**Jai Sri: Celebrating Civil Society involvement in SRI in India**

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**Abstract**

SRI is an agroecological innovation that emerged as a civil society innovation and has since captured the imagination of thousands of farmers across the world, including India. Discussions on scaling-up of SRI in India need to recognise not only the civil society origins of SRI but also the continuing experimentation led by civil society in methods of extension and research in this knowledge- (as distinguished from input-) intensive method of increasing rice yields. This paper provides an overview of civil society engagement and spread of SRI in India. Examining why civil society contribution has been important for SRI dissemination and adaptation in India, and what civil society organisations bring to the SRI agenda., The paper suggests that recognising this and understanding the changing dynamic of state civil society relation is critical for SRI uptake.

Civil society involvement in SRI has not only enhanced the spread of SRI but also has brought in important elements, like the establishment of criteria or axioms for research on SRI, and introducing dimensions of equity, gender and resource sustainability into the SRI debates. Using the broader idea of civil society to include not just NGOs or non-governmental organisations, but also formal and informal networks of farmers, the paper suggests that closer attention to the practices of civil society can help in scaling-up of SRI. The paper concludes with recommending some mechanisms by which there could be a faster spread through a changed relation between civil society and other actors, from mistrust and encounters in the early history of SRI, to dialogues and learning alliances in the future.

In the second national conference on SRI convened at Agartala in October 2007, Norman Uphoff remarked that he had been passing on the SRI ‘infection’ to numerous people around the world, having himself been first ‘infected’ with it in the mid 1990s from the Association Tefy Saina, the indigenous NGO in Madagascar that Fr. Henri de Laulanié, the originator of SRI, had started with Malagasy friends. As a chronicler of sorts of the SRI story in India, I have observed how this ‘benign infection’ has spread rapidly to dozens, then hundreds, then thousands of farmers through various actors including non-governmental organizations.

There have been order-of-magnitude increases in some states such as Uttarakhand and Tamil Nadu in the past one year, even as it emerges that new states have taken to SRI enthusiastically. Capturing all of these would indeed be difficult, and I am tempted to

1 I thank Biswanath Sinha, Sabarmatee, Shravani Roy and Ramasubramaniam for useful information and insights that has helped in piecing information together. I thank Norman Uphoff and Koen Beurmer for their comments and suggestions on a draft at very short notice. Usual disclaimers apply
think that SRI needs its own equivalent of cricket statisticians, who meticulously document every move made or not made. Speaking of SRI, I have realised is often the case that we are unavoidably presenting results that are only partially complete and needs to be seen as an open invitation to other actors to add, refute and replace.\(^2\)

**NGOs or CSOs**

The benign infection has indeed spread. It might have not reached the proverbial tipping point, to use Malcolm Gladwell’s phrase, in many places or caught sufficient media or even donor attention, yet one of the more interesting happenings of the past year has been the spread of SRI almost as a peoples’ movement. In places that are remote and where the depleted strength of the agricultural extension machinery has never reached – SRI has spread, despite the lack of weeders and markers. Some of this spread has not been due to active NGO presence or donor support, yet people have started greeting each other in parts of Koraput, Ganjam, Nayagarh districts with the phrase ‘Jai Sri’ – a post-modern equivalent of the popular *Ram Ram* in parts of India. The phrase was coined by Prof. Radhamohan at an experience-sharing workshop in Sambhav in Nayagarh in February 2008 to suggest that resource-poor farmers should take to SRI given its implications for food security.

The workshop to me indicated how benign infections can also spread in innovative ways in remote regions. There was a festivity in the air, traditional drums were beaten, and poems were composed on SRI mentioning the ill effects of conventional input-intensive farming that has pauperized the farmer. One remembered or recalled the roots of culture in agriculture.\(^3\) I recall this excitement not to romanticise SRI or oversell the SRI spread in remote regions, but to suggest that in symposiums such as these the act of thinking about SRI needs to capture not just the graphs and targets for SRI outreach, but also the atmosphere of celebration that has brought SRI to so many parts of India, and I will show that in this process, civil society has indeed played a very important role - a role that some pro-active donors such as Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Sir Dorabji Tata Trust (SDTT) have recognised and supported.

Prof Radhamohan saw this culturally-resonant greeting as one way of getting the farmers of the *Sri Samaj* or SRI community to greet each other. It is also about tapping into the large potential of sustainable and organic farming that SRI represents – *Jai* also refers to *Jaivik*, which means ‘organic’ in Oriya. The stories of extension of SRI in Koraput and other areas used to come to me through SMSes from Sabarmatee who has been enthusiastically training close to a thousand SRI farmers in Orissa in the last year and a

\(^2\) At a documentation conference on SRI in Orissa, I recall presenting our estimates of SRI of a particular district with the embarrassment of realising that there were almost half of those that we mentioned right there at the workshop, and that we were off target by an order of magnitude! If this can be the plight in the state of Orissa where I reside, I can quite imagine that any picture that I might provide will necessarily be at best partially correct. But I am hoping that through this account, I might be able to capture some trends and dimensions that can support and promote the discussion and planning of strategies.

\(^3\) Norman Uphoff remarks that there are similar parallels in other parts of the world where skits have been used with great effect in communicating the principles of SRI in Bangladesh and Indonesia. The cultural aspects of SRI has received little attention by researchers and support agencies.
half, both at Nayagarh and on actual farmers’ fields. The messages in the third week of June, brief as SMS’s are, conveyed the excitement of the spread of SRI in Orissa. A few samples:

‘Jai Sri’ slogan is in air, means ‘Jaivik Sri’ and also ‘long live SRI’. When SRI family members meet they greet by saying ‘Jai Sri’. Emphasizing on building local resource persons.
I could prepare a 3 tier trainer force - ‘Jai Sri Vahini’ - in the meantime. They conduct training in tribal dialect.
Designed ‘SRI Samman’ certificate for eco Sri practioners of Pragati.”

These short text messages have continued to flow ever since and have helped me keep pace with the excitement at the grassroots. The menu of options under the banner Jai Sri has expanded in the last few months. Table 1 received recently from Sabarmatee summarises the mechanisms of this emerging SRI community.

**Table 1: Mechanisms for Spread of SRI as a Peoples Movement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl.</th>
<th>Jai SRI Head</th>
<th>Activities undertaken or proposed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Jai SRI Samaj</td>
<td>Group/society of Jai SRI practitioners/enthusiasts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Jai SRI</td>
<td>Greeting each other when we meet, talk over telephone, send SMS/email or write letters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Jai SRI Vahini</td>
<td>Cadets of promote Jai SRI and help each other to learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Jai SRI Samman</td>
<td>Awarding/ recognising farmers/innovators for best practices/experiments/innovations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>SRI Tirtha</td>
<td>Exhibition (by Pragati, Koraput) at district-level festival (Parab)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Jai SRI Corpus Fund</td>
<td>A fund for promotion of SRI through various activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Jai SRI Greeting Cards</td>
<td>Cards designed using paddy which carries messages about Jai SRI and indigenous paddy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Jai SRI Mukta Vidyalaya</td>
<td>Resource Centre for Mutual Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Jai SRI Cultural Troupe</td>
<td>Promotion of organic farming and Jai SRI through cultural activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Jai SRI Varta</td>
<td>Newsletter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Jai SRI Seva</td>
<td>Question –Answer Service/Help Desk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>SRI Tathya</td>
<td>Documentation of SRI experiments, study, research etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Communication from Sabarmatee of Sambhav, Nov. 2008.

I narrate this in some detail to underscore two points. Firstly, we need to see SRI as something beyond what NGOs ‘do’ or ‘do not do’. Civil society is a broader category that is more relevant to SRI extension ideas, of which NGOs are very important parts, but it can include farmers’ movements like the Rishikulya Raita Sangha in Ganjam district and also others who could convert SRI into a possible peoples’ movement. Secondly, and that

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A few years back while documenting the history of SRI, the work of W.M. Premaratne, a Sri Lankan SRI practitioner and trainer who had trained over 4,000 farmers on organic SRI, was reported. This caused one to think who would be the Indian Premaratne. In the work of people like Sabarmatee, Narayana Reddy and Kishan Rao, we seem to have in India resource persons who have taken on this role in their respective ways.
is relevant for the rest of the paper, it is to illustrate that the ability of many civil society practitioners to seize opportunities, work on them, experiment, innovate and extend this to others has been critical to a fair amount of SRI spread. Civil society, as we shall see, has indeed extended the frontiers of SRI much beyond what we associate with it, and it therefore needs to be included in many of our official understanding of SRI.

Why is civil society contribution to SRI important?

SRI is unprecedented, at least within recent decades, for being a civil society innovation, one that originated not from research stations or laboratories but from the dedicated work of a priest, subsequently amplified by the efforts of NGOs and other non-state actors. Unlike many agricultural innovations of the twentieth century that usually followed a linear sequence where advances in scientific knowledge were transformed into technological advances and were transferred then through extension or market mechanisms to users, SRI not only started as a grassroots innovation but this is also one innovation where technology preceded science (Lines and Uphoff 2005, Uphoff 2007).

The unusual origin of this innovation is something that is often forgotten. If an NGO like Association Tefy Saina (ATS) was responsible for developing SRI and taking it to farmers in Madagascar and making it known, the spread of SRI in India too has been possible through the efforts of many civil society organizations (CSOs) and networks. The history of SRI in India clearly shows that SRI has had a parallel development in the laboratories of research institutes and in farmers’ fields through organic groups accessing, experimenting and innovating on SRI from other countries and farmers (Shambu Prasad 2006).

The role of civil society needs to be recognised not just for historic reasons. Civil society has an important role to promote SRI as a philosophy and a system organised on very different principles than conventional agricultural innovation. In fact, often the attempt to reduce SRI to a simplistic set of invariant principles has led to stagnation. SRI, as the name suggests, is a system rather than a technology, an agroecological innovation that is knowledge- and skill-intensive, not an input-intensive process like typical innovations such as improved seed varieties, agrochemical crop protection, etc. Civil society organisations have been quick to recognise this as an opportunity even as many governmental agencies see this characteristic as a constraint. Farmers need not just to be trained but also empowered to observe and innovate.

This has implications for the spread of SRI. Typical extension strategies have not been effective as SRI requires adaptation and not adoption alone. Extension has led research in some of the states in India. Farmer Field Schools or FFS have been more effective in promoting SRI than conventional extension methods. In this too, civil society has led several innovations in extension. The AME Foundation (Agriculture Man and Ecology) in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh and Ekoventure in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry specifically use FFS in their SRI work in India. FFS methods have also been effective for extension of SRI in northern Myanmar, as seen in Kabir and Uphoff (2007), and they
have been used also in Indonesia, Cambodia, Vietnam and Philippines. Other groups as we shall see have other innovative ways of spreading SRI.

CSOs have not taken SRI as something given and complete but have provided SRI with multiple meanings. In the early part of the SRI evolution in India, establishing SRI has often meant extolling its yield potential. This has willy-nilly in parts of Andhra Pradesh led to SRI being seen and taken further by large farmers who were attracted by its super yield potential. However, CSOs like Timbaktu Collective in Andhra Pradesh were keen to see SRI as a means towards larger objectives such as re-establishing farmers’ control over their production system and protecting against water shortages. In a specific instance where principles of SRI were used to save a standing paddy crop in Mustikovila tank command area in Anantapur district, the organic farmer and SRI champion Narayana Reddy had together with the Collective enabled the farmers to carry out alternate wetting and drying even with existing spacing. Not all six principles of SRI were followed but the philosophy was guiding practice. There were no spectacular yields as some of the coastal farmers had achieved, but the value of a saved rice crop was more important for the farmers at a time when there was overall failure of the rice crop in the whole district.  

Similar instances of CSOs providing SRI with multiple meanings abound in SRI practice in India. Many CSOs have seen in SRI the possibility of improving soil fertility, reintroduction of quality parameters – grain and straw, the potential for use with traditional and indigenous varieties of rice, the synergy with organic farming albeit in a phased manner, the possibility of extension to other crops, etc. In fact for groups such as Timbaktu Collective that was more interested in millets than rice, SRI provided them an opportunity to have a better dialogue with farmers and underscored the need for farmers to be more observant of their farming practices – an art that had more or less been lost with input-intensive agriculture.

One of the most important contributions of civil society to SRI has been in the area of experimentation and innovation. Many of these organisations have fostered innovation themselves and among farmers. Even as weeders were being popularised independent of soil types, CSOs opened up the process of innovation by inviting weeder designs from different parts of Andhra Pradesh and providing the detailed knowledge on newer kinds of weeders to others interested. The large number of weeder designs developed by WASSAN (Watershed Support Services and Activities Network) under the guidance of Kishan Rao is testimony to this. The Mandava weeder, named after Mandava village of Kishan Rao, is now being extensively used by farmers in Orissa even as the systems of getting weeders have not yet been well established.

There are numerous experiments on SRI from CSOs. The Green Foundation and PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action) have extended SRI principles to finger millet; the Centre for World Solidarity (CWS) has documented and popularised the innovation of Alwara Swamy, a farmer in Andhra Pradesh who has innovated SRI on sugarcane. People’s Science Institute (PSI) in Dehradun has conducted

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5 For a detailed account on the Mustikovila story, see Shambu Prasad (2006).
trials on using SRI in wheat. More than the final products or techniques, it is the ability of civil society to foster experimentation and create a culture of innovation by expressing a willingness to take risk and tread where many of the regular researchers have not. Few civil society experimentations occur in controlled laboratory conditions; most occur in farmers’ fields in real conditions. In fact, CSOs have been arguing that in SRI, the repeated efforts by the research establishment to re-establish SRI principles of spacing, etc. under laboratory conditions are a misguided effort, and that all demonstrations should be on farmers’ fields.

Potential ideas have not been rejected prematurely. For example, Kishan Rao from WASSAN took up the development of weeders using the ‘pull’ principle instead of ‘push’ that was counter to much of weeder design, yet the idea found support and has become popular. The SDTT has in its new support to over 86 partners on SRI promotion established innovation as a theme to enable not only the documentation of innovation by farmers and NGOs but also to try and encourage novel adaptations of SRI. SRI thus has found novel applications in water drainage under rainfed conditions where the existing knowledge of the 5% model of PRADAN has come in handy. Ekoventure in Tamil Nadu has been experimenting with using Effective Micro organisms (EM) to enhance SRI performance.

The use of *Panchagavya*, a mixture of cow urine, dung, milk, curd and ghee fermented together, has been very effective as a plant growth stimulator and has encouraged many farmers from Tamil Nadu to Orissa to take this up. Together with vermicompost, there is a veritable cottage industry emerging in many parts of the country led by CSOs to provide the kind of support to the soil in SRI with a view to enhancing soil fertility and providing for healthy and robust growth of rice plants.

There is indeed much to learn from the experiments being carried out by CSOs that would merit a network and journal similar to the popular *Honey Bee* magazine that documents grassroots innovation. Creation of a space where this is widely shared and discussed is perhaps necessary and something that the SRI community in India needs to create. This would not only avoid needless repetition of SRI trials but more importantly create a case for validation of SRI results from the field. Building on one of the most important contributions of civil society on SRI, namely seeing SRI as an open innovation and open source and placing knowledge in the public domain, is something that the SRI community needs to thank CSOs for. Civil society, from the early impetus provided by ATS in Madagascar has, to use the popular phrase of innovation theorist Eric Von Hippel (2005), ‘democratized innovations’ by treating all its knowledge as open source, allowing lead users (in this case farmers) to experiment and share knowledge with others.

To summarize, the contribution of civil society to SRI is important for five major reasons – its origin as a civil society innovation, the spread of SRI to large numbers of people, for providing multiple meanings to SRI, creating and enabling experimentation and innovation, and placing knowledge in the public domain. For all of these, one could truly

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remark Jai Sri and celebrate this achievement. In the following section I look at how this role of civil society has changed over the years.

**Overview and changing role of civil society in SRI in India**

The second national symposium at Agartala, Tripura can be seen as a landmark event in the history of SRI in India. Apart from celebrating the success of large-scale operations of SRI made possible by the dynamic leadership of the Government of Tripura and led by officers such as Dr Baharul Mazumdar, the workshop also brought about an important shift in the direction of SRI in India, emphasising its importance to rainfed farming and food security. This small resource poor farmer emphasis also opened up the space for recognising and understanding the role of civil society in SRI. A couple of years prior to that, SRI was viewed with much suspicion due largely to the international debates on ‘Rice Wars’. With SRI fighting for legitimate recognition nuances of civil society engagement with SRI was ignored as the debates were seen as ‘scientific’ ones to establish the veracity of SRI claims. There was no civil society presentation at the first ever SRI national meeting as a theme of the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) Tata Partners Meet in 2005 though there was civil society involvement in the discussions at the conference.

Ever since, while civil society efforts have been acknowledged, including at the first national symposium on SRI, they have been seen as sporadic and romantic even. There has been a sense of mistrust amongst civil society and the state with few instances of collaborative work. In fact in places like Tamil Nadu, for some time, SRI was seen very differently by civil society groups and the government, so much so that they were for some time two different names to designate SRI. Civil society work on SRI was based on the initial lead provided by some NGOs that had a lot of international exposure such as Auroville or the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) or many of the organic farming networks in South India. This was to be expected given the lack of sufficient knowledge on SRI within India.

The involvement of groups such as WWF-ICRISAT Dialogue Project was responsible in large measure in bringing about a change in the climate towards SRI. Generous funding to both research and civil society groups and institutions that enabled and insisted on dialogue among farmers and researchers with CSOs playing facilitating roles meant that the hierarchies of power were slowly getting broken and greater trust was being built. Some of the earlier dialogues were more like debates with different kinds of knowledge and worldviews fighting for space, especially in Andhra Pradesh. Civil society interest in SRI was largely seen as a South Indian phenomenon though groups from other places such as Chattisgarh, West Bengal, and Bihar, etc were watching the developments closely. PRADAN of course had through its network taken a big lead in SRI in Purulia, West Bengal.

Organisations such as WASSAN undertook the responsibility of experimenting with SRI in rainfed conditions in Andhra Pradesh, but more importantly started the process of becoming a resource centre on SRI by providing information in the public domain within
and outside Andhra Pradesh. WASSAN was not the first organization to promote SRI in the state. The Directorate of Extension for the Andhra Pradesh agricultural university (ANGRAU) began holding workshops on SRI for agricultural officers across the country after its state-wide evaluation trials in 2003 gave convincing evidence of SRI advantages, giving an average yield increase of 2.5 t/ha with reduced water requirements and less cost. But age-old institutional orientations meant that CSOs did not have access to these that were regarded still as part of the agricultural research establishment. Demands for training manuals in other languages and requests for workshops in other regions increased. Kishan Rao became an important resource person through WASSAN advising several farmers and CSOs across the country and even abroad on SRI. WASSAN’s work in identifying critical constraints in SRI operation such as weeders in different soil conditions and working towards resolving them with newer models was particularly appreciated by farmers across the country. Two states – Uttarakhand and Orissa -- drew a lot of ideas from WASSAN and its sister organisations CWS and CSA.

In eastern India, PRADAN extended its insights gained from Purulia experience initially to Orissa, Jharkhand and Bihar. The Tripura symposium brought a new player, the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust (SDTT) more actively into the SRI scenario in the country. With an almost exclusive civil-society focus for its strategy to support SRI scaling up, SDTT currently supports 107 CSOs in eight states, spanning 74 districts, with an impressive coverage in Kharif 2008 of 30,198 households in 6,635 acres. The greater number of households compared to acres indicates the focus on small and marginal farmers that civil society has brought to the effort. In Uttarakhand and Himachal under the leadership of PSI, over 12,000 farmers are practicing SRI from a modest beginning with 40 farmers in 2006 – an achievement that indicates as much about the strength of PSI as much about its network partners.

The Agartala workshop had a very significant representation from civil society that also saw some civil society proponents receiving awards for their SRI work. Soon after the workshop and building on the enthusiasm of the participants, an SRI e-group was formed. A study is underway by XIMB to do a network mapping of the SRI India community as represented in the e-group and also within the wider community (this is discussed in another paper in the conference).

Of the nearly 170 participants for whom information has been reviewed, an overwhelming 60 % are from NGOs. A closer look at the data reveals that the involvement of CSOs in the e-group is relatively high. There are 51 NGOs from 16 states in this group, many of whom are involved in SRI activity in their region in different capacities. This picture is only an approximation [representative means it is exact] as not all members listed in an e-group are directly involved with SRI activity. Table 2 provides a better estimate and is a constructed overview of organisations and groups involved in SRI in India from civil society as best I can construct a listing. This cannot be a


comprehensive picture and is presented here based on available information. Many groups working on SRI might have been missed out in this list (and additions or corrections are welcomed)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Key civil society organisations in SRI</th>
<th>Extent of coverage, mechanisms, and orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Andhra Pradesh</td>
<td>WASSAN, CROPS, Nava Jyothi, CWS, AME partners, Jalaspandana</td>
<td>Most districts; 20 CSOs are involved in collaboration with SERP, WWF; Greater organic emphasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Arunachal</td>
<td>WWF India, Rashtriya Gramin Vikas Nidhi, Nest, Gramin Panchayat</td>
<td>22 organisations in 15 districts, most in this kharif; Yield as high as 18.18 t/ha reported. Plans to reach 29,000 families; links with Bihar Rural Livelihood Support Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>Sahara, Gram Vikas Mancho, PRADAN</td>
<td>Details not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>Riccharia Campaign, Choupal, PRADAN</td>
<td>Spread in 4 districts; focus on indigenous varieties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Chattisgarh</td>
<td>FES, Sadguru Foundation</td>
<td>Over 20 CSOs, 14 districts; close to 800 acres SRI estimated in 22 districts, not all through CSOs [there is more in Kerala than this; I just got a message from there, but can’t find name of organization]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Himachal</td>
<td>PSI through its partners</td>
<td>Close to 30 CSOs working on SRI in 21 districts, Organic groups and their networks; popularization of Panchagavya; EM with SRI in Pondicherry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Jharkhand</td>
<td>PRADAN, NEEDS, Jan Seva Parishad, SPWD</td>
<td>Efforts on in 2 districts, still to take off in a big way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Karnataka</td>
<td>AME, Green Foundation, Srijan</td>
<td>32 CSOs involved in reaching close to 15,000 households in last 2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Kerala</td>
<td>RASTA</td>
<td>Early leadership in Purulia District; recent attempts to increase to other districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>ASA, Bypass, SPS, PRADAN</td>
<td>Yet to spread from initial 3 districts, 9 CSOs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Maharashtra</td>
<td>BAIF, Bosco Grammin Vikas Kendra Centre for World Solidarity (CWS) and its partners, Sahabhaagi Vikas Abhiyan, PRADAN, Sambhav, Rishikulya Raitha Sabha, Karptabha, Vaanghai, Ekoventure, Kudumbam, CCD, Sri Sadada Ashram, CIKS, farmers’ network of Murugamangalam, Tamilaga Velaan Neerval</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Orissa</td>
<td>Close to 30 CSOs working on SRI in 21 districts, Organic groups and their networks; popularization of Panchagavya; EM with SRI in Pondicherry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Tamil Nadu</td>
<td>Niruvanam, Erode</td>
<td>32 CSOs involved in reaching close to 15,000 households in last 2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Uttarakhand and HP</td>
<td>PSI and its partners, GVK India, PRADAN, Ambuja Cement Foundation, PRASARI, Baradrone Social Welfare</td>
<td>Early leadership in Purulia District; recent attempts to increase to other districts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Collated by author

Unlike in the past there has been a change in the institutional climate with increasing evidence of CSOs working with state agencies, especially at the state level. The extent of collaboration is varied. Some states like Uttarakhand have moved much further where workshops at local levels are held jointly and joint activities are undertaken; in other cases the support is for resource persons for training agricultural staff. Not all states have been as committed to support agricultural extension at local levels like Tripura. In many states such as Orissa, the government has not been able to fulfil posts of agricultural officers for several years and agricultural officers are often made to take up work of other departments. In such situations, it is CSOs with their extensive networks that could take up SRI more effectively. Yet, as we shall discuss later, policy support is muted under the new schemes for supporting SRI.

**What do CSOs bring to the development agenda?**
We have seen how CSOs are indeed playing a major role in the spread of SRI in several states. Some of it translates into increased acreage and yields, but importantly civil society brings in additional dimensions to the development agenda that otherwise would get left out. Some of the salient features are:

**Pro-poor and rainfed focus:** The spread of SRI in recent times has been much more in rainfed areas that do not receive adequate or any irrigation and where farming is characterised by small farm sizes, often managed by small and marginal and tribal farmers. Extending the benefits of SRI to these farmers has had a significant impact on their poverty levels and achieving food security. In high poverty areas of eastern India and hilly tracts of the Himalayas, civil society has indeed played an important role in addressing these issues. In addition to this specific pro-poor or small farmer focus, CSOs have also engaged the gender dimension in agriculture more pro-actively. Training sessions in Himachal and Uttarakhand have, for instance, witnessed large numbers of women participating as women there have had a big role in managing the land. PRADAN relies on Self Help Groups (SHGs) of women for its extension and recognises and rewards them by investing in them as cluster resource experts.

**Organic or agroecological focus:** Many civil society groups are explicitly promoting organic agriculture and insist that SRI promotion can and needs to be carried out based on organic methods of soil fertilization. As mentioned earlier, improving soil fertility and the local resource base of the farmer has been seen as important by CSOs, and they have increased their menu of offerings to the farmer through locally-manufactured organic growth promoters such as *Panchagavya* or through bio-fertilisers such as Magic Compost (called *Handi Khata* in Oriya) and vermicompost. They have also sought to promote indigenous and often forgotten varieties of rice that could respond favourably to SRI practices with increased yields. An organisation like Sambhav in Orissa, for instance, works on 170 varieties of rice, and this number has increased with its work on SRI. Many groups recognise the value of straw, considering its nutritional quality as well as volume, and emphasise this. Whether or to what extent SRI should be practices with organic or chemical soil amendments is often a point of much debate and should be seen as a healthy one too.

**Investing in capacity-building:** As a skill-intensive process, SRI requires investment in motivating and empowering farmers and should help build their capacities to experiment, participate and innovate. This is something that CSOs seem to understand better than government agencies. For example, NGOs like Nest in Assam organise motivational workshops. FFS as indicated earlier have been a feature of some CSOs like Ekoventure and AME. A study on the varied extension methods followed by CSOs in SRI has not been done and is a fruitful area of investigation. This in fact might even hold the key to better SRI uptake.

Experience-sharing workshops have been very effective forums to promote learning, and not just for reporting on yields, both in Orissa and Uttarakhand. Documentation workshops have enabled CSOs to look for additional elements on both the technical and
institutional aspects of SRI. The importance of capacity-building of stakeholders is unfortunately not accounted for in the training programmes of most government agencies, even for their own staff. Demotivated and ill-equipped staff can set back SRI efforts more than advance them, and this is an area that policy support is essential.

Networks: This again is an understated reason for success of CSOs in SRI promotion. The spread of SRI to states other than one’s own has been due to CSOs already being part of several networks – face-to-face or electronic. In our XIMB network study, we realised that not many government or research agencies were part of the SRI India network. Networks enable non-linear expansion of activity that can often be geometric or exponential. The spread of SRI in Uttarakhand is a case in point. Each organisation is not an isolated entity but often brings and gains social capital through its network. Creating facilitative spaces for tapping into such networks can enable greater scale for SRI.

Flexibility and strategies for mainstreaming: CSOs have shown remarkable flexibility in approaches for mainstreaming SRI. They have shown good capacity to learn from others and each other. Much SRI activity has happened due to crossing of state boundaries that policy makers do not recognise. The same organisation follows different strategy depending on local conditions and the need to adapt to opportunities. See the institutional mechanism of SRI activities of PRADAN in Purulia, West Bengal and in Gaya, Bihar below.
Strategic partnerships and linkages of WASSAN with PSI that has a mandate for several states and a training centre on watersheds enabled scale-up of SRI in Uttarakhand. SRI was a strategic fit in some of these schemes. Similarly in Andhra Pradesh, WASSAN’s strategy was to make SRI as a component in mainstream programs. It was introduced into the Indo-German Watershed Development Program (IGWDP-A) and WDF programs of NABARD, and also under AP Drought Adaptation Initiative. Making SRI part of these mainstream programs provides the required human resources and investments on a larger scale for promotion of SRI.

Innovation and establishing axioms for research: We have elaborated on this earlier. CSOs’ dissemination of an innovation through effective communication is the conventional understanding of how transfer of technology is to be achieved. However, in the case of SRI, ignoring the role of continuous innovation by CSOs during the process of dissemination would be missing a key element. The importance of continuous experiments and adaptations by CSOs is something that researchers should take serious note of. CSOs have shown the ability to move in directions that others do not. They have
gone to farmers’ fields before researchers, have experimented with different kinds of organic manures such as Panchagavya, Azolla and other alternative practices have provided different ways of dealing with problems such as pest attacks in paddy. CSOs have not shies away from experimenting with SRI concepts and methods for different crops, on saline soils, and on degraded soils as well. This rich repository of experiential knowledge should be tapped by both agricultural and social science researchers in India.

**Openness to surprise:** The SRI puzzle of why farmers’ fields’ results have often been better than those obtained under laboratory conditions merits closer attention. Why have farmers been more open to SRI as a possibility than many researchers have been? For purposes of development, Korten (1980) has indicated that a learning process approach has often been more effective in complex public administration than the blueprint approach. This is certainly true for SRI, and CSOs have been able to tap into this potential because of their greater openness to surprise that work with SRI often throws up. Biological systems are non-linear in the relationships between input and output, and conventional agricultural research has been guided much more by mechanicistic ways of thinking. Openness to surprise is an important attribute for SRI promotion as many are realising that this needs changes in attitudes often more than financial resources.

**Policy implications: Do CSOs have all the answers?**

> NGOs... can oppose the state, complement it, or reform it, but they cannot ignore it (John Clark, quoted in Farrington and Bebbington, 1993: 123).

There has been considerable change in NGO-state relations in support of sustainable agriculture since Farrington and Bebbington (1993) explored this in their book. In their book they had pointed to some structural limitations to NGOs acting alone -- their weaknesses in technical capability, their limited impacts on poverty, and their sometimes doubtful capacity to be legitimate representatives of the poor. Many of these limitations continue in sustainable agriculture and with SRI today. An example of such limitations is seen in the state of Tripura, where NGOs have been missing in action in the campaign for SRI. The tremendous success of SRI spread in Tripura without the involvement of any NGOs is an excellent case of the state government and its agencies working extremely well with the local governance institutions – the panchayat and its representatives. Given their limited and unsustained resources, scale issues of SRI cannot be tackled by CSOs alone, and the state will continue to play an important role.

The agenda of sustainable agricultural development and NGO capacity has, of course, changed considerably since the 1990s. The optimism of the strategies suggested by Farrington and Bebbington on state extension and the role of NGOs seems obsolete given the serious disinvestment in public institutions in agriculture through structural reform in most countries of the world, India included. Thus the call of Farrington and Bebbington for reforming the NARS, strategies where NGOs disseminate the results of NARS research, while NARS and NGOs conduct some research jointly, and NGOs disseminate the results of their own research seem only partially relevant today. SRI and the sustainable agriculture agenda suggest some other changes as well. Though civil
society organisations in India have moved much further on the sustainable agriculture agenda than state organisations, changes in the external climate due to rising oil prices, global food crisis and climate change pose much bigger challenges. The subsidy bill on fertilisers in India according to a recent estimate has touched a whopping Rs 1 lakh crore.

SRI does have the potential of addressing some of these challenges but it requires a much higher level of collaboration between state, civil society and business organisations if a dent is needed to be made. NGOs and the state cannot see themselves as ‘reluctant partners’ and need to be seen as moving together in meeting some of the challenges. Civil society capacities are not necessarily equal to the challenge even as much unused capacity in the state and business needs to be channelled. What is it that we can glean from the experiences of CSOs from the SRI story that could help in meeting these challenges, to go beyond ‘business as usual’ as the recent IAASTD report suggests? The history of civil society involvement suggests some possibilities where more effort could be made to convert reluctant partners to join learning alliances.

The historical account of SRI indicates that international NGOs like the WWF have indeed played a very important role in getting the reluctant partners together by:
   a. Hosting state-level and national-level dialogues where SRI merits and demerits can and have been openly discussed,
   b. Supporting joint research in evaluating SRI results (particularly in the state of Andhra Pradesh),
   c. Changing the rules of the game by providing support for research agencies from an international NGO, and thereby suggesting ways of changing the manner in which research is conducted. In this, inputs from CSOs have been valuable. The best example of this has been encouraging better weeder designs in t collaboration with other agencies in Andhra Pradesh.
   d. Pushing for national-level policy support for SRI, both from research and extension.

The nature of state–CSO relations in SRI in India has been a very dynamic one. It started with only a few research organisations working on SRI, especially in the south. [but isn’t it ambiguous to lump universities together with state institutions? The start in TN and AP was in the universities – not ‘the state’ as usually understood] However, the spread of SRI, especially with state government, support led to pressures to change the agenda of national-level agencies, supporting programmes for evaluation and demonstration of SRI, with some cooperation between the research and extension departments. The early phase of state–CSO interactions was one of suspicion, with civil society having to push for SRI to be taken seriously. It was at times easier to convince local governments than research establishments, departments of irrigation and rural development that department of agriculture.

However with active involvement of some SRI champions like Dr. T.M. Thyagarajan and Dr. Alapati Satyanarayana, spaces for SRI opened up in the agricultural research establishment, with extension receptivity following. The debate between state and civil society then assumed a different nature. It was not any more ‘whether SRI?’ but more...
about ‘how to do SRI?’ Should it be chemical or organic? How should SRI be promoted – as a package of practices or as a philosophy emphasising local adaptations? Which strategy should be tried out under what conditions? Should research be done on station or in farmers’ fields? How should SRI trainings be organised? and so on.

There are significant differences within the SRI community on these questions, and all of these have a bearing on state-CSO relations and on the ability to work together. The increased support to SRI through policy initiatives such as the National Food Security Mission (NFSM) can raise some additional concerns. Despite their proven expertise and experience in promoting SRI in India, civil society organisations were not consulted before the guidelines for NFSM were drafted, and the strategy for promoting SRI within it was formulated. The guidelines reflect a ‘business as usual’ approach with provisions that have been closely linked to the promotion of conventional rice varieties or agrochemical inputs. There is also a provision in NFSM for use of weedicides in SRI, something that most SRI proponents are surprised by.

Capacity building for SRI at local levels, a critical component for success, has not been taken into account. Institutional hindrances to state-civil society collaborations in SRI have not been addressed and continue to remain high. For instance, training programmes for SRI have assumed similar forms to conventional training, whereas more effective inputs could be provided in the field. Mechanisms for state agencies to use expert advice from NGOs and resource persons do not exist in sufficient measure, even though there is acknowledgement among the actors that this could enhance effectiveness.

How does one then get reluctant partners to work together and increase synergy? It must be reiterated that the efforts of several SRI champions to place knowledge in the public domain has created an atmosphere of tremendous trust that SRI has and needs to capitalize on. From the very first letter received by Norman Uphoff from a Punjabi farmer about SRI in 2001 to several emails from farmers, NGO representatives and researchers since then all of them have had amazing responses to their requests for information, often getting to know each others’ work through Norman. For their part those who have received insights too have passed it on to others by testing it out locally. Within this overall frame of open knowledge perhaps sticking to becoming reluctant partners would make for little sense.

To add to this overall climate of trust and sharing has been the deliberate attempts by WWF to bring together diverse players under a common platform through dialogue workshops. In continuation of these trends have been some focused and encouraging experiences in the various states. The considered and deliberate effort in Orissa to have a state-level dialogue functioning as a ‘learning alliance’ in June 2007 helped change the relations between state and civil society. The Learning Alliance concept recognises that the main purpose of meetings and workshops is to build greater trust within multi-partner and multi-stakeholder projects. Thus, while differences are likely to remain and might

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9 For details on the application of Learning Alliances, see Shambu Prasad et al. (2007) and Shambu Prasad (2008).
continue to be discussed and debated, forums where ideas and work can be shared need to be created.

In Orissa, this approach has been taken to try to avoid the earlier mistakes of Tamil Nadu, where state and CSOs were working in parallel rather than cooperating. Further, the structuring of such workshops can also provide motivation for government functionaries from the agricultural department. Getting Dr. Baharul Mazumdar from Tripura to speak in such a meeting about SRI success there through the State’s Department of Agriculture was very effective in convincing some of officials about SRI. The contribution of actors outside state boundaries has been very effective in Uttarakhand and Himachal where resource persons like Kishan Rao from AP have been able to convey effectively SRI principles and ideas.

Regional workshops of this kind are likely to provide extremely important directions for SRI in the days, months and years to come. More so than in other countries, the Indian SRI innovation system presents great complexity. Progress with SRI in many other countries such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam, etc. has been largely due to NGO support. India has perhaps the highest number of actors in SRI in the world – strong national agricultural research systems, active civil society presence, large number of farmers and farmers’ organisations, and many active universities and research institutes. Getting these to work together requires a lot of institutional change and innovative mechanisms such as learning alliances. Ensuring synergy among these diverse actors will continue to be one of the biggest challenges in SRI.

The SRI innovation system in India is sufficiently mature to realise that celebrating one actor’s role, in this case civil society organisations, does not mean suggesting that other actors are less important. This could be civil society’s undoing if it pits itself against other actors. The festive atmosphere of a national symposium calls for celebration of this spirit of experimentation and innovation that civil society has been able to give to SRI with other actors and we would all join in this celebration by echoing the slogan in word and deed to meet the challenges of sustainable agriculture.

\textit{Jai SRI}

References


