Women actresses of the agroecological transition:

Feedback on 10 years of projects by SOL and Navdanya in North India
Acknowledgments

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Introduction

WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE: AN ESSENTIAL BUT UNRECOGNIZED ROLE TO DEFEND AND PROMOTE

The role played by women in agriculture is decisive. The FAO estimates that they contribute half of the world’s food production. They are often responsible for the preparation of the land, watering, harvesting, storage, processing, and packaging, as well as for the supply of water and the administrative and accounting management of farms. In addition, they are responsible for domestic and community life. These multiple tasks, costly in terms of time and energy, are poorly recognized and rarely paid. In addition, in many countries, women have limited access to natural resources and land and are not involved in decision making, limiting their autonomy which is already very restrained by social norms.

In India, where they suffer strong discrimination, women play a leading role in the selection, conservation, and multiplication of farmers’ seed varieties, which contribute to the preservation of local biodiversity.

Recognizing the role of women is essential, for themselves as well as for society, and more globally for the environment and biodiversity.

It is for these reasons that SOL supports the development of farmer and solidarity-based agroecological models in India that recognize and value the central role of women.

WHY THIS PUBLICATION?

SOL wanted to produce this publication to share its experience in India where, with its partner Navdanya, it has been implementing the Seeds of Hope, Small Farms India and now Seeds of Resilience programs for the past 10 years. From these flagship projects, we have drawn certain lessons, reflections, and new knowledge, particularly concerning the role of women in the evolution of agricultural practices - all good practices that we value in our current projects and that we are keen to share. In these pages, we will focus on the agroecological transition, the selection and use of seeds adapted to the areas of intervention in a context of climate change, and finally the central issue of women’s empowerment.

1 FAO, La situation mondiale de l’alimentation et de l’agriculture. Le rôle des femmes dans l’agriculture. Combler le fossé entre les hommes et les femmes pour soutenir le développement, 2010-2011.
Farmer-based agroecology: a movement for the ecological transition of our agricultural and food systems

Agroecology includes different models that may vary according to the context, but have in common respect for the environment, adaptation to local resources and know-how, replicability at low cost, etc. It is presented as a social movement in defense of sustainable and equitable agricultural and food systems, aiming to guarantee accessibility for all to quality food, while ensuring autonomy and a decent income for farmers and recreating links between rural and urban areas. It is part of a real political project for the benefit of environmental and social justice and human rights.

WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

IN INDIA, WOMEN:

- Approximately 43% of the global agricultural workforce is made up of women
- Produce about 80% of the food products in most of the Global South countries
- Work an average of 12 hours more per week than men
- Spend 8 & 10 hours per day on unpaid work (housework, family and community care)
- Represent 55% of the agricultural workforce
- Only 14% own their land

5 World bank data, 2019.
7 ActionAid International, Addressing Women’s Unpaid Care Work: Integrating Agroecology and Women’s Economic Empowerment for Climate Resilient Livelihoods, Experiences from Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan.
I. SOL in India

SOL IN INDIA: A LONG-STANDING EXPERIENCE

It was in India, in the state of Bihar (north-east of the country), that SOL carried out its first projects: the creation, in partnership with local associations, of grassroots pharmacies and the training of health workers in Ayurvedic medicine from 1981 (through the creation of plant gardens) and then of rural health centers from 1982. Since then, SOL has supported about 60 projects in India.

For SOL, these projects were a forerunner of its current work in the agricultural sector in India. They were also a mean of integrating issues related to the participation and empowerment of women, which SOL systematically integrates in all its actions. Thus, since 1988, SOL has conducted several «integrated» development projects throughout India, always with local partners, linking agricultural transition (access to land, training in agroecological techniques, reforestation, livestock breeding, etc.), development of vocational training and the establishment of income-generating activities for women.

Navdanya: an organization close to the field

Since 2010, Navdanya has been a privileged partner of SOL in India. Founded by the ecofeminist activist Dr. Vandana Shiva in 1991, the trust promotes an agriculture that respects human rights and the environment, based on the autonomy of farmers and ensuring food security for the most marginalized rural populations (see box).

The projects conducted together by SOL and Navdanya have, over the past 10 years, contributed to the empowerment of Indian women farmers. For Vandana Shiva, “whether it is the pandemic or the call to regenerate the earth or to care for communities facing hunger, unemployment and poverty, women’s experience and dedication to care will guide the ecological transition”.

8 The word navdanya refers to the «nine crops» that ensure Indian food security.
Navdanya: an organization close to the field

Involved in 22 Indian states, Navdanya works with many local and national organizations and involves about 1,000,000 small farmers, mostly women. It also works with local communities to encourage them to become involved in organic farming and seed saving activities. More than 35,000 farmers are part of its network, and 2,000 new farmers are trained each year.

Initiator of a hundred seed banks allowing the conservation of thousands of varieties of plants (rice, cereals, vegetables, oil seeds, medicinal plants), Navdanya created in 1995 in Dehradun (Uttarakhand, north of the country), Bija Vidyapeeth, a demonstration farm which hosts training courses. The farm also has a bank of 1,425 varieties of old vegetable and cereal seeds, a soil analysis laboratory, a food processing area, a greenhouse, a solar dryer, and a medicinal plant garden.

Navdanya has also launched the Diverse Women for Diversity program to give voice to women from the local to the global level on issues of biodiversity, cultural diversity, and food security. It provides a common international platform for women to lead non-violent resistance to globalization, genetic engineering, and patents on life.
Farmer agroecology in India: our actions since 2010

<table>
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<th>Seeds of Hope</th>
<th>Green schools</th>
<th>Small Farms India</th>
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<td>Dehradun Valley, Uttarakhand</td>
<td>Tamil Nadu</td>
<td>Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan</td>
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- To give back to agriculture its societal and environmental role
- To implement agroecological techniques in schools and farms
- To sensitize rural communities, and particularly young generations, to biodiversity

### OUTCOME OF THE THREE PROJECTS

<table>
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<th>COMPLETED ACTIONS</th>
<th>RESULTS</th>
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<td>Training of 1457 farmers, including 1000 women</td>
<td>Increase of the production from 5 to 20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>38 self-help groups created</td>
<td>606 women networked together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 seed banks created and training of 274 seed keepers</td>
<td>100% of farmers use their own seeds of 35 climate-resilient varieties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creation of 68 school gardens and training of 160 teachers</td>
<td>21381 children and 85520 families sensitized</td>
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<tr>
<td>56 events and seminar organised</td>
<td>286400 people sensitized between 2011 and 2019, over the 3 projects</td>
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Increase from 3 to 27 varieties grown on average
55200 people have access to a more diversified food
392 women transform their surplus

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The “Seeds of Hope” project was selected in 2016 by the French Ministry of the Environment as one of the «100 projects for the climate» and received in 2017 during the COP 23 the Gender and Climate Solutions Award. It was finally presented at the 2nd International Symposium on Agroecology organized by the FAO in April 2018, as an example of an initiative that values the fundamental role of women in the fight against climate change.

Awards:

The “Seeds of Hope” project was selected in 2016 by the French Ministry of the Environment as one of the «100 projects for the climate» and received in 2017 during the COP 23 the Gender and Climate Solutions Award. It was finally presented at the 2nd International Symposium on Agroecology organized by the FAO in April 2018, as an example of an initiative that values the fundamental role of women in the fight against climate change.

Testimonies:

Bija Devi’s, seed keeper:

“If we buy seeds from outside, we don’t know what they will do. All farmers should save their seeds. (...) This is the only way to make farmers prosperous, to ensure food security, for the health of all in our societies.”

Rukhmani Rawat’s testimony, Navdanya’s local coordinator:

“I organize trainings on organic farming, and I help women to gather in groups for women’s food sovereignty. We produce many different crops. We combine 4 to 5 crops per season in the same field, up to 12 crops per year on the same plot.”
II. Women actresses of agroecological transition in India

1. WOMEN, FIRST CONCERNED BY AGROECOLOGY

In India, women living in rural areas are often confined to low-valued agricultural work (transplanting, weeding, etc.). Moreover, it is difficult for them to access land, credit, and training. Finally, their subsistence and that of their families, which they often ensure, is undermined by climate change, whose meteorological consequences expose them more directly to food insecurity and malnutrition. At the global level, the risk of death linked to natural disasters is 14 times higher for women, who also represent 90% of climate refugees. The ecological and farmer transition as conceived by SOL is part of the construction of more inclusive societies, which give women rights, opportunities, and responsibilities equivalent to those of men, and allow them to draw the same forms of recognition. It is estimated that equal access to land, natural and material resources would enable women to increase the yields of their farms by 20 to 30%, which would contribute to significantly reducing malnutrition in the world.

A lever of change for women and communities

For SOL and Navdanya, it is necessary to question the sexist patterns of conventional agriculture and to promote the emancipation of women from male control in India as elsewhere. On the contrary, women’s involvement in the agroecological dynamic contributes to the development of this model, which is more respectful of biodiversity, environment, and human beings.
This has been demonstrated in the projects that the partner organisations have been carrying out jointly for 10 years.

Following training in agroecological techniques (making pesticides and natural fertilizers, learning crop rotation techniques, using farmer seeds, etc.), 1248 farmers, 80% of whom are women, are now producing fruit and vegetables independently, and 80% of them have obtained an increase in their production of 5% to 20%. All the farmers have subsequently switched to organic farming and have seen a clear improvement in the quality of their soils and their health.

After three years, most farmers reported yields equal to those of farmers using chemicals for corn, rice, and wheat.

In the case of vegetables, their productivity under organic farming is even higher. Farmers reported that, despite unfavorable climatic conditions, productivity of the main food crops was satisfactory compared to conventional farms. Agroecology is thus a source of autonomy, resilience, and food sovereignty for farmers, especially women.

Testimonies:

Kamlesh Devi, farmer in Keshowala:

“I participated in agroecology trainings at Navdanya’s farm and in my village. I learned different techniques to make compost, save my seeds and increase soil health. Before we used chemical pesticides and fertilizers, now we don’t. By applying the different techniques, our food is better, and our children are healthy.”

Women farmers of Lower Charbha village:

“It is better for our health to grow our vegetables without chemicals, it is also cheaper, and our products taste better. For these reasons we asked to work with the project. Now we grow 10 to 12 different varieties of vegetables and plants each season, we save our seeds, and we hardly buy any from the market.”

In India, the training in agroecological techniques conducted with women farmers has led to:

An increase in agricultural production of 5 to 20%\textsuperscript{16}.

\textbf{100\%} of farmers are fully convinced of the advantages of organic farming over chemical farming. They are particularly satisfied and happy with the savings in chemical input costs on the one hand, and the better and healthier agricultural production in the form of cereals and vegetables on the other\textsuperscript{17}.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid
\textsuperscript{17} Final external evaluation of Seeds of Hope project phase I, February 2014
2. SEEDS, KNOWLEDGE, AND KNOW-HOW SPECIFIC TO WOMEN

India embarked more than 50 years ago on the industrialization of its agriculture. Industrial seeds then took precedence over the traditional seeds used by farmers for thousands of years, with the imposition of a standardized model for registering seed varieties used by farmers that met agribusiness criteria. In India, rice varieties declined from about 200,000 to 30,000 in the mid-19th century, and several thousand more varieties have disappeared since the imposition of the Green Revolution in India in the 1960s.

Today, it is estimated that only 6,000 varieties of rice remain in Indian fields. As a result, this has led to a collapse in crop biodiversity, greater vulnerability of crops, increased use of pesticides, standardization of fruits and vegetables and a decline in their quality.

In the face of these observations, the assets of farmer seeds are today reaffirmed. Offering a great genetic diversity, they adapt to many geoclimatic contexts. Free of rights and with excellent taste and nutritional qualities, they are the fundamental resource of farmers, who can save, reuse, and transmit them without purchase costs. Farmer and local seeds are the foundation of farmers’ food sovereignty, quality food and agricultural production adapted to climate change.

In India, women have traditionally played a prominent role in the preservation and use of seeds. They are the holders of ancestral knowledge and skills in the selection, conservation, and multiplication of farmer seeds. A study conducted by Navdanya in 2010 revealed that in 60% of the cases, women decided on the type of seeds used on the farms. On a daily basis, Indian women farmers use 150 different plant species.

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18 Navdanya & RESTE, Seeds of Hope, Seeds of Resilience – How Biodiversity and Agroecology offer Solutions to Climate Change by Growing Living Carbon, 2017
19 Debal Deb, La lutte pour sauver le riz traditionnel indien, Pour la Science, 21 avril 2020.
A feminist agroecology for resilience

The programs deployed by SOL and Navdanya have strengthened this role in the covered territories by structuring a network of 274 seed keepers trained in seed selection and conservation. These women farmers are entrusted with local varieties of seeds to preserve, benefit from training specifically addressed to them and are the protagonists of the implementation of techniques learned during training in their farms or villages. They have identified and collected 30 varieties that are resilient to the climate changes affecting their regions (resistance to drought, flooding, etc.)

They select the seeds according to the climatic and geographical characteristics of their territory and then test their adaptability to the environment and their good yield, even under climatic stress. Varieties with satisfactory results are selected and then stored in the 17 seed banks that these programs have created or consolidated, as well as on their own farms.

Vegetable production in the area has become extremely diversified, increasing from an average of 3 or 4 varieties per family to more than 27, improving farmers’ resilience to climate change. The work of the seed keepers thus has a multiple objective of restoring cultivated biodiversity, food and economic autonomy and resilience.

To cope with the severe floods, long dry spells and increasingly frequent cyclones in India, many local varieties have been selected and conserved. For example, crops such as millet and local rice varieties with long vertical roots, no lateral roots and less leaf curl have evolved to tolerate drought and ensure food security in water-scarce areas. The seed keepers in the Navdanya network have also conserved salt-tolerant rice varieties such as Lunabakada, Kalambank, Bhundi, and Dhala sola, as well as more flood-tolerant varieties.

The solutions provided by traditional seeds make women experts thanks to their knowledge and know-how in seed selection, multiplication, and conservation.

These actions, while reinforcing a role traditionally assigned to women, have produced significant societal effects: strengthening the food security of women and their families and greater involvement of women in the management of natural resources and in decisions related to agricultural production.

22 Mandwa (éleusine), Jhangora (millet), Kauni (millet), Bhat noir et blanc, Kulath, gram noir (légumineuse), Chad Dhan (riz rouge), mais, l’Amarante, Masoor (Lentilles), orge, lentilles Navrangi, riz UkhDIG & RR-21, blé Mishri et blé Mundri, chana brown (pois chiche), Chana Black (pois chiches), Toor (légumineuse), moutarde, blé Kathia, coriandre, Zeera (cumin), Sonf (fenouil), etc.

TESTIMONIES:

Mithlesh Devi, farmer in Keshowala

“Today, the food I produce is healthy and tasty and my family saves money. I save my own seeds like paddy basmati rice (non-irrigated), kasturi rice and vegetables like radish, spinach, fenugreek, mustard, garlic, onion, etc. I hope to continue exchanging knowledge and skills for the protection of our seeds and land.”

Bija Devi, seed keeper

“If we don’t save our seeds, what will we eat tomorrow? For example, I just harvested turmeric, I’m going to save some in the ground, the smaller ones, which I will replant in July. I know that the turmeric I just harvested grows very well here, we have been growing it for many years, it is reliable.”

IMPACTS:

Diversity of subsistence crops (rice, wheat, maize, mustard) increased by

10 à 15%

The diversity of grown vegetables and spices increased by

275%

Farms using agroecology and locally adapted seeds outperformed conventional farms, even under climate stress

24 Final evaluation of Seeds of Hope project, February 2019

25 Ibid.

26 Navdanya, Celebrating Biodiversity, Agroecology and Organic Food Systems, 2018
3. WOMEN CONQUERING THEIR AUTONOMY

Industrial agriculture has made Indian farmers dependent on a model that imposes its own techniques, seeds, and commercial outlets. This model has not allowed them to ensure their self-sufficiency, and generates negative impacts on food quality, natural resources, and ecosystems. Women are even more affected because they face inequalities that undermine their freedom to act: the conquest of their autonomy is therefore a priority issue. This implies equal access to productive resources (land, bank loans, etc.), support for the development of activities (agricultural, commercial) and their access to the income generated that promote their emancipation, as well as participation in debates and decisions concerning agricultural production or community life. The agroecological transition must allow these different issues to be addressed together, and to advance women’s autonomy and gender equality.

**In India, autonomy is gaining ground**

Training women in agroecological techniques, promoting their expertise in preserving local biodiversity and enabling them to receive payment for their work, contributes to their recognition, their emancipation and the affirmation of their local democratic role.

The programs carried out by SOL and Navdanya in this sense have helped Indian women farmers to achieve real autonomy. The women beneficiaries have seen their basic income increase by 25%\(^2\). The training of women farmers in agroecology, seed conservation and food processing has enabled them to become more self-sufficient in food and independent of the market, but also to sell their surpluses at fair prices, either locally or within the Navdanya fair trade network. This has a positive impact on the community’s overall economy, as it strengthens the value chain for its women, who perform essential but poorly paid activities.

In addition, the 606 women members of the 38 self-help groups created during these 10 years have, thanks to the implementation of micro-savings systems, the development of projects and exchanges between peers, acquired new knowledge, exercised important responsibilities, learned to speak in public, etc. These women now play a recognized role in agricultural activity and in the management of natural resources. They have better access to the means of production and enjoy a real capacity for initiative.

Participation in decision-making has also become more equal, in the agricultural field as well as in the family sphere and in local politics. These developments make women the instigators of profound changes in and for the community. These gains in autonomy place them at the heart of strategies to feed the world of tomorrow, but also to ensure better respect for human rights.
**TESTIMONIES:**

**Women farmers of Lower Charbha village:**

“We have a self-help group in the village, we meet every month. Firstly, it allows us to have a moment of sharing and to help each other when necessary. Secondly, the money we collect will allow us to give loans to each other and reduce our financial dependence. Finally, this group can be an opportunity to work together, and eventually start an income generating activity.”

**Mangleshwari, from Ratampur village:**

“I borrowed a small amount of money from the self-help group and was able to start renting a sales space. Now I sell my fruits and vegetables there every day. I can cover my expenses with the income generated and I even make a small profit. As a result of my experience, many women farmers in the village would like to start a small sales stall like mine.”

**IMPACTS:**

The farmers who have surplus production have grouped together to create sales stalls in order to promote their products, sell them and share the profits.

Thanks to the techniques learned, the farmers have increased their production and are now self-sufficient for their family food.

The income of farmers following the training increased by 25%.

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28 Final evaluation of Seeds of Hope project, February 2019
29 Ibid
Conclusion

**Recognition of the role and rights of women, a key issue in the agricultural and food transition**

In order to grow and spread widely, the agricultural and food transition requires the participation of an ever-increasing number of actors, and to put farmers back at the heart of our agricultural and food systems. And if men and women have everything to gain from a parity approach to functions and responsibilities, it is urgent for SOL to promote the place of women within these systems, because of the key role they play.

**An essential but little-known role**

Women farmers, in India as elsewhere, have a central role in farming. Without them, many essential tasks could not be carried out in the same way on the farm. SOL and Navdanya projects have shown the importance of the role of women as guardians of local biodiversity, drivers of innovation for their farms and part of solidarity in their communities (initiating the transition to sustainable practices, sharing with other women in their communities, etc.). By joining together in self-help groups, they are implementing collective solutions at the village level and regaining their economic and decision-making autonomy. The agroecological transition must now highlight these multiple roles by building on their traditional knowledge and know-how in order to strengthen food security and the resilience of farmer communities.

**Concrete and promising results**

Understanding the importance of farmers’ seeds, women have strengthened their autonomy by selecting, conserving, and promoting them. Thanks to their commitment, all the farmers in these villages now cultivate a much wider range of varieties of cereals, spices, fruits, vegetables, without chemical inputs and with very good yields. And all of them are now collecting seeds that will be planted the following year, thus regaining their independence.

**A holistic approach that promotes overall wellness**

Agroecology and feminism should not be dissociated, both movements promote a more democratic, inclusive and resilient model of society. These movements are intended to allow collegial decision making where women have their place, to stimulate and facilitate individual initiatives, to correct injustices, to place the environment at the heart of the issues. Agroecology and feminism ultimately contribute to a more equitable vision of society and human relationships, and a reconnection of humans to nature. The agroecological transition will not be exclusively feminine, but the role and place that women will play - and already play - will be decisive. SOL will continue its efforts to disseminate this vision more widely and deploy its actions.
The programs that SOL and Navdanya have been experimenting in the field for the past 10 years have produced encouraging results that support their vision of the agroecological transition and encourage them to extend and intensify their action. Therefore, the two associations launched at the end of 2020 their new program Seeds of Resilience, for 3 years, in the states of West Bengal, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand. Stimulated by the increased need for resilience in the face of climatic, health and socio-economic crises that aggravate the difficulties of farmers, and in the continuity of previous projects, it relies on agroecology, the preservation and multiplication of farmer seeds to ensure the food security of farmer communities, recreate the consumers-farmers link, and build sustainable local agricultural and food systems.

**IMPACTS:**

SEEDS OF RESILIENCE PROJECT DIRECTLY ADDRESSES 700 FARMERS IN 60 VILLAGES.

IT WILL ALSO RAISE AWARENESS AMONG 16 000 PEOPLE, INCLUDING 1 000 CHILDREN IN 10 SCHOOLS.
Appendix

Extract from the comic strip «Toutes paysannes, tous paysans: voyage au cœur de l’agroécologie paysanne» (All women farmers, all farmers: a journey in the heart of farmer agroecology) - In India, women actors of the agroecological transition, p.29 to 48.

Inspired by the life stories of farmers in the Small Farms International program, this comic book illustrated by Claire Robert takes you on a journey to India, France and Senegal, to discover the challenges of an agroecological transition based on farmer autonomy and the preservation of seeds by the farmers.

Discover the whole comic book by scanning the QR code:
And this year, the yields have been excellent in Thailand... this made the prices fall everywhere.

What is that all you are giving away?

And this is only 10 bags...

He knows that the monsoon season is increasingly unpredictable and the dry season increasingly dry.

How will we pay for the hospital?

We have sold the two goats, yes."

But at that price, how are we going to manage to buy seeds, fertilizers, and inputs?

If we had a farmers’ seeds conservation and multifunction project that you will find interesting.

And to rent the tractor? And to pay irrigation fees?

Maybe we can help you with our support group.

Farmers’ seeds?
Our husbands do not want to admit it, but it’s clear that the techniques of the Green Revolution no longer work.

Expensive hybrid seeds have to be used with pesticides and fertilizers, that’s absurd!

Come, here I will show you her farm.

This is my vegetable garden, where I grow vegetables and aromatic herbs for my whole family all year long.

How wonderful!

There, I planted rice and millet in association.

And there, “the three sisters” squash that occupy the ground, corn, and beans that climb on the corn.

I rototill every year.

And you really grow all this without chemical fertilizers!

We sow green manures and we use different types of composts that we prepare ourselves.

If you have one for two cows, I will tell you how to use their dung.
Since two years, I've been part of a farmers' network in our village, which has particularly helped drought-resistant crops. We use a part of our production for our family needs and the rest goes to the local market. Then we sell our vegetables and canning goods at local markets.
On the occasion of the 10th anniversary of partnership between SOL and Navdanya, one of our local partner in India, we invite you to discover our new publication dedicated to the crucial role of women farmers in Indian agriculture: “Women actresses of the agroecological transition”. By retracing our 10 years of projects in India, this publication highlights the role of Indian women in the country’s agroecological transition.

In this publication, SOL shares its experience in India with Navdanya as well as the lessons, reflections, and new knowledge on the role of women in the evolution of agricultural practices - all good practices that we value in our current projects and are keen to share. In these pages, we will focus on the agroecological transition, the selection and use of seeds adapted to the territories of intervention in a context of climate change, and finally the central issue of women’s empowerment.

We hope that this publication will enrich the reflection on the place of women in the evolution of agricultural practices but also in the resilience to climate change and to participate in the recognition and valuation of the agricultural work of Indian women.