

Expert Group Meeting
Good practices in realizing women's rights to productive resources, with a focus on land
Geneva, Switzerland
25-27 June 2012

**Good practices in realizing women's rights to productive resources,
with a focus on land: The case of India**

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Introduction

The importance of land and other productive resources to women's livelihood security as well as recognition of social identity is now well established (Rao, 2011). In India, women own about 11 per cent of cultivable land, though they constitute over 60 per cent of the total agricultural work force (FAO, 2011) and 84 per cent of all rural female workers (NSSO, 2010: H-ii)¹. Stagnation of agriculture has led to growing male migration in search of alternate employment, and increased urbanisation, yet 66 per cent of the population remains rural and dependent primarily on farming for their livelihood. Reports of malnutrition and persistent rural poverty and disadvantage (World Bank, 2009, GHI, 2011), alongside the reality of a feminised agricultural sector, have refocused policy attention towards ameliorating the constraints faced by women farmers, a key one being the lack of control over productive assets, including land, in order to improve productivity, incomes and wellbeing (Kelkar, 2011).

Land rights for women have however not been easy to realise. This is not surprising, given that land represents more than a physical asset, rather it refigures the meanings of power and authority in society. Pressures on land add to the complexities mediating women's access such as its location (natal/marital), mode of acquisition (inheritance, markets, state), the type and extent of rights (legal, use), and the larger religious and political economy context that shapes state policies and priorities within which claims are negotiated (Rao, 2011). Actualising claims have involved struggles at different institutional levels, confronting a host of social, religious, political and economic resistances, rather than technical fixes. The spaces for struggle have been both formal (e.g panchayats, law courts) and informal (e.g SHGs, grassroots collectives, networks) (Rao, 2010), and involved diverse and context-specific strategies, recognising that women (and men) are social beings, rather than autonomous individuals, embedded within wider social structures (Rao, 2008). While equitable laws are not sufficient for ensuring that women are able to realise their rights in practice, they are an essential starting point, providing a fair and just environment for women to claim their rights.

In India, starting with the Constitutional Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy, that assured equality before law irrespective of sex, race, caste and religion, there has been a slow but systematic effort to make the legal framework both gender-equitable and gender-just. The Hindu Succession Act (1956) was amended in September 2005, the Domestic Violence Act was passed in 2005, and efforts to reform the marriage and divorce laws are currently underway. Additionally, a host of policies have been formulated to strengthen the entitlements of and support to women farmers, for the sake of food security, and material wellbeing², even if not explicitly pointing to emotional security and social recognition. Implementation however has been near absent.

¹ The total cultivable land in India was 182.57 million hectares in 2005-06 (60% of total land area), declining from 185.09 million hectares in 1980-81, mainly due to its diversion to non-agricultural purposes. The total workforce in the same year was 509.3 million, of whom 60% were engaged in agriculture.

<http://www.financialexpress.com/news/indias-cultivable-land-falls-marginally/282603/> accessed on 10/6/12.

² The most recent of such policies is the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) or Women Farmers' Empowerment Programme, launched in 2010-11 with a budget of Rs 100 crore to enhance women's productive capacities in agriculture.

The first step in the realisation of rights to land by women is then establishing their legitimacy, both legally and socially, that is, her rights to land should be recognised by law, custom, her family and the community. This would enable her to enforce them, be it through state or community mechanisms. However, given that law and society are not mutually exclusive, rather they constitute each other, norms and practices that maintain elite power and patriarchal control persist (Rao, 2007). Overcoming the multiple, overlapping barriers women face, therefore requires establishing the rule of law and a social framework that allows the existence of such a rule of law. This requires, at the very minimum, mechanisms that can ensure transparency, accountability and most importantly give women voice within systems of governance. Struggles, both individual and collective, initiated by themselves or by progressive NGOs, are a key strategy in this process of gaining legitimacy. Women draw alternately on customary and contemporary legal frameworks to forge their identities and gain a material asset, establishing the validity of such spaces for struggle in the quest for social justice and gender equality.

While transparency, accountability, participation and the rule of law are all seen as key elements of the 'good governance' agenda, in India, the reform process has applied these principles exclusively to the economic realm. Development has been concerned with processes of economic growth, with women's claims to productive resources often dismissed as being of the socio-cultural domain. Recognising women as productive workers/farmers then might give legitimacy to their claims to resources. This has however been a fundamental tension within development policy: the construction of women as either workers or mothers and wives; the separation of the productive and reproductive, rather than a holistic attention to women's needs and claims as 'persons', engaging equally with the productive and reproductive domains. This ideological stance has not changed even with processes of decentralisation, which have largely involved devolution from the top rather than participatory planning from below, hence revealing little responsiveness from or coordination between departments and programmes on the ground. Kerala perhaps is the one exception, which has decentralised both the process of planning and implementation, including the provision of a specific Women's Component Plan, accounting for 10 per cent of the budget³.

This leads to a third important, though related, point. Actualisation of women's rights to land and other productive assets needs more than gender-just laws. Implementation and monitoring mechanisms, which are resourced, but also creative and dynamic, need to be put in place (Goonasekere, 2011)⁴. Land constitutes an important element within the larger picture of economic transformation, but is not a substitute for social responsibility. Supportive social policies that address women's concerns as social beings (productive and reproductive) in a holistic manner are equally crucial in strengthening women's ability to make their claims.

In the next section, I provide a few examples of the struggles and strategies used by women to claim legitimacy for their rights at different institutional levels – rights to inheritance through

³ This could be interpreted as tokenism, as despite high social indicators, Kerala too does poorly on women's rights, in particular work participation and violence.

⁴ One recent example is the Women Farmer's Entitlement Bill (2011), introduced in the Rajya Sabha on May 11th 2012 as a private member's bill. It seeks to recognise rural women, engaged in farming, as farmers, providing them all the required support for cultivation, whether or not they own the land. The panchayat or local government would need to certify them as farmers.

legal mechanisms (especially the implementation of the Hindu Succession Act, 1956); state development and land distribution policies (Kudumbashree in Kerala) and community level mobilisation (Working Group on Women's Land Ownership, Gujarat) (c.f Agarwal, 2003). Additionally, it is important to note that women are not a homogenous category, and it is separated and divorced women who are often left entirely resourceless, as claims of wives and widows, even if not legally titled, are seen as socially legitimate (Rao, 2008). I therefore also provide some insights from the struggles of single women in India (Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan). Markets don't seem to work for poor, rural women without back-up support (either from SHGs or NGOs). Examples of producers' cooperatives however do exist, with success stories in the dairying sector as well as forest produce associations (Rao, 2010). While the examples used do not constitute an exhaustive list, I use them to draw out some lessons that can be learned for both policy and practice in actualising women's rights to land.

Struggles over land

Legal reform and its impacts

The Hindu Succession Act (HSA) 1956, which covers about 80 per cent of the Indian people, was amended in 2005 to remove gender discriminatory provisions and provide a daughter and son equal entitlements to agricultural land⁵. Prior to this, five states had already brought in amendments – Kerala in 1976, Andhra Pradesh in 1986, Tamil Nadu in 1990 and Karnataka and Maharashtra in 1994 (Deininger et al, 2010). While the Kerala Act sought to abolish the joint family altogether, in the others, the position of a daughter was made on par with a son as far as rights in coparcenary property were concerned (RDI, 2012). This did not apply retrospectively, but only to daughters who were unmarried at the time of the amendment.

A major implication of the amendment, by granting daughter's equal rights in inherited property, is to equate the female line of descent with the male line. Just like a son, a daughter would continue to have interests in her natal family even after marriage. While this can potentially bring significant changes in kinship systems that facilitate gender equality, such as a move towards bilateral inheritance, one does not find many such shifts at present; women continue to see their futures in their marital home, hence seek property rights there rather than in their natal home. Based on a survey of 545 ever-widowed women, Agarwal (1998) points out that while 51 per cent of the widows got a share of their husband's land, only 13 per cent inherited a share of their parental property as daughters⁶. The preference for claiming a share of marital rather than natal property is also demonstrated by Rao (2008) in the case of the Santals, though women still constituted only 11 per cent of all landholders.

Examining the impact of the HSA Amendment on women's land claims in two districts of Andhra Pradesh, Brule found that in the absence of information and mobilisation, the HSA

⁵ While being a step in the right direction, the Lawyer's Collective (2010) point to the persistence of certain anomalies in the law itself such as the ambiguity regarding self-acquired and ancestral property, no recognition of wife, widow and mother as coparceners, confusion regarding agricultural land and the continued possibility of willing the land to particular heirs.

⁶ In Karnataka, Swaminathan et al (2011) found that 71 per cent of agricultural land was owned by men, 14 per cent by women and the rest was in joint titles. 72 per cent of the women owners were widows.

amendment itself had little impact on women's land claims, irrespective of educational levels (Rachel Brule, personal communication, 8/7/10). A study conducted by UN Women and RDI (2011) in two other districts of Andhra Pradesh confirmed not just the low awareness of the law amongst women, but also greater support for wives inheriting land from their husbands, rather than their parents. Interestingly enough, despite the existence of the HSA Amendment since 1986 and the state policy on joint titling of land since the 1990s, women's names appeared in less than 10 per cent of the documents. Of course, it needs to be mentioned here that only 60 per cent of the plots surveyed had any sort of formal documentation in the first place (Ibid), given the tedium of registering land and gaining title documents. Mobilisation by the gender thematic group of the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP), a body linked to the Department of Rural Development of the Government of Andhra Pradesh, however did make a difference. Women in villages where the gender unit was active were twice as likely to know about their rights as those in villages without such active units.

Secondly, of the women who did inherit land, those marrying after 1986 appeared to receive more equal land shares and also have greater control than those married before the Amendment. While not necessarily leading to enhanced claims or registrations of land titles in the names of women, the law does seem to have influenced the degree of autonomy enjoyed by women in their marital families (Roy, 2008) as well as negotiations between husbands and wives on the terms on which wealth should be distributed to their children (Brule, 2010). In a similar exercise conducted in Karnataka and Maharashtra, where the Amendment came into force in 1994, Deininger et al (2010) report that women whose father's died after 1994 were 22 percentage points more likely to inherit land than those whose fathers died before 1994. While still a long way from attaining full gender equality in land inheritance, they suggest a positive effect on both age at marriage and educational attainment as a result of female inheritance rights. Amongst Muslims the shariat grants inheritance rights, albeit half the share of the brother, but it is rarely claimed⁷.

Patel (2006) argues that the reasons why women have not claimed their inheritance under the HSAA is because of the flawed assumptions in the law itself: identification of a woman's personhood as independent of others in her family, the continuing identity of a woman as a member of her parents' family even after marriage and the willingness of women as sisters to jeopardise the relationship with her brother and potential future security. Agarwal (2009) critiques Patel's argument on several grounds, primarily for ignoring regional variations in post-marital residence and kinship systems (with South Indian kinship systems allowing same village and cross-cousin marriage), generalising for India on the basis of North India and for conceptually confusing cultural norms with religious ideology. Most importantly, gender-progressive legal change, according to her, will indeed be out of sync with a social reality which maintains gender unequal social values.

This brings us back to the conceptual point that the rule of law and laws based on it are essential for setting gender-just normative standards, however, the rule of law requires mechanisms for implementation, alongside establishing accountability, legitimacy and voice. Given the primacy

⁷ Other recent legislation such as the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 recognises the rights of forest-dwelling communities, both men and women, to the forest land and other forest resources, but this too has hardly been enforced.

of marriage in the lives of Indian women (and men), and its role in shaping women's identity within her conjugal, familial and kinship relations, it appears that there may be greater recognition of women's rights in marital property. Nevertheless, awareness of the right to inherit and social support for inheritance, even if not translated into actual inheritance as clear from the evidence above, does seem to have positive effects in terms of bargaining, educational attainment or indeed the age at marriage. While further research is required to identify the specific outcomes of the Act in different contexts, what is clear is that establishing the rule of law requires a change in social structures and normative standards that recognise women as complete social beings.

Mainstreaming Gender in State Policy: Kudumbashree in Kerala

Kudumbashree, the Government of Kerala's main anti-poverty programme, is a network of 4 million women, most of them below the poverty line, organised into neighbourhood groups. *Sangha Krishi* or group farming was initiated in 2007, as a core element of Kerala's food security action plan, which simultaneously emphasised increasing the production of food and women's participation in agriculture. Currently, around 250,000 women in around 44,225 collectives are practising collective farming in an approximate area of 27000 hectares (66,000 acres). These collectives lease fallow land, rejuvenate it, farm it and their either sell the produce or use it for consumption; the key decisions being taken locally and democratically (Mukherjee, 2010, 2012). They form an integral part of local planning processes at the community level. This connectedness to local institutions has led to coordination with NABARD's Joint Liability Group (JLG) funding mechanism for subsidised credit⁸, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) for wages to revive fallow land, and a mechanism to ensure that their voices are heard and transparency and accountability maintained in local political processes (c.f Agarwal, 2010 in the case of DDS). Apart from contributing to both a reduction in risk and vulnerability of poor women (through provision of basic needs and infrastructure) and an increase in their levels of satisfaction, through their enhanced ability to use resources to diversify and strengthen their livelihoods, their active participation in political processes has been a significant outcome (Arun et al. 2011).

Serious challenges however still remain, most importantly in the area of tenure security. As the women work on leased lands, the owners are often reluctant to provide them with a formal lease agreement and tax remittance receipt due to apprehensions about the loss of control over their land permanently. This has implications for access to credit, seed and fertiliser subsidies, crop insurance schemes as well as technical knowhow from the Agriculture and allied Departments (Geethakutty, 2011). The idea of a Public Land Bank in every Gram Panchayat, though not yet tried out, has been mooted (Agarwal 2012), to overcome this problem. Landowners not engaged in agricultural work, such as the educated and better off, would be able to deposit their unused land for varying periods of time with the local land bank. While lowering their risk in terms of loss of land, women and women's groups would find it easier to access such land. Secondly, better coordination of services at the local level is essential to provide adequate security and

⁸ The Sanghas are able to avail loans on recommendation of their application by Kudumbashree's federated structure (Area Development Societies and Community Development Societies), in addition to receiving two special incentives – the 'area subsidy' for developing land and the 'production subsidy' for achieving certain levels of productivity (Geethakutty, 2011).

support to women farmers. This could take the form of Resource Centres at panchayat level discussed later.

Nevertheless there are lessons to be learnt from the enthusiasm shown by rural women in joining Sangha Krishi. Mukherjee (2010) highlights three key dimensions: the sense of ownership that women display in relation to their farm work; the organisational structure of the collective farming experiment; and the systematic links between the local government and the community on which the experiment rests. The most important lesson seems to be that Sangha Krishi does not represent the mere implementation of a government project/scheme; rather it plays the dual role of providing space for the articulation of needs and aspirations and bringing them to the local government, while at the same time bringing government resources to the community. Key perhaps is that decision-making lies with the women's collective at the neighbourhood group level, which then mobilises support through the three tier Kudumbashree structure, which works closely with local government mechanisms. The strength seems to lie in the simultaneous mobilisation from above and below, unique also to Kerala's People's Plan Campaign, initiated in 1996, and the synergies that have emerged between the state and civil society, with the former responding to women's agendas, rather than seeking to implement its own through the instrumental use of women's labour. While the question of sustainability remains an open one, this example illustrates how women have collectively organised to establish a rule of law based on good governance and accountability. It also gives hope that the rule of law is not static, but can be shaped and challenged by gendered subalternities.

Issues of Single Women: the National Forum for Single Women's Rights

Women have generally been seen as dependent on men in one way or the other – as daughters, wives and mothers – especially in relation to property rights, hence single women find it difficult to legitimise their independent claims socially and vis-à-vis state policy, despite the existence of legislation guaranteeing equal rights. The only role in which single women have been seen as legitimate is as widows, having served their husbands, families and children for a life-time, and hence entitled to claim both land and other resources (Chen, 1998, Agarwal, 1998, Rao, 2008); yet even here younger widows face considerable harassment.

The category of single women however is much more diverse. It also includes divorced, separated and abandoned women, as well as women who remain unmarried, either due to choice or circumstance (e.g disability, only child and responsible for supporting parents). These latter categories are seen as 'deviants' and are socially rejected, exploited and denied both physical and emotional security by their families, communities and the state. Given their invisibility, in 1998, Aastha Sansthan, an NGO based in Udaipur, Rajasthan, began to organise these women with the dual objective of enabling them to struggle for their rights through a process of collective planning, learning and action, alongside sensitising state and civil society organisations and their functionaries to their needs. In 2000, the Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan (ENSS or Association of Single Women) was formed as a membership based organisation, which through its efforts helped women claim their land and other state entitlements such as pensions and ration cards, and fight against sexual harassment and other discriminatory caste and community practices (Srivastava and Chaudhury, 2011, Berry, 2011). By 2004-5, it expanded to the states of Himachal Pradesh and Jharkhand, and in 2009 a National Forum was established, with members

from six states, the three additional ones being Bihar, Gujarat and Maharashtra. The leadership of the National Forum was drawn from the state organisations, with social activists from the supporting NGOs forming a support group.

The National Forum initiated a study on the condition and status of single women across these six states in 2009-10, interviewing a total of 386 women (46% widows, 38% separated and 16% unmarried). The findings are interesting, confirming a lower status and standard of living for the majority of these women across social groups. Against an All India literacy rate of 65 per cent for women in 2011, only 46 per cent of the single women interviewed were literate, though the figure is higher for unmarried women. Only 40 per cent had ration cards and 25 per cent received pensions, the figure somewhat higher for widows and much lower for separated and divorced women. Age and income criteria, quotas, complicated procedures and corrupt practices all contribute to a denial of their entitlements. When it comes to land, this study too confirms previous studies with a majority (85%) of widows getting a share of their marital property, while most separated/divorced women could not claim either a share of land or any other form of maintenance, partly because the husbands themselves were economically insecure (Srivastava and Chaudhury, 2011).

There are several lessons to be learnt from this experience. First, rather than being helpless persons waiting for assistance/benefits, single women (like other women) are agents of change, and need to be given the space and opportunity to shape their own lives and the larger society in the process. Secondly, as a basic issue confronting them is one of identity and citizenship, not just material security, engaging with collectives, both through membership-based organisations and the local government, becomes critical for gaining recognition. Systems and ways of thinking need to change to recognise single women as equal citizens, not just as a 'category' which needs 'support'. They seek recourse to both the 'modern' and 'indigenous' systems for support, combining their struggles for land and resources with those for identity and recognition. Having said this, it is important to remember that particularly for single women, often ostracised and excluded by their families, state entitlements become key for both survival and security.

Organising for land: the Working Group on Women's land ownership, Gujarat (WGWLO)

Central to the struggle to gain recognition for women's land rights is collective struggle and action. It was in this spirit that the WGWLO, a network of 23 NGOs and CBOs, working for women's rights in 12 districts of Gujarat, came together in June 2002. Before undertaking any advocacy for women's land rights, they felt it important to understand the situation on the ground, and gather evidence that was meaningful and reliable. So the first strategy of WGWLO has been to undertake studies to understand the status of women in agriculture in Gujarat (2004), the gap between law and practice and the extent of legal awareness (2004) and an analysis of Muslim women's land rights (2006). The studies gave insights and understanding into the issues at hand and helped develop responsive and sensitive strategies to address them. The first study conducted with 403 women owning land in Gujarat found that 48 per cent were widows who had claimed a share in their husband's property, 41 per cent were wives who had received titles with a view to claiming particular state announced tax benefits or for their husbands to escape land ceiling laws (many did not even know they held land titles) and less than 5 per cent were women who had inherited a share of their natal property and this too because their parents had no male heirs

(WGWLO, 2004a). Women, however, accounted for only 12 per cent of total land-holders. 20 per cent of the women did cultivate their own land, take decisions on cropping and sale, yet faced a host of difficulties in terms of access to irrigation, credit and technical information (less than 10 per cent had access to credit or agricultural cooperatives), negative attitude from their family members, and lack of support from the state revenue bureaucracy.

As a result, WGWLO initiated work at multiple levels:

- a) Organising women at the grassroots and building federations for mutual and peer support, increasing the capacity of different types of grassroots organisations on how to introduce and negotiate the issue of women and land ownership, legal awareness and implementation of existing laws (with back-up support from a group of lawyers), facilitating mutual and collective learning, exchange and experience sharing;
- b) Sensitising the revenue officials as well as caste/community institutions through training programmes, regular dialogues and consultations, participating in *varsai* (tilling) camps, as well as advocacy; and
- c) Changing the public mindset by reaching out to the media, other networks (including women's and development organisations), academic institutions, through organising public events, research reports, newsletters, taking up cases etc (Dave. 2010).

Most important perhaps is the emphasis on establishing institutional mechanisms to promote women's access to a range of productive assets. Called by different names – Gender Justice Centres, Women and Land Committees, People's Rights Centres, Legal Aid Centres, Panchayat Information Centres or just women's federations, these mechanisms facilitate the interface between the women and the state to realise entitlements, be they kisan credit cards, widow pensions, ration cards or registration under the MGNREGS⁹. They also seek to work with local panchayats, in particular supporting elected women representatives to take forward their agendas and struggles. Such participation and engagement with local government helps put their demands on to legitimate fora and governance structures, establishing systems of accountability in the process, rather than carrying out small-scale independent activities.

The role of WGWLO has been to facilitate a process whereby its member NGOs/CBOs take on board the issue of land rights as a critical element of their larger agenda that involves a struggle for women's rights as equal citizens. While the specific issues and priorities are grounded in local realities and have been raised through collective analysis, as the interaction between member NGOs and grassroots organisations is not funding-based, the relevance of the issue and its location within their own agenda has contributed to a sense of ownership. Rather than being target-driven, each of the members has had the time and space to explore and develop the issue, with training and legal support when required, alongside open and transparent communication (Velayudhan, 2008). The systematic demonstration of gaps between policy and implementation through data, collectively gathered and analysed, has enabled WGWLO to demand accountability from government institutions at all levels – the panchayats, revenue bureaucracy as well as different department of the state government. A good example of the attempts by the state here to set up a rule of law and good governance is visible in the *varsai* camps that provide

⁹ The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, introduced in 2006, guarantees 100 days of work at the minimum wage for any person seeking work.

titles with minimum bureaucratic hurdles, while at the same time incentivising households to register land in women's names.

Conclusions and Lessons learnt

Women struggle to assert their identities at all times, and the struggle for land is a part of this larger struggle. Any success in actualising land rights can therefore only occur when women are recognised and accepted as complete social beings. This can happen when the rule of law is seen to be established, neither a straightforward nor a linear process, given that women are deeply embedded in a network of family, kinship and social structures. While the existence of a law/statute is a starting point, it doesn't automatically lead to a rule of law, due to the importance of not just legal, but equally social recognition in actualising rights to land. This raises the importance of creating legitimate spaces for women to express their needs and aspirations, refigure gender roles and exercise control over land and other productive assets.

One finds the common themes of establishing a rule of law, transparency, accountability and strengthening women's voice running through the examples discussed in this paper, each using different strategies to establish a rule of law. Certain key principles can however be identified:

1. Recognising women as agents of change: Strengthening women's collectivities to enhance the spaces for bottom-up articulation of needs, control over decision-making and ownership of action. This relates both to claiming recognition as equal citizens (by shifting normative social standards) and enhancing their social and economic wellbeing;
2. Creating institutional mechanisms (preferably membership-based) that enable women to both support and have a voice in local government bodies (putting participatory governance into practice based on principles of transparency, accountability, legitimacy, participation and voice);
3. Developing innovative strategies to ensure access to credit, inputs, information and technology, and land itself, such as public land banks, panchayat resource centres¹⁰, decentralised and localised delivery of agricultural services through agri-clinics¹¹.
4. Operationalising with adequate budget support a multi-pronged strategy that includes social support and protection, alongside strengthening economic entitlements, especially for the most vulnerable, single women;
5. Supporting legal awareness, knowledge sharing and the facilitation of claims; and
6. Making budgetary provisions for monitoring and enforcement of the law.

¹⁰ In March 2012, Odisha's Ganjam district administration has announced the creation of Women and Land rights Facilitation Centres (WLRFC), to be staffed by women revenue inspectors, across its 22 administrative divisions. Working through village-level anganwadi workers, it seeks to identify single and destitute women and facilitate the provision of titles to homestead land to them (Singh, 2012).

¹¹ The National Farmer's Commission (2006) recommended the training of and support to local youth to set up agri-clinics in their own panchayat. Possible funding through the MGNREGS was suggested.

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