

# WOMEN AND AGRICULTURE IN KERALA STATE:

COLLECTIVE RESPONSES BY KUDUMBASHREE  
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

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# INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed fault-lines in most of the advanced nations as they failed miserably in handling the health and consequent social crisis. In contrast, Kerala, a tiny state in India managed the health crisis caused by the virus and the consequent economic crisis through community-based action. Kerala's record of managing COVID-19 and lowering the impact of economic lockdowns through local institutions is an interesting case that merits attention.

Disruptions in food supply chains and the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic led millions to food-insecure conditions and indebtedness. The Government of Kerala took measures to address this crisis by bringing women and agriculture to the forefront. This paper reviews the Government of Kerala's public action in ensuring food security and employment during the COVID-19 pandemic. It provides learnings on how the state capitalised on its investments in social capital, especially women's empowerment to address the pandemic. Unlike many other states in India, Kerala has institutions at the community level which provide greater space for the state machinery to reach and deliver services effectively. Here the role played by Kudumbashree, the poverty eradication and women's empowerment programme of the state government, in grass-root level extension work and farming is worth learning. This learning can strengthen public action involving the community despite dominant neoliberal trends. The paper primarily uses secondary literature, NSSO data, and interviews with critical stakeholders such as trade union leaders, policymakers and Kudumbashree's members.



## BACKGROUND OF PUBLIC ACTION DURING COVID-19

Kerala has achieved notable progress in human development indices since the 1970s. However, its industrial and employment growth remains a perennial challenge for policymakers. This development paradox is known as the 'Kerala Model,' which gives a thrust to public welfare policies for improving social well-being and also empowering social and political institutions (Ommen, 2018). From 1957 to 1990, nearly 50 per cent of the budget allocations of the state government were for human capital (Bhaskaran, 2018).

Since the 1990s Kerala has been investing intensely in social and democratic institutions through women's empowerment programmes and supportive legislations. It reserved

33 per cent seats for women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in 1991 and eventually increased this to 50 per cent in 2009. Currently, more than 50 per cent of the local self- governments (LSGs) are led by women and many of them lead development activities at the grassroots level. The Government of Kerala also launched the 'People's Plan' in 1996 to strengthen the decentralisation process which demands increased participation of women at the grassroots level. To capacitate the elected representatives of LSGs or PRIs, a series of trainings on various aspects of local administration, planning, and development are provided.

In 1998, Kerala launched Kudumbashree, a community organisation of neighbourhood groups (NHGs) of women. It empowers women to increase their economic and political participation. As a result, more than 43 per cent of the elected LSG representatives are experienced and skilled Kudumbashree members. Kudumbashree's engagement has capacitated them in community work by strengthening their organisational skills, people management, entrepreneurship, and financial management skills. Above all, it has empowered them to understand their own needs, assert their rights, and assess the needs of the community for planning livelihood management. Their engagement is often voluntary. Women's empowerment and subsequent gendered development and public participation has delivered positive results in Kerala's society (Duflo, 2012; Ka-beer, 2005).

The state launched the Rebuild Kerala Initiative (RKI) to rebuild Kerala through a participatory and inclusive process after the floods in August 2018. The magnitude of the disaster caused by the floods was unprecedented in the history of the state. RKI constitutes the state's strategic roadmap for a 'Green and Resilient Kerala' and encompasses crosscutting and sector-based policies, regulatory and institutional action, and priority investment programmes that are critical for resilient and sustainable recovery and rebuilding the state.

The aim of these reconstruction efforts in agriculture was to increase economic activity and sector resilience to disasters. Implementation of an inclusive recovery strategy including promoting the participation and well-being of women and other vulnerable groups in agriculture, fisheries, livestock, and allied activities were the other highlights of these efforts.

The Kerala government also initiated sustainable and resilient agriculture development programmes covering off-farm activities (livestock, poultry, and fisheries), non-farm

livelihood options (manufacturing, trading, and service enterprises), involving informal/unorganised sector workers, and skilled labour for addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. These initiatives incorporate end-to-end support – from production to marketing – for generating livelihoods and improving food security.

During the COVID-19 crisis, the Kerala government devised and executed pandemic crisis management strengthening its 'state to people' and a 'public action through people centric' approach that emphasises on women's involvement in LSGs, civil society organisations (CSOs) like trade unions, and community organisations. The main features of the outreach approach are:

- a.** regular update on the pandemic situation and measures adopted for crisis management,
- b.** empowering people to be resilient through coordinated public action between the state government, LSGs, and the community, which keep women in the central position;
- c.** implementing programmes to promote income/ employment and productivity; and
- d.** planning for food security. Lockdowns led to supply disruptions and concerns about the availability and affordability of essential supplies. The plan was achieving self-sufficiency while promoting sustainable agriculture. Vegetable cultivation is a major focus as the state is short on most vegetables. Hence, it opted for promoting group farming.

This public action, not only aimed at utilising the skills of the Kudumbashree women in particular and people in general, and the resources allocated for livelihood development by the state, but also embraced the finer aspects of care – concern about hunger, domestic violence, child rights issues, mental health issues, and so on. In a politically conscious and socially mobilised society, the state needs to be proactive and interventionist (Heller, 2000; Sen, 2006), as the system puts pressure on the state and holds it to account for its actions and inactions (Tharamangalam and Chathukulam, 2021).





## WOMEN AND SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE CENTRIC CRISIS MANAGEMENT — EMPIRICAL PROFILE

### Status of women workers in Kerala

One of the development paradoxes of the 'Kerala Model' is women's low work participation rate amidst an almost 100 percent literacy rate and impressive gross enrolment of girls in higher education. Only 25 per cent of the adult women are in the workforce (PLFS, 2020). This figure declined to 22.4 percent during the lockdown (October to December 2020) from 27 per cent in October- December 2019 (see Table 1). Further, PLFS 2019-20's Annual Bulletin reports that the ratio of females aged 15-64 years in the labour force to total workers in the same age group is only 37 per cent in rural and 32.8 per cent in urban Kerala.

At the same time, unemployment among women in all age groups is almost double that of their male counterparts. During the lockdown, unemployment among women went up to 29.4 percent overall. It reversed very slowly when compared to male workers (See Table 2). Nevertheless, in some places, women emerged as the main breadwinners in households especially during the lockdown (See Box 1). Empirical evidence shows that working hours for men were reduced by around 15 per cent compared to women workers during the pandemic (Refeque et al., 2021).

The tertiary sector, the main employer of women in Kerala, employs more than 60 per cent women workers. However, the pandemic brought some shifts in work patterns. Agriculture and industry improved between October-December 2019 and 2020, especially the share of agriculture which almost doubled (See Table 3).

### **Role of agriculture in livelihood development in Kerala**

Without improving agricultural production, achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) regarding poverty eradication, zero hunger, and good health and well-being for all will be difficult. Therefore, the Government of Kerala has been promoting agriculture and allied activities since 2016 by expanding the area of production and by improving productivity and profitability. During 2017-18, Kerala reported a 2.11 per cent growth in its agricultural sector. The Kerala Economic Review (2020) reported that though agriculture constituted only 8 percent of the gross state value addition (GSVA) in 2019-20, it became the pivotal sector during the pandemic in terms of providing employment and achieving self-sufficiency. The report adds that 13.3 per cent of the workers depended on agriculture for livelihood during October-December 2020, compared to 9.92 per cent during the same period in 2019.

According to the 77th round of NSSO 2020, only 33 per cent of the rural households reported themselves as being agricultural households (See Table 4). Among this, nearly 87 per cent were small cultivators with less than one hectare of land. Income from agriculture was around 40 per cent for an agricultural household. It was also found that an average agricultural household in Kerala had diversified its income basket including the non-agricultural income component which helped it reduce income dependency on agriculture and challenges due to market distortions (Table 5). Average monthly household income from agriculture in Kerala is Rs. 17,915, the fourth highest in India followed by Punjab, Haryana, and Jammu and Kashmir (NSSO -77 Round, 2020).

As per the Labour Bureau (2021), between October 2019 and October 2020, agricultural wages for women in Kerala declined from Rs. 483 to Rs. 452; this increased to Rs. 478



between October 2020 and October 2021. This indicates that agriculture still has the capacity to be resilient during a crisis.

### **Kudumbashree's role**

During COVID-19, Kudumbashree emerged as a major link between the state and the community with its 4.58 million women members (September 2021), or almost 40 per cent of the women in the age group 18-79 years in Kerala (Bhaskaran, 2018). In other words, COVID-19 provided an opportunity to the state to capitalise on its social investments in women.

### **Gender focused, people centric public action to address the pandemic led to livelihood challenges**

In March 2020, the Kerala government estimated the probable impact of the COVID-19 crisis to take appropriate measures to protect the state's economy and the lives of the



people. Since then, following a Keynesian approach, the state has devised programmes and schemes to reach out to the people via direct and indirect aid. It has ensured food and shelter for the poor, created job opportunities, and worked to raise agricultural and industrial production (Kerala Development Report, 2021). In resilience building, the state's thrust has been on sectors that have greater capacity for revival such as tourism, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), and agriculture; and investments in infrastructure through externally-aided projects and projects of the Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board (KIIFB).

Apart from these, the Government of Kerala converged two livelihood initiatives, Kudumbashree and MGNREGS to address the probable food security crisis as well as employment losses under one umbrella through the food security and sustainable livelihood development programme, 'Subhiksha Keralam.'<sup>1</sup> The programme was announced on March 25, 2020. During the lockdown in 2020, the government started distributing free rations for the poor and also provided free provision kits that included rice, wheat, sugar, salt, edible oil, pulses, and spices to all Public Distribution Sup-

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<sup>1</sup> Self-reliant in food production or ensures food security.

ply (PDS) card holders, irrespective of their income status and also to migrant labour camps. To build self-sufficiency in food production, the programme brings fallow land within homesteads under vegetables, fruits, tubers, paddy, and other crops, integrating line departments with MGNREGS and Kudumbashree. Women agriculture workers have become cultivators under this programme.

The 'Subhiksha Keralam' programme is designed to reach out to people. Hence, it can also be used for understanding the government's people-centric gender focused approach in the COVID-19 recovery package.

### **Converging Kudumbashree and MGNREGS with other sustainable livelihood development programmes**

MGNREGS is a short-term recovery measure that mitigates losses suffered by low-income households. Over 90 per cent of its beneficiaries are women. MGNREGS in Kerala shifted focus to the creation of durable assets required to revive and rebuild livelihoods like the creation of thousands of irrigation ponds and wells, cattle-sheds, buildings for anganwadis, compound walls for schools, and village roads as part of the Rebuild Kerala programme, since 2019. In 2020, under the 'Subhiksha Keralam' programme, fallow land was converted into cultivable land using MGNREGS workers. As on December 12, 2021, almost 11,201 hectares of land was being readied for cultivation across the state. The government estimated that it will spend around Rs. 3332.1 million for this project through various departments. Out of this, 6257.13 hectares has been developed using MGNREGS funds, amounting to Rs. 6021.23 million. This provided 32,37,741 man-days benefiting 3,37,787 MGNREGS workers at Rs. 291 per day wage. Besides, 50 days of additional paid wage labour was sanctioned under the Ayyankali Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme to benefit the most vulnerable. As a result, more people benefitted and the media reports there is a 20 to 30 percent increase in demand for MGNREGS job cards in September 2021, when compared to the financial year 2020-21.

By September 2021, Kerala had allocated nearly 29 percent of MGNREGS expenditure to asset creation, the highest since the scheme was implemented. Towards this, the state norms allow up to 40 percent of the labour budget to be used for creating durable and productive assets, both public and individual. Under 'Subhiksha Keralam,' MGNREGS beneficiaries invest the money received in materials and skilled labour to create assets for agriculture and allied activities. Thousands of cattle/ goat sheds and tanks for dairy and poultry farms have been constructed, fodder cultivation has expanded across 113 hectares, and 8,300-odd compost pits and soak pits have been constructed.



## KUDUMBASHREE — COMBATING THE PANDEMIC FOLLOWING A GENDER CENTRIC APPROACH

Kudumbashree formed an integral part of the state government's COVID-19 crisis management. Many Kudumbashree micro-enterprises and group farmers suffered severe losses due to the abrupt lockdown as their procured stocks were destroyed, they incurred additional costs due to locked up working capital and defaulted on loan instalments (Kudumbashree, 2020). Kudumbashree has 68,388 Joint Liability Group (JLG) farming collectives under which 3.38 lakh women cultivate paddy, vegetables, and other crops on around 56,000 hectares of land (2020) under collective lease land farming.' Around 75-80 percent of the total cultivated area is leased by a group of upto 5 members. They cultivate mainly organic, though not organically certified products which have high local demand and fetch a premium price. At the time of the lockdown, many groups were about to harvest their crops and Kudumbashree's estimate is that in April 2020 group farmers alone lost Rs 3.6 crore. To mitigate some of their losses, the district authorities collaborated with HortiCorp and Kudumbashree groups to market their produce such as Kani vellari (cucumber produce especially for Vishu, a harvest festival)

being procured and distributed through SupplyCo.<sup>2</sup> Vegetables were also added to the Asraya scheme.<sup>3</sup>

Women's groups also diversified their activities based on the new government programmes. For instance, 'Subhiksha Keralam' offered new opportunities to Kudumbashree members as they became part of the food production, processing and distribution like running restaurants. With the help of the agriculture department, panchayat members, and main farmers, Kudumbashree's groups ventured into farming (See Box 2). Many of them were first time farmers. They used MGNREGS to prepare land and initiate farming. After that they took turns and worked on the farm on a daily basis. They could benefit from the inflation in vegetable prices and could also negotiate for a premium as the produce is purely organic.<sup>4</sup> There are many similar positive stories that illustrate the power of a gendered institution in building resilience.

Kudumbashree community kitchens and subsidised restaurants also played a major role in addressing the issue of hunger under 'Subhiksha Keralam.' Collaborating with LSGs, Kudumbashree women ran over 1,000 community kitchens and restaurants even in the remotest places<sup>5</sup> providing lunch for Rs 20. These kitchens also did home delivery and take-away services during the pandemic. More than 16,000 Kudumbashree farming groups served as a lifeline for these eateries by donating 116 metric tons of agricultural commodities.

To support the crisis-ridden SMEs and JLG group farmers, the livelihood start-up programme for nano-enterprises along the lines of the Start-up Village Entrepreneurship programme was started using money from the Crisis Management Fund (CMF) under the Rebuild Kerala programme. Through 'Sahayahastham' (helping hand), the Chief Minister's loan scheme, the government reached out with recovery packages using Kudumbashree. With around Rs 2,000 crore of interest free loans, it reached out to over 22.77 lakh women who lost their livelihoods. It had given them loans ranging between Rs 5,000 and Rs 20,000 by October 2021. This is in line with the Resurgence Kerala loan scheme implemented in 2018 to help those affected by the floods. It reported a 98 per cent repayment rate.

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<sup>2</sup> SupplyCo is the Government of Kerala's civil supply department.

<sup>3</sup> Ashraya is an integrated project aimed at identification and rehabilitation of destitute families.

<sup>4</sup> Information from the field visit. See Box 2 for details.

<sup>5</sup> District administration monitored this programme. LSGs identified the needy, managed the logistics of food preparation and distribution, set up community kitchens, and enumerated ward-level youth volunteers for home delivery of cooked food.



## REACH-OUT AND PANDEMIC MANAGEMENT: A PEOPLE CENTRIC GENDER FOCUSED APPROACH

To reach out to the people, the government needs community organisations that are empowered to execute directives. Kerala's carefully carved out social institutions at the local level, elected representatives of LSGs, and Kudumbashree women including ASHA workers<sup>6</sup> and anganwadi workers<sup>7</sup> - who understand the process of people's mobilisation and operational characteristics of the government departments - took on these responsibilities. Since they represent every neighbourhood in the state, they could assess, enable delivery channels, and collect feedback without much delay. They reached out with information on various state services, both social welfare and livelihood development and encouraged and empowered the community to be part of these initiatives and often facilitated capacity building activities. However, it is imperative to note that their services are often characterised as voluntary so they receive either a token payment or provide these services free.

Pandemic management in Kerala was an orchestrated decentralised response comprising the state government, the local governments, Kudumbashree, the public health system, CSOs, and the people. It demonstrated solidarity and social capital at its best, helping in slowing down the spread of the pandemic and facilitating the rebuilding of livelihoods to some extent (See Figure 1).

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<sup>6</sup> Frontline health workers who are community health workers.

<sup>7</sup> Teachers of Integrated child Development Centres (ICDS) which are known as anganwadis.



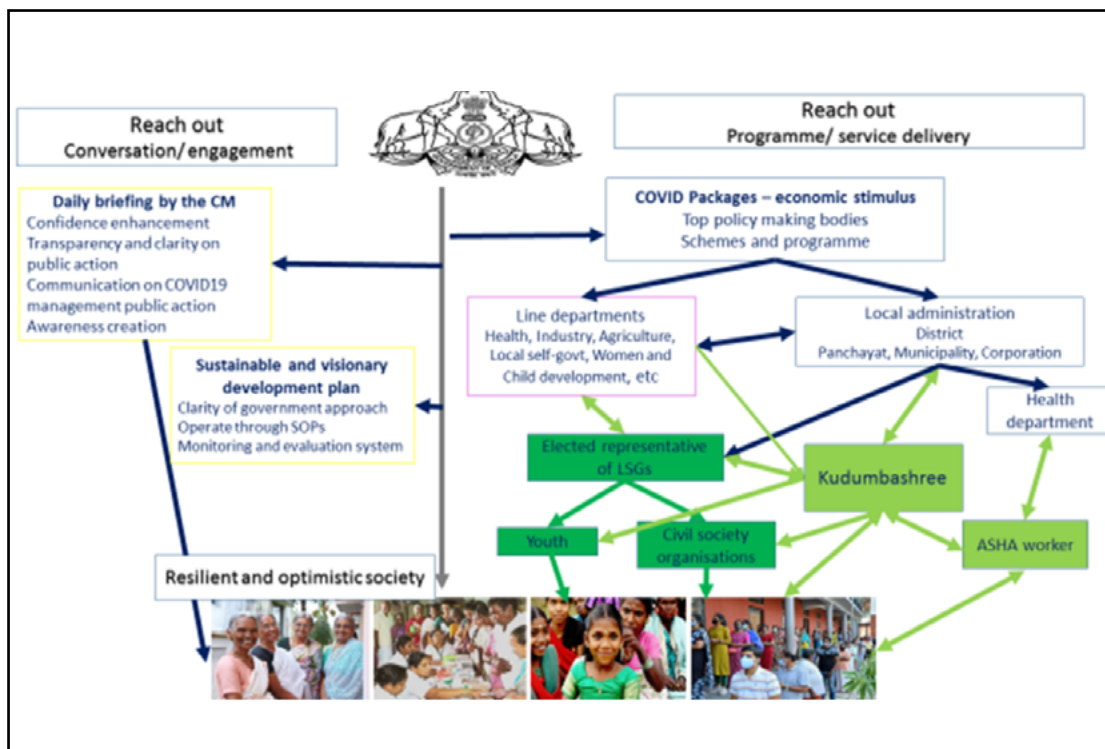


Figure 1: State to people: Kerala's People centric gender focused pandemic management approach

Social capital formation through decentralisation of LSGs and women's empowerment that enhanced their public participation in economic as well as political life, bore fruit during the pandemic's management. Since 50 percent of the elected members of the LSGs, 100 percent of ASHA workers, and Kudumbashree members are women, the pandemic crisis management was primarily an endeavour of the women of Kerala. If we assume that around 25 percent of Kudumbashree's members actively participated in these activities, it can be argued that nearly 10 percent of the adult women in Kerala were directly involved in the state's COVID-19 response. Hence, it would be correct to say that Kerala followed a people- centric gender focused crisis management approach to reach out to the public to strengthen resilience during the pandemic.

In this approach, women did not remain mere beneficiaries of the COVID-19 packages; instead, many of them became the executors of the packages. This was possible because Kudumbashree enabled them to identify their own needs and problems, empowering them to assert their own decisions by capacitating them to be active participants in the decentralised development planning. Kudumbashree enhanced their problem solving and communication skills and also trained them to devise campaigns to enhance public participation in government programmes.

## SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE, AN APPROACH FOR ACHIEVING SELF-SUFFICIENCY

The magnitude of the COVID-19 crisis was beyond any level of estimation. In this context, realising the resilience of agriculture and allied activities among the economically poor households and promoting sustainable agriculture became a significant policy approach of the Kerala government. Under RKI, the state promoted sustainable agricultural activities to promote livelihood development among low-income households. Lockdowns deprived people of their livelihoods and basic minimum incomes. Subsequently hunger and malnourishment emerged as major challenges for any responsive state. The Kerala government's 'Subhiksha Keralam' programme not only prevented hunger,<sup>8</sup> but led to expanding vegetable cultivation, converting fallow land to cultivable land, marketing agricultural produce of Kudumbashree's JLG group farmers, and ensured a steady supply of locally produced vegetables during the pandemic.

Using MGNREGS, the government intensified the conversion of fallow homestead land to cultivable land and also developed essential infrastructure for off-farm and non-farm activities. The fallow homesteads were turned into vegetable gardens managed by Kudumbashree groups. While creating employment, this step multiplied the utility of MGNREGS' spending. Since these farms use bio-manure and bio-pesticides, their produce is organic which also facilitated the promotion of sustainable agriculture development in Kerala.

Due to the prevalence of small agricultural holdings in Kerala, the engagement of Kudumbashree in the form of group farming was a creative approach for combining landholdings for achieving economies of scale. The small landholdings also offered greater scope for horticulture and floriculture. According to the agricultural department the decline in vegetable prices in Kerala between March 2020 and March 2021<sup>9</sup> was due to increased supply of vegetables within the state. Between September and December 2021, farmers could increase the supply of vegetables in the local markets and mitigate inflation. A continuing steady supply of local vegetables in the markets points to the success of this programme (Kerala Development Report, 2021).

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<sup>8</sup>As per the NITI Ayog, only 0.78 per cent of Kerala's population was poor (multi-dimensional poverty index, November 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Agricultural department, 'Weekly retail prices of vegetables, varied by week between 2020 and 2021.'

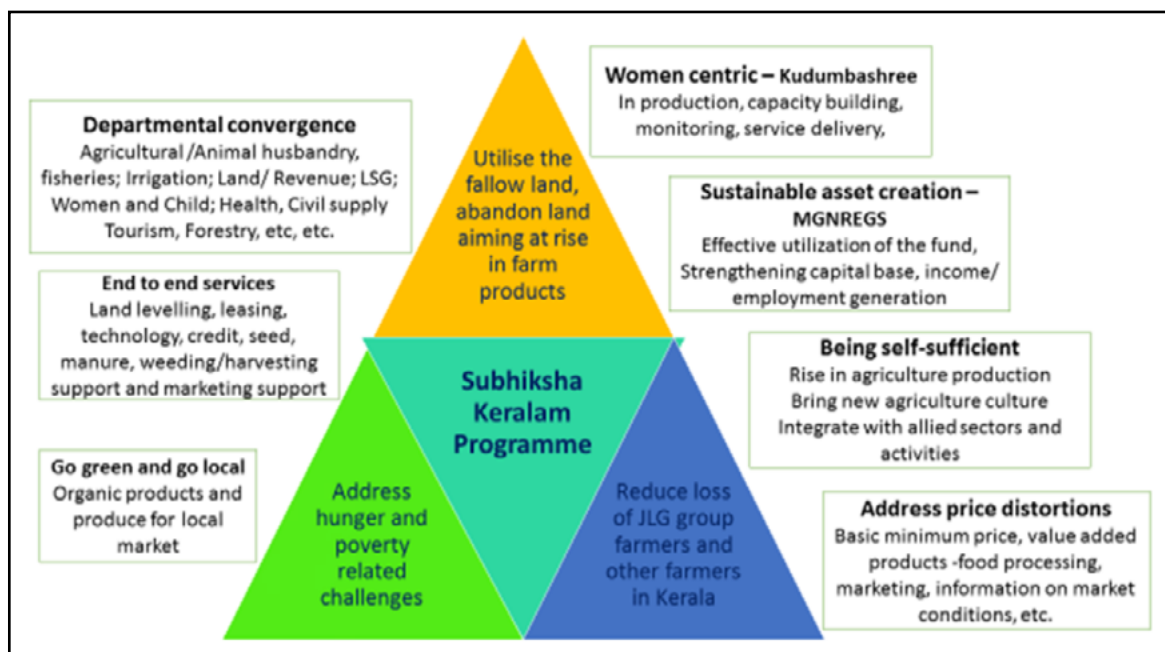


Figure 2: Convergence and integration for achieving food security

The key features of the sustainable agricultural model evolved under the 'Subhiksha Keralam' programme which is primarily implemented through Kudumbashree groups during COVID-19 is given in Figure 2. These features are:

- convergence of line departments for overall increase in agricultural production both at commercial and household levels,
- end-to-end services offered by various departments in collaboration with the farmers and Kudumbashree groups,
- using MGNREGS to create sustainable assets thus increasing capital expenditure for sustaining production,
- 'go green and go local' helped reduce the carbon emission goals of the state, while producing organic and healthy products,
- mechanisms developed for addressing price distortions in the vegetable market. Farmers were ensured a minimum price for their produce. Providing cheap credit to reduce the capital burden on farming households, and
- being self-sufficient in food production. This major challenge that Kerala faced was brought to the centre of the 'Subhiksha Keralam' programme. The state continued to prioritise its poverty alleviation strategy even during an unprecedented crisis like COVID-19.

## CHALLENGES OF KERALA'S COMMUNITY CENTRIC GENDERED RESILIENCE APPROACH

The community centric gendered resilience approach offers interesting insights, but at the same time some lacuna restricts its replicability and sustainability:

- It is based primarily on volunteer engagement –Kudumbashree workers, elected representatives, ASHA workers, and youth. Volunteerism has a lot of limitations as eventually the intensity of the engagement dilutes and weakens as the grassroot workers need to scale up the programmes socially and economically.
- Widening gap between the state bureaucracy and the common people – As many community engagement roles of the bureaucrats have been transferred to community organisations, the bureaucracy disconnects from the people and acts as a new social class which has limited knowledge about the life of the people they are obliged to support.
- Mounting revenue and fiscal crisis affect the sustainability of the programmes – According to media reports, the MGNREGS funds allocated for FY 2021-22 had been exhausted by October 2021. Similarly, fund allocation is becoming an issue due to the mounting financial crisis.
- Middle and upper segments of society are on the peripheral level – The model focuses on the bottom of the pyramid. The middle and top layers are also part of the pyramid and their constant non-inclusion warrants accepting other issues including acceptance of fascist and anarchist ideologies. On the other hand, the lower segment is always viewed as rent-seeking, regardless of its contribution in building resilience during a crisis.
- Rising climate change challenges and their impact on agriculture – The unprecedented rains in 2021 affected agricultural activities and those who were engaged in commercial as well as homestead vegetable production suffered losses. More than recovery packages, the sector needs cultivation technologies that have the capacity to combat the impact of climate change.



## SUMMARY AND THE WAY FORWARD

Kerala's success in managing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was due to its humanised and inclusive approach. Historical preparedness and contemporary policy innovations helped in combating the virus and reducing the damages caused to the economy. In the 1990s, when India sought to limit state intervention and promote market-based solutions, public policy in Kerala shifted gears to deepen state intervention by promoting community participation and empowering women. Kerala's economic relief packages included cash support, employment, free food, and zero-interest loans to women. Through helplines, the government reached out and helped women report instances of violence and mental stress.

The greater role that women played as community level crisis managers and often as the main breadwinners during the pandemic also helped in enabling the system to widen the gendered space at the higher levels of socio-political and economic life in the state.

By keeping sustainable agriculture at the centre of livelihood development, the state essentially addressed four critical issues: reducing the magnitude of the food security crisis and hence, addressing hunger; facilitating employment creation with limited capital creating assets that can deliver income beyond a short-term; sustaining the enthusiasm of group farmers; and helping the state achieve some of the critical SDGs' goals like poverty eradication, women work participation, and reducing carbon emissions.

Overall, the people-centric women-focused approach reaffirms the principles and values of equality, sustainability, social justice, and inclusion. It also explains that investments in decentralised democratic institutions and community development through women's empowerment are essential to deal with market distortions. This approach is cost-effective, socially integrated, and politically rewarding. However, it also teaches us that even if community networks and decentralised democratic institutions exist, a sensitive, responsive, and visionary political leadership is required to empower the system. This includes the bureaucracy, the political system, community, and other stakeholders.

Finally, the frontline actors, the women, expressed unconditional social commitment to their work despite largely being volunteers. Whenever they performed a paid service, these community workers received an honorarium on a daily basis which was equal to the daily wages of unskilled workers. For many, their social interactions often proved to be economically, socially, and politically costly especially when assertions by a woman,<sup>10</sup> even if intended for a social cause, are still often looked down upon in Kerala's society, indicating the importance of reviving debates on 'navodhanam' (renaissance) around gender equality. Often, these women are identified as the frontline executors of the government's various welfare programmes and any issues related to these programmes fall on their shoulders especially on the elected PRI representatives and ASHA/ anganwadi workers.

In a nutshell, Kerala achieved remarkable success in containing the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, as it designed and pursued a set of strategies that leveraged its core strengths while overcoming its disadvantages. The state made sure that decisions and policies also considered the needs and concerns of the vulnerable and marginalised – especially gender concerns. The gender sensitivity of Kerala's pandemic response is a rich guide as it demonstrates diverse possibilities. In addition, the state pre-emptively formulated a comprehensive set of actions that were supported and complemented by community participation.

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<sup>10</sup> Women representatives face more challenges in convincing people, bureaucrats, and other stakeholders. It is quite often heard, 'I wish I had a moustache, so I wouldn't have to explain so much or hear so much abuse.'



## TABLES

**Table 1: Labour Force Participation Rate according to current weekly status (All urban)**

Period	15 years and above age			All age groups		
	Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All
Oct-Dec19	68.1%	27.0%	45.8%	53.3%	21.8%	36.4%
Jan-Mar20	69.2%	26.8%	46.3%	54.8%	21.6%	37.2%
Apr-Jun20	67.1%	22.4%	43.2%	52.8%	18.2%	34.5%
Jul-Sept20	67.1%	24.8%	44.6%	53.1%	20.4%	36.0%
Oct-Dec20	66.7%	24.9%	44.6%	58.5%	20.5%	36.1%

**Source:** Quarterly Bulletin- Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) (October-December 2020). Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, National Statistical Office, September 2021.

**Table 2: Unemployment Rate (UR) according to current weekly status (All urban)**

Period	Male	Female	All
Oct-Dec19	9.0%	19.9%	12.5%
Jan-Mar20	14.6%	20.4%	16.4%
Apr-Jun20	26.5%	29.4%	27.3%
Jul-Sept20	16.1%	25.6%	18.9%
Oct-Dec20	14.0%	23.2%	16.7%

**Source:** Quarterly Bulletin- Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) (October-December 2020). Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, National Statistical Office, September 2021.

Period	Male			Female			All		
	Agriculture	Industry	Service	Agriculture	Industry	Service	Agriculture	Industry	Service
Oct-Dec19	10.14%	35.15%	54.14%	8.7%	20.84%	70.49%	9.92%	30.95%	66.45%
Jan-Mar20	11.43%	33.12%	55.43%	9.11%	20.56%	70.34%	10.73%	29.36%	59.87
Apr-Jun20	11.26%	28.18%	60.54%	10.79%	19.49%	69.73%	11.13%	25.85%	63.01%
Jul-Sept20	12.43%	31.69%	55.89%	11.43%	24.07%	64.07%	12.16%	29.62%	58.22%
Oct-Dec20	12.87%	31.66%	55.46%	13.85%	25.85%	60.88%	13.13%	29.84%	56.4%

**Source:** Quarterly Bulletin- Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) (October-December 2020). Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, National Statistical Office, September 2021.

Household type during the agricultural year July 2018- June 2019	Agricultural households: 33% Non-agricultural households: 67%
Social group wise agricultural households during the agricultural year July 2018- June 2019	Other backward: 52.4% General: 40.8% SC: 3.6% ST: 3.2%
Distribution of agricultural households by size class of land possessed (ha.) (%)	>0.4 ha: 58.9% 0.4-1 ha: 28.4% 1-2 ha: 9.5% 2-4 ha: 2.6% Above 4 ha: 0.5%
Distribution of agricultural households by household classification	Self-employed in Crop production: 34.4% Livestock/ farming: 4.3% Other agricultural activities: 1.6% Non-agricultural enterprise: 14.2% Regular wage/salaried earning in Agriculture: 2.1% Non-agriculture: 13.6% Causal labour in Agriculture: 5.0% Non-agriculture: 16.3% Others: 8.5%

**Source:** Situation Assessment of Agricultural Households and Land and Livestock Holdings of Households in Rural India, 2019. NSSO Round 77. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. [www.mospi.gov.in](http://www.mospi.gov.in).



Table 5: Percentage distribution of households by household type for rural areas	
Self-employed	
Agriculture:	14.1%
Non-agriculture:	18.8%
Total:	32.9%
Regular wage/salary earning: 19.9%	
Casual labour	
Agriculture:	8.9%
Non-agriculture:	18.2%
Total:	27.1%
Others: 20.1%	
Percentage distribution of households by household type for urban areas	Self-employed: 29.7% Regular wage/salary earning: 29.7% Casual labour: 20.4% Others: 20.1%

**Source:** Annual Report - Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), JULY 2018- JUNE 2019. Government of India. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, National Statistical Office (NSO) 2020.

Table 6: Indicators relating to level of education for rural households	
Literacy rate among persons of age 7 years and above	
Male:	97.9%
Female:	95.6%
Person:	96.7%
Percentage of persons of age 15 years and above with highest level of education secondary and above	
Male:	52.5%
Female:	51.1%
Person:	52.0%
Percentage of persons of age 15 years or more who have attended any formal training in agriculture	
Male:	2.8%
Female:	1.3%
Person:	2.0%

**Source:** Situation Assessment of Agricultural Households and Land and Livestock Holdings of Households in Rural India, 2019. NSSO Round 77. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. [www.mospi.gov.in](http://www.mospi.gov.in).

## **BOX 1:**

Oppam (together) – Story of women turning breadwinners during COVID-19 Oppam is a community initiative that focused on women to rehabilitate the flood-2018 devastated Palathuruth, a small village in Chendamangalam panchayat in Ernakulam district. Most of the households in the village live on the fringes of poverty. Post-flood initiatives helped around 50 women find new livelihoods and a steady income from stitching cloth bags. During COVID-19 when men breadwinners lost their jobs, the women came up as the breadwinners, earning between Rs 4,500-Rs 6,500 a month.

Oppam volunteers arranged training for stitching cloth bags and also linked the women to organisations like Goonj, New Delhi, the Lulu Group and Supply Co. Some of these women stitch grocery bags for Lulu Group and also for Goonj regularly, but on a part-time basis. The grocery bags for the free provision kit of the Government of Kerala are also stitched by them. Seeing their success, many women now approach Oppam volunteers for training and work. Oppam is one of the 25 registered Youth Cooperative Societies formed under the COVID-19 package in August 2021 to promote livelihoods in Kerala. This society opened a retail store in September 2021. It provides regular employment to four women directly in the store and another group of women is attached to Oppam's food processing units.

## **BOX 2:**

Subhiksha Keralam convergence Model - Case of South Cherthala Panchayat South Cherthala grama panchayat in Kerala is in the coastal area. Comparatively poor soil quality made farming unviable and in course of time it became fallow land. Some homesteads became fallow 50 years ago. During COVID-19, under the Subhiksha Keralam programme, the agricultural officer and the panchayat leadership empowered Kudumbashree women to take up cultivation. With the convergence of MGNREGS, Kudumbashree, and the agricultural department, the women took to farming millets, pulses, and vegetables in the fallow land. Elected representatives identified land and got permission for cultivation on lease. Employment of these groups was accounted for under MGNREGS, seeds were provided free, and the agricultural department monitored the activities on a regular basis. They successfully produced vegetables, millets, and pulses.

Around 220 farming groups involving more than 4,000 women took up farming activities during COVID-19, interestingly many of them were first-time farmers. Though this particular panchayat does not require marketing support as its products are being sold at the farm gate, the government also helps with marketing wherever required. The agriculture department's officials say that increased vegetable production helped manage vegetable price rise, especially after the monsoon.

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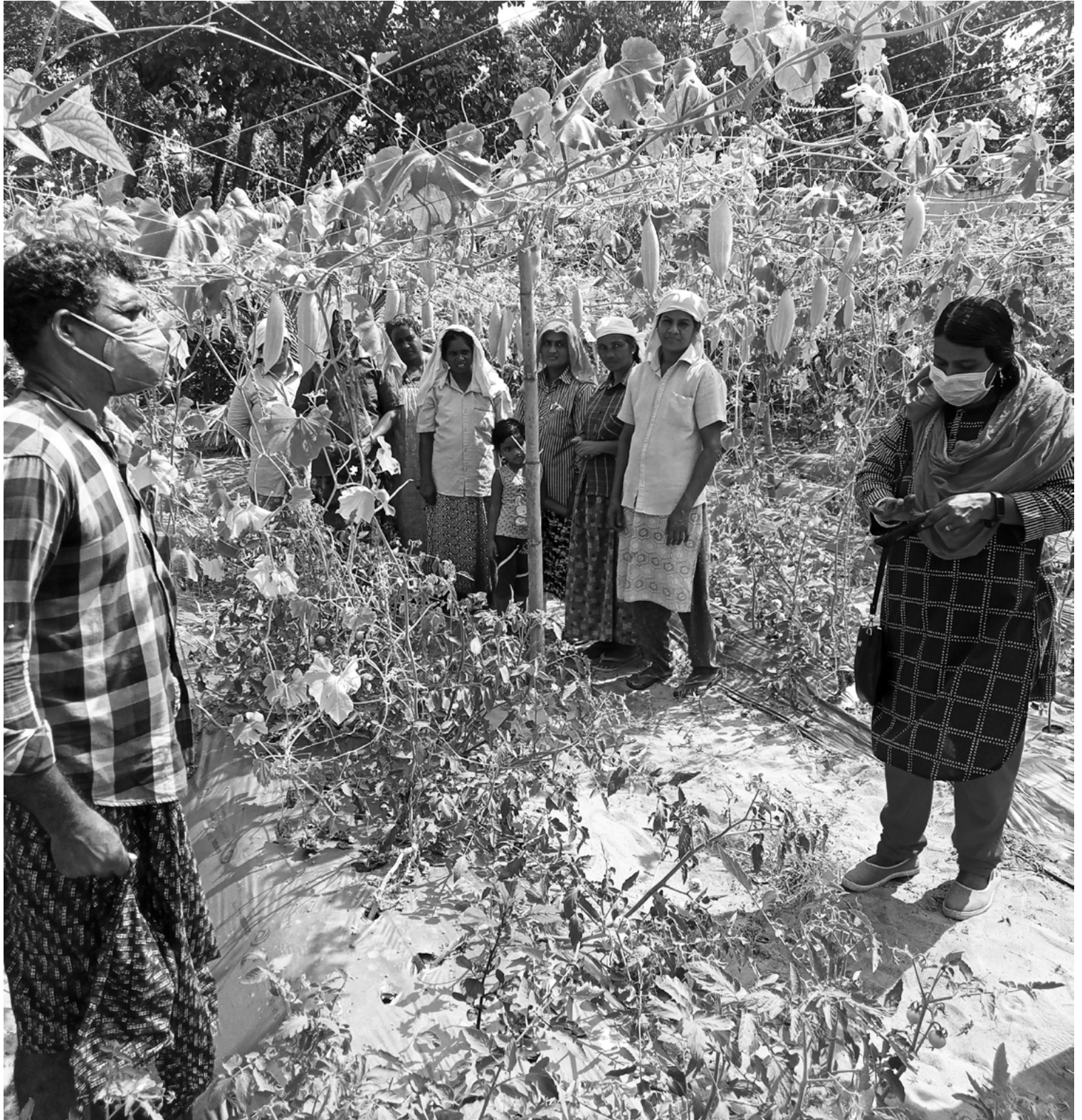
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## **FOCUS ON THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

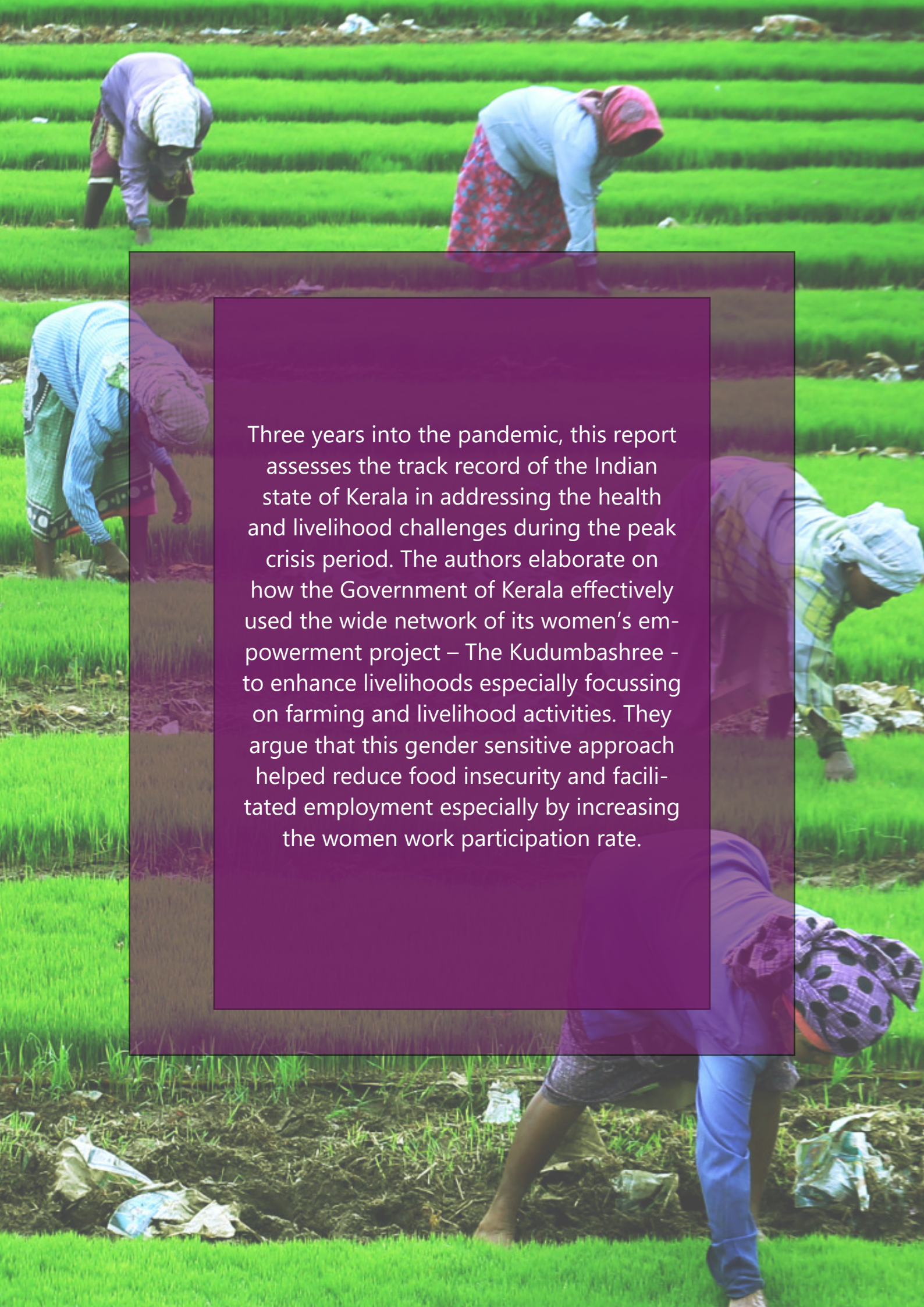
### **FOCUS ON THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

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The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) is a Germany-based foundation working in South Asia as in other parts of the world on the subjects of critical social analysis and civic education. It promotes a sovereign, socialist, secular and democratic social order, and aims to present alternative approaches to society and decision-makers. Research organisations, groups for self- emancipation and social activists are supported in their initiatives to develop models which have the potential to deliver greater social and economic justice



Three years into the pandemic, this report assesses the track record of the Indian state of Kerala in addressing the health and livelihood challenges during the peak crisis period. The authors elaborate on how the Government of Kerala effectively used the wide network of its women's empowerment project – The Kudumbashree – to enhance livelihoods especially focussing on farming and livelihood activities. They argue that this gender sensitive approach helped reduce food insecurity and facilitated employment especially by increasing the women work participation rate.