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Rotti, rice or ragi? Let the women choose

by Bhargavi Nagendra, India

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of **Stories
Change**

*Connecting traditional knowledge and
innovations for fair and sustainable
food systems*

United Nations
Decade of
**FAMILY
FARMING**
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Stories of change: *Connecting traditional knowledge and innovations for fair and sustainable food systems*

In December 2017, the [United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the United Nations Decade of Family Farming \(UNDAF, 2019-2028\)](#) thus constituting a framework that recognizes the importance of family farmers, which includes peasants, indigenous people, traditional communities, pastoralists, fisherfolks, upland farmers, and many other groups of food producers that possess a unique potential to promote transformative changes in the way food is grown, produced, processed and distributed.

All over the world, there are thousands of stories of distinctive work carried out anonymously by family farmers, including women and youth, on successful transitions to more inclusive, sustainable and fair food systems. Those stories are based on co-creation and sharing of traditional knowledge and innovations that are helping to make food systems sustainable, leaving no one behind.

In this context, the [Family Farming Knowledge Platform](#) in collaboration with the [Barefoot Guide Connection](#) organized a series of “writeshops”, writing classes to support practitioners to write their own experience, generating knowledge which highlight the practices, changes, innovations and impacts of what they do in support of family farming.

These writeshops represented an opportunity to share the creative process through which identify, recognize, write and exchange stories and experiences from young people, women, farmers, small-scale producers who work to promote, improve and strengthen family farming and achieve prosperous and inclusive rural societies.

This initiative was conceived to provide a space to highlight the human, cultural and social dimensions of family farming, including the human rights embedded in family farming and its social and economic organization.

The stories presented in this compilation - selected among those written during the writeshops, highlight the different ways in which family farmers responsibly and creatively manage their natural resources, landscapes and ecosystems as well as the cultural and symbolic values that define their identity.

Cover photo by thestoriesofchange.com/
[handloom-ilkal-saree](#)

Rotti, rice or ragi? Let the women choose

by Bhargavi Nagendra, India

It was early February 2020. I was headed off with my camera crew, our field officer – Kumar and our NGO partner from Bagalkot to visit and film some Fair Price shops. There were muttered rumors of a virus called COVID. WhatsApp messages, sounding the alarm of a pandemic, were traveling faster than the virus itself. But at that point the threat was still incomprehensible to us and seemed far away. Thankfully, it did not stop this very important tour of our project.

Our first stop was in the main city area of Ilkal, a few miles away from the District Headquarters. Ilkal is known for its very distinctive traditional saree woven by artists in North Karnataka. The Ilkal saree, a 6-to-9-yard of fabric, commonly worn by the women in India, is made of cotton as well as silk. The loose end or pallu of the Ilkal saree consists of alternate color stripes woven in pure silk and the use of a form of embroidery called Kasuti which reflect traditional patterns like palanquins, elephants and lotuses.

It was not very difficult to find the newly constructed shop as the local residents knew it well and could easily guide us to it. Fair Price shops have been important landmarks in India since the 1960s and are commonly called ration shops.

We were early and the shop had not yet opened. We were to meet our community elected members; the four Citizen Monitors, Ms. Saroja, Ms. Prema, Ms. Usha and Ms. Deepa by ten o'clock. They were part of the 716 other Citizen Monitors, across the state of Karnataka, we had

been working with over the last 3 years. I realized that ten o'clock was early for them as they would have had to finish their household and farm chores, prepare and send their children to school and arrive here on foot. As a project lead, I had learnt this early on, after having been made to wait for more than an hour or two, but I knew that they would try their best to be on time as we were all eager to meet each other again.



Photo by thestoriesofchange.com/handloom-ilkal-saree

While we waited, Mr. Manjunath, our NGO partner, had managed to contact the Citizen Vigilance Committee (CVC) member of the shop. Unlike other shops across the state, we were lucky to find at least one of the Government selected CVC members because CVCs have ceased to exist in other places or many of them are not even aware that they are a part of the CVC committee.

This committee, if effectively functional as per the regulations, could transform the last-mile delivery of the Public Distribution System. It could enhance the accessibility of food for the most marginalized by ensuring transparency and accountability of the system. The committee has three women members selected randomly from the list of ration cardholders of a shop. Since each shop would have at least 500 ration cardholders - meaning 500 families - all

the women of the shop could get the chance of being a CVC member at least once in their lifetime and serve their village, town or city. But this would only happen in a utopian world of a policymaker or practitioner. In our project, we had recorded stories of the computer-selected CVC members not knowing that they were selected! Some had migrated out of that location; some were even dead, and databases were not updated. In cases where CVC members were documented to be present, they told us that they had not received any training in their roles and responsibilities from the government. Reviving these committees has hardly been a priority for the state.

It was already getting hot and we were still exhausted from our long travels. As the shop was yet to open, we decided to start interviewing the government selected CVC member who had taken time off to talk to us. This CVC member was a schoolteacher and was fairly acquainted with this Fair Price Shop where she had her ration card. She looked anxiously at the camera. Like many others she told us that she had not received any training from the government on her duties and responsibilities as a CVC member. She had only interacted with the Food Inspector once or twice in her long tenure of four years and had never met her other committee members. It was surprising that she had not heard of or attended our special *Grama Sabha* that was conducted as a part of our intervention.

Although *Grama Sabhas* are arranged only annually or for special occasions by the local Government, we had included this format of discussion in our intervention to revive the decentralized decision-making process. These meetings are attended by all the village inhabitants, local leaders and officials and provide a platform for the community members to discuss and take decisions on issues related to their ration cards. It was in one such meeting that

Ms. Saroja, Ms. Prema, Ms. Usha and Ms. Deepa were elected by their community members to get trained by us and help resolve their woes of accessing food grains.

We could hear an old Splendor motorbike arrive near the shop. The shop owner's son, Mr. Suresh, had arrived just as we were wrapping up the interview and he came with a friend who helped him run the shop. He greeted me and shouted "*Namaskaara* madam!" as he arrived.

We got many shots of Mr. Suresh opening the store door to feed into our documentary as a creative filler, something that the Director of the movie wanted to add-in. The pandemic had just started but they had managed to keep a sanitiser bottle at the store entrance. I was impressed, but I didn't have the heart to tell them that it was not sanitiser in the bottle, but hand wash soap!

When Mr. Suresh's father, the manager and owner, came to the shop, he already knew why we were there. The NGO partner had explained to him that his shop was one of the best performing shops as per our intervention and we wanted to listen to his side of the story and get visuals for the film. Our project was ending after three years, and we were touring across the state to capture stories of change for our report and documentary. Since our CMs were yet to arrive, we decided to interview the eagerly waiting shop owner. He looked like he was in his 60s. His dark eyes were bright and interested. I sensed that he was an observant person. Although we had to prompt some answers to the questions, I was surprised that he was able to answer most of them without any help. I was amazed and pleased that he did not take any credit for the improvements in his shop but owed it all to the Citizen Monitors who were trained to take up the role of a CVC member. He told us that his shop was now compliant with all the regulations including maintaining shop timings, displaying

records, ration details, samples, putting up a complaint box and keeping the store clean. The beneficiaries would now know the times the shop keeper would be available and the days the shop would be closed. They would also be able to write down their issues or suggestions and drop it into the complaint box if they wanted it to reach the shopkeeper and expected an action towards it. Mr. Suresh attributed all of this to the constant nudge he got from the monthly visits by the Citizen Monitors. He felt that he was ready to face any surprise inspection by the government officials. The CMs had also helped raise his concerns to the Food inspectors.

He seemed quite delighted with the new shop that he had recently shifted to after many complaints about his old shop. I was very curious to know why they had changed the location. According to our metrics, this intervention was one of the biggest improvements among all the shops. Convincing a shop owner to shift to a new space and finding a new place in less than four months of interventions was very impressive. Even we had not anticipated this level of commitment from our volunteers. They continued to surprise us.

During the interview, our four Citizen Monitors had arrived. As we wrapped up our conversation with the shopkeeper, I prepared them for their interviews facing the camera. I felt that this recording meant a lot to them because all of them had taken a lot of effort to show up dressed nicely. They wore colorful sarees, with fresh flowers in their hair, colorful bangles matching their sarees and had neatly combed plaits. This made me very happy.

Even after Mr. Kumar prepared them by taking them through all the activities they had undertaken since the time they were elected, they buckled under pressure when they faced the camera. Our team acknowledged that the

experience of speaking in front of a camera was indeed a daunting task, but no amount of encouragement eased them. We tried various locations around the shop, but it got even worse because many onlookers started crowding and scared our CMs further.

We almost gave up and decided to change the location once again for the interview. Our plan now was to capture the location of the old shop that had become the biggest hindrance to access the food rations for families enrolled in this shop. Our CVC members had described it as an isolated place with no street lamps and they had also reported instances when they were stalked and catcalled by drunk men in that area. It was a long walk from the busy main road and the afternoon sun did not make it any easier. I could imagine what it would be like to walk from here back home, carrying 20-25 kgs of food grains with no last mile transport. Under the Public Distribution Scheme, the biggest food distribution network in the world, each member of the household is counted in the ration card and is given 3 kgs of rice, 2 kgs of wheat and sometimes 1 kg of pulses at a subsidized or free price to people below the poverty line. They include some of the most marginalized sections of the country and India currently caters to 23.68 crore ration card holders and 80.75 crore beneficiary's dependent on the system (1 crore = 10 million).

When we arrived, I could immediately see why the shop had to move to a new location. The old shop was in a desolate building with iron rods used for construction poking out, concrete blocks showing and paint missing. With one wrong step, anything could go wrong especially if children accompanying mothers to collect their rations were left unattended. The hygiene of the shop in handling and distributing food grains had also been a concern among the consumers and buildings like this were easy targets for pests. In another study site, the Fair

Price Shop was next to a cattle shed and this ended up contaminating the food stored in the shop! Hunger levels of people can be met by increasing the quantity of food but only the quality of the food can improve health and nutrition of a population.

I could see the camera crew growing impatient because the four CMs were still hesitating to speak even after changing multiple locations. We were running out of ideas and decided to take a chai (tea) break at a local store. I quietly asked the women what was bothering them. One of them looked up at me and said politely, “We find it really hard to speak freely with the shop keeper’s son and his friend always circling around trying to eavesdrop during the interviews!”

How did I not realize this?

The camera crew, our FRO and I looked at each other. We had to come up with a plan. The only way to keep Mr. Suresh and his friend away was by distracting them. We split the camera crew and I decided to take Mr. Suresh with me to a food grain storage plant along with a cameraman to get his story of the problems he faces as a shop owner. However, I could see the limitations of the interventions. Even though we have trained these women with the information required, supported them to be able to identify the right and wrong, we could only push them up to a limit. They were still worried that Mr. Suresh would use their interview to take extreme action against them. We had to reassure them that nothing like this would happen. Our role in the community is limited during the intervention and we had to respect the invisible boundaries set in the community. After all, the CMs and their families would continue to live in the same community even after we leave.

The women now looked visibly at ease, and they did not stop narrating their story even after one hour. Ms. Saroja, Ms. Prema, Ms. Usha and

Ms. Deepa told us that even though they were clueless when they got elected, now they were ready to speak confidently about entitlements, grievance redressal systems, compliance requirement of ration shops and were able to reach out to their Food Inspectors if required.

The newly found respect they had gained in their networks had motivated them to fight for many more causes! The Public Affairs Center, the organization I worked with, had taken up this project to explore effective models for improving community participation in the PDS.



Photo by agrifarming.in/jowar-farming

After a lot of trial and error we learnt that women who were a part of Self-Help Groups, when elected and trained, could bring about tremendous improvements in their Fair Price Shops, and make up for lack of state capacity. Our stories show that they could beautifully bridge the gap between the communities and government too. At this moment I was ecstatic. Their answers had not required any prompting from us! They were able to carry out the functions that a government selected CVC member, Food inspectors and the department had ignored for many years. While some of these issues seem transactional, it has grown into a bigger

monster that will soon make the system more cumbersome and dysfunctional- impacting hunger levels.

They were proud of their achievements and now wanted to take up the most compelling battle with the Government. This was to request for a diverse and nutritious food basket as a part of their ration. They were upset that they were forced to switch from eating jowar, a type of millet largely made up their diet historically to rice. These women know what they want on their plates, and I know they will fight for the right diet to nurture their children and communities. Empowering them with the right information and agency will ensure that the benefits reach every person in the village.

A letter was sent later to the Commissioner of the Department demanding other food grains to be added to the ration for better nutrition based on the discussions in the Grama Sabha. Making systems more transparent and accountable will help many more to be informed, included and help them ask the right questions to the authorities! Tutorial videos, awareness pamphlets, a [documentary](#), and a toolkit were made to get many more beneficiaries to be informed and involved.

After the interviews, I went off to a local restaurant for a quiet meal. While I was reflecting on my conversations with our NGO partners, Citizen Monitors, Government Officials and my senior colleagues, I was snapped back to reality with something that sounded like claps from the kitchen. The sound of perfecting the dough came from the women in the kitchen making jowar rotti (millet-based bread), a bread eaten in the semi-arid regions of this country. I realised that our systems need constant shaping, nudging, flattening of bumps to make them function smoothly and effectively just like the smooth and round rottis made in the hands of the local women.

But also mind you, these rottis may not suit the ragi millet lovers of South Karnataka. Solutions need to be tailored to suit the local situations. Rotti, rice, or ragi, women will show us the way forward.

I wonder then, how many types of cuisines should we cater to in India alone?

Let me think about it while I relish my aromatic groundnut based hot shenga obbatu and a dallop of hot ghee with my team.

Photo by [bbc.co.uk/food/recipes/roti_46086](https://www.bbc.co.uk/food/recipes/roti_46086)





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