in the extensive and beautifully presented Timbaktu Collective 2016-17 Annual Report

### Contact Information

**Website:** [www.timbaktu.org](http://www.timbaktu.org) and [www.timbaktu.co](http://www.timbaktu.co)

**Email:** [info@timbaktu.org](mailto:info@timbaktu.org)

**Address:** The Timbaktu Collective, Chintavanam, Chennekothapalli, Andhra Pradesh, India 515101



### International Permaculture Education Network (IPEN)

*Increasing the effectiveness and coherence of permaculture education internationally*

IPEN Case Studies have been enabled by the Lush Spring Prize