

Gender just climate solutions: Sustainable management of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve

India, Asia



The Aadhimalai Pazhangudiyanar Producer Company is a collective of Adivasi (Indigenous) farmer-producers in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, a tropical forest biome in India that is rich in biodiversity. As part of Aadhimalai, small-scale Adivasi agriculturists and forest gatherers, especially women, are ensuring sustainable management of the biosphere. They are contributing to climate change mitigation by protecting the forest and native species while strengthening their resilience and livelihoods through the sustainable use and sale of non-timber forest products (NTFPs). NTFPs are foods, substances and materials, excluding timber, that are obtained from forests for human use. NTFPs may be used directly or brought to markets.

Mitigating and Adapting to climate change through forest conservation and restoration

Located in the Western Ghats of India, the 5,520 square kilometre



Photo Credit: Keystone Foundation

Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve encompasses a wide variety of unique ecosystems, including seasonal rainforests, tropical montane forests, grasslands and swamp. Climate change, particularly changes in rainfall and temperature, is threatening the area's Indigenous peoples, plants and wildlife. In recent years, the area has experienced intense storms interspersed with severe droughts, heatwaves, and deficient and failed monsoons. Extreme precipitation has caused massive landslides and soil erosion, destroying large areas of old-growth vegetation.

The Aadhimalai collective, incubated in 2013 with support of Keystone Foundation, involves 2,000 Adivasi families and is contributing to climate change mitigation through forest conservation and restoration. Women in the collective use their traditional knowledge to protect and restore the Nilgiri's forest ecosystems and sacred groves. Thanks to their efforts, five sacred groves have already been restored and another 28 have been identified for protection. At the

same time, women in the collective are making sustainable use of NTFPs, including honey, beeswax, shampoo nuts and berries, as well as agricultural produce like coffee, pepper, silk cotton and millets. The collective uses the NTFPs to make a wide range of products, such as balms, soaps, baskets and food products. The NTFPs are collected over large forest areas ranging from 250 to 2,000 hectares. The collective's members have established nurseries for planting NTFPs and are transferring their knowledge about traditional seed use to the next generation.

Other members of the Adivasi community act as 'barefoot ecologists', monitoring the Nilgiri's forests, farms, wildlife, habitat quality, water sources and tree phenology based on their traditional ecological knowledge. Together with Keystone Foundation, they have designed and implemented monitoring and data management protocols. The Aadhimalai collective uses this data to ensure that NTFPs are sustainably procured and to inform their production planning.

Advancing gender justice

Adivasi women are the prime actors in the Aadhimalai collective. Through the collective, they have taken up leadership of

forest governance, deciding what to harvest and when. Practices of sustainable harvesting, improved marketing and local value addition have strengthened the Adivasi women's NTFP-based livelihoods, as well as their rights to resources, land and forests, as enshrined in India's Forest Rights Act of 2006. The collective guarantees that members receive a fair market price for their products, enabling them to operate independently of traders and middlemen.

The Aadhimalai collective's processing centres have generated employment for more than 50 women across the Nilgiri region, enhancing both their skills and income. In addition to NTFPs, the women have further diversified their incomes with several new farm products. In its sustainable use of natural resources, Aadhimalai recognises and builds on women's traditional knowledge and practices – a key feature of gender-just climate solutions. The women's leadership and engagement in the collective has had a positive impact on their sovereignty, access to natural resources, health and wellbeing. In 2021, Aadhimalai received the United Nations Development Programme's Equator Prize, which recognises outstanding community efforts to reduce poverty through the conservation

and sustainable use of biodiversity

Potential for upscaling

Incubation of Aadhimalai was a multiyear process resulting in a strong, stable collective that collects and markets over 20 NTFPs and farm products, both in wholesale and value-added form, with a turnover of approximately EUR 150,000. Support from funders is needed for Adivasi women to further develop and expand the collective. Funding of EUR 25,000 per year for three years would address the needs of women in a processing unit for management training, skills-building and infrastructure. Building on lessons learned, the Aadhimalai model has great potential for replication in similar contexts. Donors can play a vital role in supporting initiatives like Aadhimalai by providing initial investments, which are difficult to secure from private banks and other financial institutions.

For more information, visit: gaggaalliance.org, or contact gaggacommunication@fondocentroamericano.org

About the Global Alliance for Green and Gender Action (GAGGA)

The Global Alliance for Green and Gender Action (GAGGA) is a diverse network of women's funds, environmental justice funds, NGOs, and women-led community-based organisations that have joined forces to strengthen the nexus of women's rights, climate and environmental justice. It works at local, national, regional and international levels in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, Latin America and Europe. GAGGA's aim is to influence governments, investors, and donors to divest from fossil fuel (related) industries, defend critical ecosystems, and support inclusive, sustainable and gender-just climate solutions. It does so by strengthening and deepening connections and collaborations among women-led community-based organisations (CBOs) and movements working on women's rights, environmental and climate justice, and by pursuing women-centred lobby and advocacy (L&A) agendas.

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