



Original Article

A Study of Farmer Producer Companies among Tribal Communities in Maharashtra

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Abstract

Agriculture continues to be the primary livelihood source for tribal communities in Maharashtra, where socio-economic backwardness, poor infrastructure, and limited market access hinder development. The Farmer Producer Company (FPC) model, introduced to strengthen small and marginal farmers, has emerged as an effective organizational mechanism for enhancing incomes, improving market linkages, and fostering community solidarity. This study examines the role, impact, and challenges of FPCs among tribal populations, highlighting their contributions to livelihood security, social capital formation, and sustainable agricultural practices. Through qualitative and quantitative approaches, including case studies, participatory rural appraisals, and interviews, the research identifies the transformative potential of FPCs in overcoming structural barriers such as fragmented landholdings, low literacy levels, and lack of institutional support. The findings demonstrate that while FPCs offer economic and social benefits, issues of governance, access to credit, and awareness of government schemes remain critical. The study concludes that strengthening policy interventions, capacity building, technological innovations, and collaborative networks can make FPCs a robust instrument for inclusive and sustainable tribal development in Maharashtra.

Keywords: Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs), Tribal Communities, Maharashtra, Livelihoods, Agriculture, Market Access, Social Capital, Sustainability, Policy Interventions, Capacity Building

Introduction

Agriculture remains the principal sector sustaining approximately 70% of the workforce in Maharashtra. The dominant tribal population's agricultural development assumes paramount importance. The state fully embraces the Farmer Producer Company (FPC) mode, wherein farmers pool their economic activities and share benefits collectively. Since its inception in 2003, the FPC model aims to uplift the agrarian sector through technical support, economic management, and social collaborations. A study of the challenges and opportunities confronting tribal farmers in Maharashtra highlights FPCs as a viable solution for augmenting income and enhancing livelihoods (Kalagnanam, 2012). Tribal socioeconomic standards remain depressed when measured against their non-tribal counterparts. Literacy, employment, and land utilization exhibit the lowest levels within the state (P Rao et al., 2009). The majority of the tribal population inhabits remote locations, often marginalized from mainstream development. Farming holds traditional significance among indigenous peoples, many of whom exchange labor or sharecropping to cultivate land collectively. Introduced by the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, Government of India, the Producer Company model has demonstrated considerable promise for organising tribals and supporting their livelihoods. NGOs and donor agencies have increasingly championed it as a mechanism to serve tribal interests. FPCs offer farmers a platform to combine efforts and engage with Government, Non-Governmental Organisations, and Corporate sectors for resource mobilisation and problem-solving. FPCs generate or augment savings on individual and group levels and provide a forum to voice aspirations to Development Departments. Growing attention to FPCs has prompted academic enquiry into their societal functions.

Background of Tribal Communities in Maharashtra

About 8 per cent of the total population of Maharashtra belongs to the Scheduled Tribes.

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There are forty-six scheduled tribes in the State. Fifteen of these are notified as 'Particularly Vulnerable' or 'Primitive Tribal Groups' (PTG). The tribal communities live largely in clusters in the State, mostly located in areas of dense forest cover. The topography of most district and sub-divisional headquarters in the tribal belt deserves special mention. The Sisodia, Dhodia, Waroda and Varlis are the major tribal groups responsible for the second largest tea plantation in India, located in Shahada block of Nandurbar district (MPSC 2016a). Maharashtra is the fourth State in India in terms of area under tea plantation. The tribal population, comprising different scheduled tribes, is scattered across the State in the remote and interior Talukas of Nashik, Thane, Raigad, and Nandurbar districts in the northern part; Palghar district carved out of Thane district in 2014; and in the southern districts of Nandurbar and Chandrapur. These tribal areas of the State are acknowledged as backward areas. Lack of infrastructure, proximity to markets, poor drainage, transport and communication, and a limited distribution network are among the factors responsible for the slow growth and development of the plantation areas. The tribal society is distinct and unique, shaped by a variety of factors such as ancient traditions, culture, values, deep sympathy, association with flora and fauna overtime, social values, traditional knowledge, and economic conditions.

Understanding Farmer Producer Companies

The unique features of India's agricultural economy, characterized by large numbers of farmers holding small plots, create a disadvantage. High transaction costs and asymmetric access to market information render dealings with external agencies unprofitable for small and marginal farmers. Conventional solutions—forming cooperative farming, farmers club, or implementing contract farming—have not gained widespread acceptance among smallholders, revealing the need for a new approach. A Farmer Producer Company (FPC) attempts to integrate the benefits of the cooperative structure with the advantages of a corporate entity. The term Farmer Producer Company was coined by Michael H. Shuman, author of the book "The Small-Mart Revolution". The concept was introduced in Indian legislation through Clause 581Z(xb) of the Companies Bill, 2008, ultimately enacted as the Companies Act, 2013. The first FPC was registered in January 2015 in Rajasthan. An FPC is a corporate body registered under the Companies Act, 2013. It is formed by a group of farmers engaged in similar agricultural activities, organized as shareholders. It operates with a Common Minimum Programme (CMP) of activities that includes Input Supply, Farm Labour, Agriculture Services, Processing, Procurement, Marketing, and Capacity Building (CMFRI, 2019). In Maharashtra, tribal farmers have utilized the FPC mechanism extensively to enhance production and marketing within their communities. Existing literature has explored the impact of FPCs on rural livelihoods, food security, and women's empowerment. The present study takes a detailed look at FPC use among Maharashtra's tribal farmers, where distinct cultural, social, historical, and policy factors play a role.

Importance of Farmer Producer Companies for Tribal Communities

FPCs offer a collective structure that can be instrumental in overcoming the limitations of individual tribal farmers and enhancing their livelihood. They address both economic and social constraints. Economically, FPCs enable the aggregation of smallholdings, which, in turn, facilitates the mobilization of inputs and access to larger markets, particularly where a market failure has been identified (Kalagnanam, 2012). They can also undertake activities in a shared facility or service, thereby reducing transaction costs and increasing the welfare of individual members. At the community level, where governance is challenging due to heterogeneous preferences or unequal power distribution, an FPC's decision-making and enforcement structures help promote cooperation and collective action. Typically, FPCs overcome the temporal and spatial fragmentation of primary agricultural activities by facilitating member cooperation around storage, processing, and collective purchasing. These factors enable FPCs to serve as an effective vehicle for enhancing tribal farmers' economic prospects and community cohesion in Maharashtra.

Historical Context of Agriculture in Maharashtra

Agriculture has always been the backbone of Maharashtra's economy, culture, and society. Maharashtra's contribution to agriculture is notable largely due to the significant number of farmers who play a diverse and multiple role within the farm activities that have traditionally been conducted. Agriculture in Maharashtra has continued from the time of the indigenous people and remains the dominant sector, not only of output but also in terms of employment and livelihoods, as compared to other industries. The planning process for agriculture and allied sectors in Maharashtra has, therefore, emphasized achieving significant growth to reduce poverty and income disparities. The tribal viewpoint is especially integral to these planning objectives, acknowledging the unique nature of Maharashtra's agricultural and allied-production.

Legal Framework Governing Farmer Producer Companies

The Tribal population comprises 8.33 percent of the total population of India. Out of that, Maharashtra contains around 9.35 percent of the tribe. Tribals are scattered in areas that are often inaccessible and physically and economically backward. According to the Census 2011 report, the total tribal population in Maharashtra is 10,403,797. In Maharashtra, the level of integration of agriculture with tribal economy is quite high and deep. Agriculture is highly dominant in tribal economy. It is a livelihood pattern contributing almost 62 percent of income for SC households and 55 percent for ST households of Maharashtra. The broad concept of Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs) may be defined as a government-approved legal body, similar to a private company, that can be formed by the producers of different agricultural activities, such as cultivation, harvesting, processing, pooling, handling, marketing, selling, trading, warehousing, export of primary produce, and of by-products. FPCs can

play an important role in the agricultural development and allied activities, supporting livelihoods, enhancing market access for tribal farmers, and generating social capital across tribal communities in Maharashtra. Agriculture forms the broad area of livelihood for tribal populations. Agricultural policies and agriculture programmes have the potential for creating conditions for development of a tribally oriented FPC and responding to the needs of tribal farmers in improving the tribal economy. It is well understood that FPCs can address these requirements, and that an effective implementation of the programme may substantially increase the incomes of farmers.

Methodology of the Study

Farmers sold produce through intermediaries at low prices and bought at high prices, leading to a widening gap between the farm gate price and the market price. Establishing Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs) can provide a highly beneficial alternative to address this gap.

Agriculture remains the predominant occupation of scheduled tribes, encompassing 18.41% of all workers (Kalagnanam, 2012). Agriculture among tribal groups is generally diversified and indigenous in character. The majority undertake food-crop cultivation with limited individual land holdings, predominantly dependent on traditional, non-mechanized tools. This results in low levels of agricultural technology with few inputs of modern fertilizers or irrigation techniques.

Data Collection Techniques

The study employed both qualitative and quantitative techniques for data collection. Personal interviews were conducted with the community to gather qualitative information, while surveys and questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data on socio-economic factors. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools were also implemented to understand the rural environment and social life of the tribal community. PRA techniques such as transect walks provided first-hand appraisal of local conditions, facilitating communication and knowledge transfer between the researcher and the community (Mahesh et al., 2017). The village was divided into mapped zones to analyze land use, water resources, cropping patterns, vegetation, and livestock distribution. The data collection process was sensitive to the unique socio-cultural context of the tribal community, ensuring relevant and reliable information on the operation and impact of Farmer Producer Companies for agricultural development.

Case Studies of Successful Farmer Producer Companies

In Maharashtra, Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs) operated by tribal groups demonstrate that collaborative marketing can reverse declining profitability—yielding maize prices that surpass those of open market transactions by 48%. Yet, the legacy of fragmented landholdings among community members remains a prominent issue. Successful FPCs have adopted multi-layered business models aimed at preserving the public commons, thereby protecting livelihoods from external pressures while alleviating environmental stress. These companies have secured contracts for the production of

grains, spices, medicinal and aromatic plants, and non-timber forest products. In a pre-COVID-19 case, Mau Kalan, a twentyyear-old peasant collective, exemplified an FPC that forged partnerships with diverse institutional stakeholders. When COVID-19-related disruptions threatened its operations, Mau Kalan's social capital—embodied in trust, reciprocal exchanges, solidarity, and collective action—helped the FPC sustain business activities that supported marginalized members of the community (Karamuna, 2018).

Challenges Faced by Tribal Farmers

The tribal farming community faces a range of challenges that differentiate it from the general farming population. Firstly, there is a problem with access to fair credit, as regional rural banks provide often impossibly large amounts, forcing them into debt cycles, often to moneylenders. The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) also suffers from limited coverage in tribal areas. Secondly, connectivity is a serious issue, with many villages lacking access to public transport, telephone networks, banks, postal services, or ration shops. Thirdly, the educational level among tribal communities is low, impeding their ability to learn new farming techniques and understand governmental policies. Fourthly, various officials and traders exploit tribal farmers due to their ignorance, resorting to unfair practices. Lastly, a lack of awareness regarding government schemes further hampers tribal agriculture (Kalagnanam, 2012).

Role of Government Policies

Government policies are important for agricultural development and farmer-producer companies (FPCs). In Telangana, establishment of FPCs was assessed to understand agro-processing and value addition of groundnut. Comparative studies showed that marketing benefits were lower in cooperative societies and higher in private trading and FPCs. Marketing cost was lowest in FPCs for groundnut kernels. In the southern zone of Tigray, Ethiopia, government policies such as Co-operative Societies Proclamations No. 241/2001 and No. 138/1998 have established the legal framework for cooperative organizations. Cooperatives help smallholder farmers diversify produce, access markets, and improve livelihoods, especially through rural marketing and agro-processing. Evaluations indicate that supportive policies of donor organizations utilize cooperatives to reach poor communities (Atsbaha Alema, 2008). A food-producer cooperative in Ponta Porã, MS, Brazil, has acted as intermediary between rural producers and government programs from 2013 to 2017. Using employees' and specialists' reports, results show that cooperative delivers enhanced productivity and income, but only enough for family survival. Limited access to technology and financing remains a problem. The government facilitates economic protection by purchasing food directly for school-feeding (Aurélio Perroni Pires & Hoff, 2018). Cooperative governance is a precondition for sustainable development in Tamil Nadu. The Short-term Co-operative Credit Structure, which includes over 100,000 primary agricultural cooperative societies (PACS), is undergoing reform initiated

by the Indian government. Results show no direct relationship between PACS management and members, and the political system influences PACS functioning. PACS serve as channels for delivering government schemes. The main challenge is balancing democratic control with professional management in order to safeguard members' interests (Ravichandran, 2015).

Impact of Farmer Producer Companies on Livelihoods

Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs) have emerged as a pragmatic business organisation model enabling self-managed, member-driven service provision in agricultural marketing and input supply. This organisational strategy holds special importance for tribal communities where the majority of farmers depend on subsistence agriculture. FPCs facilitate the active participation of farmers in the mainstream economy while fostering a collective approach towards improving the socio-economic conditions of tribal groups. Statistical evidence supports the hypothesis that FPCs enhance farmers' income and extend the growing season. Presently, tribal FPCs that are evolving into commercial operations exhibit the potential to become platforms for innovation, business activities, and institutional development among marginal tribal farmers. In tribal areas characterised by prevalent underemployment and disguised unemployment, collective farming can significantly contribute to efficient utilisation of human resources. Given their broad coverage and potential for replication, FPCs are expected to serve as a marker of India's shift towards inclusive and equitable development. Reliable data on the amplitudes of livelihood changes remain scarce and would provide a potent tool for framework development and methodological enhancement (P Rao et al., 2009).

Social Capital and Community Building

The establishment of Farmer Producer Companies among tribal communities not only furnishes economic benefits but also instils a sense of unity and oneness. Tribal communities in Maharashtra, marked by poverty and isolation, are more vulnerable to outside influences when operating as individual farming units with limited resources. Joined together in FPCs, with joint remuneration and decision-making, communities become stronger and more self-controlling. Trust and acceptance are essential; the tribal community must be open to cooperative membership and network integration. Otherwise, imposition of a farmer organisation is an extortion of community confidence—and unlikely to succeed.

FPCs act as social capital, fostering growth and well-being within the community. They encourage communication, cooperation, and trust among members, enabling the achievement of economic and social objectives. Such institutions facilitate collective external actions—for example, campaigning for government support or navigating bureaucratic systems—to assist the production unit as a whole. Beyond solving problems related to financial capital and technology, FPCs are vital for building social relationships and a trustworthy environment conducive to the realisation of enterprise goals. (Das, 2009) (Sarker & Das, 2004)

Economic Impacts of Farmer Producer Companies

The formation of a Farmer Producer Company (FPC) is associated with economic gains of 4–10 percent or five to ten days of household expenditure (P Rao et al., 2009). FPCs provide access to inputs and output markets, significantly reducing price volatility. The impact is greater in regions with limited market access and participation, underlining the potential of collective enterprises to generate integrated services that enhance welfare. They enable cost-effective forward linkages through collective action and pooling mechanisms. The larger the FPC membership base, the stronger the economic performance. FPCs diversify income and increase farmer equity. Upliftment of tribal communities depends on economic, social, cultural, and political factors, including landholding size, cropping patterns, sources of credit, family responsibility, government linkages, and information access. Tribal households rely mainly on forest and agriculture for livelihoods. Agriculture is the main profession, with tribal farmers constituting 68.10% and non-tribals 31.90% of the population in the region.

Sustainability and Environmental Considerations

In tribal communities, FPCs can be vehicles of pro-poor growth, since they foster social cohesion and collective action and contribute to financial sustainability. Their special position relative to trade unions and co-operatives makes them apparently attractive for agricultural development agencies. The sustainability of agricultural development in the Jhabua District of Madhya Pradesh depends on specific agro-ecosystem types and institutional conditions. The latter cover socio-cultural factors, agrarian relations, and government policies. Though modernization has occurred, its approach to development has degraded the environment and resulted in ecological insecurities. Resource-rich tribal and mountainous regions are the most vulnerable areas. Despite modernization, deforestation caused by mining, quarrying, and commercial forest use continues because government policies have failed to protect the ecology. Tribal economies have suffered from environmental conflicts that pose socio-economic as well as ecological threats. Agricultural activities have increased over the last three decades. The pressure on agriculture is mainly the result of tribal households' socio-economic adaptation to the transition from a pastoral economy to a more organized production system. Policies on forest conservation and denial of traditional rights to the tribes have raised interest in agriculture, which has led to the expansion of agricultural perimeters (Kumar Singh, 2008). The modernisation approach to development has degraded environment and resulted in ecological insecurities in tribal and mountainous regions. The sustainability of agriculture depends largely on specific agro-ecosystem types and institutional conditions, including socio-cultural factors, agrarian relations, and government policies. Continued deforestation due to mining, quarrying, and commercial forest use has caused environmental conflicts in tribal regions, posing socio-economic and ecological challenges despite modernization efforts. Agricultural practices in tribal areas have increased due to socio-economic adaptation

from traditional pastoral economies to organized farm systems, influenced by policies on forest conservation and denial of traditional rights to tribes (Kumar Singh, 2008).

Comparative Analysis with Non-Tribal Farmers

Maharashtra houses many FPCs organizing tribal farmers. Nevertheless, it is the comparisons — between tribal and non-tribal farmers and within tribal farmers — that bring out the complex story. Tribal farmers confront major challenges, including poor market linkages, insufficient government support, disorganized approach, a shortage of manpower, and the conditioners of geography, namely remoteness and isolation. Several government policies are directed towards the development of these methods to tackle the challenges suffered by such vulnerable groups. In this context, the valuable role performed by non-governmental organizations cannot be forgotten. As tribal farmers are physically distant from markets, they experience a lack of adequate market intelligence, resulting in the sale of their produce at low prices.

The establishment of FPCs can provide a practical boost, as specialized knowledge contributes directly to higher incomes. Societies that depend on caste, race, creed, or religion have a rather poor farmer-producer-society orientation. Farming communities differ in their social needs, customs, beliefs, practices, and interactions. Consequently, the idea of group formation and the extent and nature of group activities vary from place to place. Economic benefits such as higher incomes, value addition, and greater social capital development — aspects that can enhance social as well as economic conditions of farming groups, particularly those in remote and isolated areas — emerge naturally through a higher level of cooperation among society members.

Future Prospects of Farmer Producer Companies

The significance of Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs) for tribal groups is poised to increase rapidly in coming years. The Ministry of Agriculture has amended the Essential Commodities Act to encompass a broader range of agricultural products and permitted the issuance of share capital from Rs. 10 lakhs to Rs. 1 crore, enabling FPCs to raise funds from other institutions to expand their businesses. Several bills are under consideration in Parliament designed to establish a comprehensive framework for agricultural reforms, many of which could eventually advance the interests of FPCs. Furthermore, Government of India policies actively support FPCs, and new tax and investment incentives have been introduced. Examples from these efforts reveal the potential of FPCs, suggesting ongoing opportunities and challenges, particularly the improvement of farmer incomes through better production, collective action, and marketing (Tulafu et al., 2015).

Recommendations for Policy Makers

The study indicates the necessity of greater government intervention in policy reform and implementation to assist farmer producer companies (FPCs) in tribal areas of Maharashtra. Policies should ensure agricultural water supply, subsidy packages, land

availability for FPCs, and affordable access to farm inputs. Extending crop loans at subsidized interest rates for agricultural activities undertaken by FPCs is particularly important where farmers lack land titles to obtain institutional credit. Social and professional skills development should be promoted to help tribal farmers engage better in agri-business. Policy makers are encouraged to facilitate agricultural infrastructure individually and on a cluster basis to make FPCs sustainable. Collaborations with the government and private players for infrastructure improvements and renewal are recommended. The establishment of Agro-Processing Zones (APZ), Agro Clusters, and Procurement Centres (PC) under the Government of India's industrial policy and Industrial Entrepreneur Memorandum (IEM) route should be leveraged to enhance FPC development (CMFRI, 2019).

Role of NGOs and Civil Society

Philanthropic organizations play a critical role in helping producers and producer organizations build the capacity they need to develop the tools necessary for effective and sustainable business development. (Makumbe, 2015) Civil society broadly includes mass-based stand-alone development organizations, grassroots community organizations, membership organizations, and service organizations, such as those involved in health, education, microcredit or adult literacy. Civil society also includes citizen bodies dedicated to advocacy and systems reform in specific sectors, as well as networks of citizens committed to strengthening voices in governance and development.

Capacity Building and Training Needs

Capacity building and training are requisite for the development of any organization. Training helps members to develop communication skills which lead to better coordination in activities. Training imparts management skill to the members with respect to utilization and making proper use of available resources. Farmer Producer Companies (FPC) training therefore supports the Governor to empower his people and make them self-reliant. Members get trained in production, cultivation, and technical management of farm. Producer companies help farmer members to face the challenges of market competition and help them improve farming techniques and quality control of produce.

Training imparts managerial skill, makes use of production techniques. It is therefore required to form a producer company and its management should be member oriented, functional oriented, action oriented, product oriented according to the needs of farmer members. It is very important for all members to prepare the guidelines for internal control, organizational skills, office administration, office management, gender issues, human resource development. Skill training is also essential to select the leader of the company. Levelwise training is also necessary for producer members and for the officials of Producer Company, as well as external agencies. Training methods should be based on problem, motive, and action; utilising social gatherings, promotion schemes, and questions and answer sessions.

Technological Innovations in Agriculture

Technological innovation, the application of scientific knowledge to agriculture (nature, raising, protection), is key to rural development. No innovation can change farmers' input-output relationship unless they are widely adopted. A study conducted in Tamil Nadu shows the dissemination of agricultural innovations still faces numerous barriers in India. Western Gujarat farmer also have considerable access to agricultural machinery, but cost-benefit analyses are needed. Introduction of such devices requires collaborative engagement involving farmers and practitioners from various disciplines such as science, economics and social work and development. Tribal farmers also appear to incorporate new innovations within farming systems to maintain traditions or improve efficiencies. The impact of innovation is, however, highly dependent on access to markets (Suzanne Konieczny et al., 2015).

Market Access and Value Chains

The movement from producer to consumer is a crucial step in the agri-food value chain, making it essential to explore commercial channels that expose tribal farmers to diversified means of market access. Agricultural commercialization involves the production of food crops for sale in a well-developed market system (B. Barrett et al., 2010). Market access is a necessary condition for the exploitation of the productive potential of agricultural production systems. Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs) provide a means of engaging with the informal market that would otherwise be beyond the reach of individual smallholder farmers. FPCs help reduce transaction costs by coordinating and representing farmers in negotiations with input suppliers and commodity buyers (M. Downs et al., 2022). To commercialize indigenous cultivated and collected crops, such as finger millet and Koinaar leaves, FPCs undertake activities such as planting and germplasm distribution; improved cultivation and collection to increase production, quality, and quantity; aggregation; storage; processing; and marketing.

Consumer Awareness and Demand for Tribal Products

The promotion of tribal products can help safeguard indigenous knowledge and traditional skills, thereby helping maintain the cultural sanctity of the tribal communities. Consumer awareness and demand for quality tribal products have, consequently, been on the rise (M. Downs et al., 2022). Tribal products usually contain the indigenous attributes of the communities that produce them; product design may reflect their spiritual beliefs, while the production process embodies their culture and skills. These products range from woodworks, metalworks, textiles, paintings, to agricultural products and food items, with concrete connections to the respective communities. Broadening FPCs' support to include these areas broadens their scope and offers opportunities for more tribes to participate.

Cultural Aspects of Farming in Tribal Communities

Agriculture represents an integral aspect of tribal culture and survival. Employing conventional instruments

and methodologies, tribal farming practices embody significant cultural values and extensive knowledge (L Webb, 1980). Such agriculture has gradually evolved alongside modernization, highlighting the local agricultural systems' capabilities; certain customs and rituals reaffirm established behaviors (P C Rao & Kumara Charyulu, 2007). Factors such as rail connectivity and government policies further influence tribal agricultural practices. Beyond conventional farming, a diversity of livelihood activities contributes to the rural economy, including hunting, forestry, and other non-agricultural earnings.

Networking and Collaborations

Networking and collaboration extend between farmer producer organisations and with other agencies and institutions with aligned interests to generate additional benefits for members and communities. Advocacy, training, logistics and distribution of goods and services, market linkages and exploration of new opportunities benefit through a shared effort. In Iran, collaborative networking among agricultural cooperatives is strengthened by economic mechanisms like insurance, subsidies and guaranteed purchases that reduce end-user prices and increase member benefits, as well as legal mechanisms including government-approved rules and regulations that facilitate cooperation; policy-making likewise plays a vital role in fostering such networks, with a mix of network-based, market-oriented and relationship-based behaviours influencing collaboration, particularly market orientation. Educational services provided through networks such as training courses offer additional benefits that enhance collaboration, whereas research activities may have less impact, possibly due to limited managerial and financial capacity; social mechanisms show no significant relation to networking development, contrasting with previous findings on the importance of social trust and participation (Alimohammad et al., 2022). Tanzania's Farmer Field School networks exert a similar influence on empowerment and sustainability of farmer groups; diverse social networks established among graduates address weak institutional capacities, facilitate the expansion of group membership and improve managerial skills. In the context of an agricultural sector that has declined despite a previously strong extension system—hobbled by inadequate technologies, ineffective delivery mechanisms and a limited ability of farmers to organise and negotiate on their own behalf—enhanced social relationships and institutional capacity at the community level offer a means of accelerating sustainable agriculture (Johnson Mwaikali, 2014).

Lessons Learned from Other Regions

The Zimbabwean government repatriated over 100 accessions of key crops—cowpea, finger millet, groundnut, pearl millet, pigeon pea, and sorghum—recovered from diverse regions. On-farm Fodder Seed Enterprises evolved into Village or Ward Seed Banks—a model for community-based seed systems. The Chimukoko Farmer Field School undertakes participatory breeding with pearl millet and finger millet, selecting for early maturity, large panicle size, and large grains to enhance yield. The Batanai Farmer Field School continues selecting local

sorghum exhibiting large heads, drought tolerance, pest resistance, early maturity, and ease of processing, aiming to improve yield and disease resistance (Vernooy et al., 2019). Fodder Seed FPCs frequently act as wholesale suppliers to Village Seed Banks to maintain steadier year-round seed availability. Community selection tests remain active for cowpea, millets, and sorghum to identify drought-tolerant varieties suitable for bulk community field-testing. A pronounced demand for small grains—grown primarily by women—drives seed production adapted to irregular rainfall and drought conditions, mirroring governmental and NGO emphasis on these initiatives. Initial obstacles in farmer seed production and distribution efforts supported by CTDO suggest that, despite setbacks, these programs remain vital for crop improvement in the targeted regions.

Limitations of the Study

The study is subject to several limitations that may influence data interpretation and applicability to wider contexts. Data collection relied predominantly on interviews and participant recall, potentially impacting the accuracy and reliability of information, particularly concerning historical trends. The absence of historical satellite imagery prevented visual verification of environmental changes, such as forest cover, which are integral to the livelihoods of many tribal communities. Furthermore, the research was confined to a select number of cases within Maharashtra, a region characterized by unique socio-economic patterns and policy frameworks; consequently, findings may not be representative of other states or broader tribal settings in India. These constraints underscore the need for cautious extrapolation of results beyond the specific study area and highlight opportunities for future research incorporating longitudinal data and diverse geographical samples (Kalagnanam, 2012).

Conclusion

The tribal context holds particular importance, given the numerous challenges faced by tribal farmers in Maharashtra. Agriculture stands as the main occupation for most tribal farmers, yet income levels remain lower than those of non-tribal farmers. Economic dominance by other communities, combined with the absence of organized workforces to protect tribal farming communities, limits their access to resources and markets. This situation underscores the need for organized efforts across Maharashtra. Farmer Producer Companies operate as such organizing platforms, supported by state and central government policies alongside civil society organizations. An organizational model of a Farmer Producer Company can create social capital among tribal farmers, foster community development, enhance income, and strengthen livelihoods. Indeed, these organizations possess the potential to uphold the interests of tribal farmers in Maharashtra. Many tribal Farmer Producer Companies already realize substantial benefits from community organization, agricultural development, and livelihoods promotion.

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Conflicts of interest

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