

## Engineering just transitions: Putting money where the mouth is

### *The need for Climate Justice*

Each year, the way to UNFCCC COP is paved with good intentions, but year after year, the hopes of vulnerable communities in low-income countries are dashed, for the good intentions are rarely translated into structural actions at scale. Those who work with smallholder farmers in the Global South are understandably hopeful that this year the thematic focus on food and agriculture, coupled with the promised new global goal on adaptation, will help in just transitions for these vulnerable communities. But to ensure that these hopes are fulfilled will require political will and systemic changes at all levels.

[Daily losses attributed to climate impacts exceed \\$200 million](#), and smallholder farmers whose livelihoods depend on climatic conditions disproportionately bear the burden of these impacts, and yet not much has been achieved so far to help this demographic section of society cope with climate change. Studies estimate that the smallholder agricultural sector, comprising hundreds of millions of the world's poorest households, [receives a meagre 2% of the necessary funds](#), and even this pittance rarely reaches the affected population to help them in adaptation. The inherent climate injustice of this current situation is evident from the fact that sector smallholder farmers have, in terms of actual and historic emissions, low per capita emissions.

### *Vulnerabilities of women and Indigenous Peoples in the Global South*

Climate change in the Global South has resulted in the predicted cycles of droughts and pluvial floods that now annually destroys agricultural productivity and livelihoods. Structural measures for better adaptation and resilience are urgently needed, and yet, in international climate dialogues, even conceptual frameworks for addressing the challenges of the Global South are missing. International climate change discourse in the agricultural sector is predominantly shaped by a Western technocratic approach and oriented towards the needs of the globalised industrial food system. This systematically increases the vulnerabilities of the agrarian communities in the Global South as their needs are not met. Within these agrarian communities, women and indigenous peoples, are at a higher risk due to their social marginalisation.

Women face specific vulnerabilities arising from their traditional social roles. This is not because women are more vulnerable per se, but because of inherent disadvantages in present-day socio-political structures. In the Global South, agriculture engages a high proportion of women, and even though they are responsible for securing household nutrition, their agency and decision-making power are severely limited due to entrenched patriarchal structures. Distress migration, an increasing phenomenon in such landscapes, poses greater risks for women than men. Gender qualifies roles, responsibilities, and agency available to people and is thus a factor in determining their vulnerability quotient. Yet, a gendered approach is largely absent in the dialogues around climate change and the allocation of climate funds. Gender should be a cross-cutting issue across all the themes of the UNFCCC COPs, but instead, gender gets paid token lip service and is not meaningfully included in these dialogues. This December, the COP 28 in Dubai promises to be no different, as its schedule indicates a siloed approach to gender.

In India, my organization, [Revitalising Rainfed Agriculture Network \(RRA Network\)](#), works in partnership with farmers in the rainfed areas of the country. The rainfed areas of India account for 55 percent of the net sown area of the country and cover a wide diversity of terrains, soil types, rainfall patterns and other ecological features. In these regions, along with women, there is another disadvantaged demographic sector, that of the indigenous population. [With an estimated total population of 104 million people and 705 officially recognized ethnic groups](#), India is home to the [largest population of Indigenous Peoples](#)<sup>1</sup>. The distribution of this population is largely concurrent with the areas where rainfed agriculture is practised in the country. Historically, these tribes had sustainable livelihoods, but

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<sup>1</sup> The socio-political classification for indigenous tribes in India is "Scheduled Tribes." While there are 705 officially recognized scheduled tribes, there are many more ethnic groups that are still denied that status. On paper, several laws recognize the need for affirmative action for the scheduled tribes and their rights to land and self-government, but, in reality, India's indigenous tribes face systemic injustices. Furthermore India, after independence, recognized all Indians as "Indigenous." Therefore, the concept of "Indigenous Peoples as defined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) is not applicable to India, which effectively furthers silences the voices of these tribes on international platforms.

today their traditional agricultural knowledge, practices, and livelihoods, have been eroded by mainstream, “one-size fits all” approach to economic development. As with gender vulnerability, the vulnerabilities specifically faced by indigenous tribes is often overlooked in the framing of national and international policies. As with Gender Equality, the theme of Indigenous Peoples is duly included in the COP 28 schedule, but not given prominence.

### *Engineering just transitions: The example of the Odisha Millet Mission*

To adapt to climate change, we need bottom-up developmental approaches. Successful adaptation practices should inform policies. The commendable experience of the RRA Network across varied terrains conclusively proves that climate-resilient agriculture needs decentralized structures, participatory frameworks, and localised agroecological solutions. Experience in the field also reveals that there is still a wealth of traditional wisdom and genetic biodiversity, which would help in dealing with the vagaries of the weather. RRA Network has been successful in designing and implementing decentralized, participatory frameworks at scale as evidenced by the agricultural programme--[the Odisha Millet Mission \(OMM\) for the Government of Odisha](#), India. Using a plate-to-farm approach, OMM promotes a comprehensive revival of millets (a nutritious, climate-resilient, forgotten staple) in the rainfed regions of the state benefitting primarily indigenous farmers. As of March 2023, OMM resulted in crop diversification and better mitigation and adaptation practices in 264,000 Ha benefitting 202,784 millet farmers. A significant proportion of the beneficiaries of OMM are women and/or tribal farmers. The structural design of OMM systematically empowers rural women by providing them with gender-friendly technology, capital funds, and necessary training to be agri-entrepreneurs. At present, there are 116 Farmer-Producer Organisations (all of which include women farmers and some of which are run solely by women) and 1,869 women self-help groups were part of OMM. As is well documented in gender studies, the economic empowerment of women allows them to have greater agency and decision-making power in societies. Women are not hapless victims: When empowered, women can be active agents of change taking responsibility for shaping their own destinies and that of the households they manage.

The decentralised framework of OMM has also allowed for reviving millet biodiversity in the fields by legally approving the sale of indigenous seed varieties. Traditional millet varieties or landraces in the rainfed agroecosystems had evolved over centuries, in keeping with the ecological conditions of the landscape and the indigenous knowledge of farmers who carefully cultivated various varieties for different needs. This rich inherent agrobiodiversity has been greatly eroded due to monocultures promoted by the industrial food system. Bringing back the biodiversity of ecosystems is key to building resilience to climate change. OMM set up support systems for scientifically researching the performance of farmers’ preferred landraces through participatory varietal trials and to approve the release of such seeds by an accredited technical committee. In August 2023, [Odisha became the first state in India to formally release four finger-millet landraces](#) for seed production and cultivation. This is a landmark decision for it acknowledges the intellectual property rights of indigenous farmers who were custodians of these seeds. Under OMM, local women and farmers operate community-managed seed centers and have been trained in the processes of seed purification, treatment, and multiplication for the market.

OMM demonstrates that through structural changes women and indigenous peoples can play a pivotal role in building resilience against climate change. Recognizing this, UN-FAO is studying the agroecological framework of OMM for its applicability to other countries in the world in transforming food systems. OMM’s success can be attributed to the political will of the Government of Odisha to design and implement a different participatory development paradigm supported by the necessary public investment. These are the sort of just transitions that we need, nationally and internationally. One hopes that 2023, which started as the International Year of the Millets and will culminate with COP 28, will mark the beginning of a new era: An era where people whose lives and livelihoods are being destroyed by climate change will be supported in building local resilience.

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