



# Voice of the Tribals

A Compendium of UN  
Written Statements by  
the Tribal Community of  
Tri-junction area of  
Rajasthan, Gujarat and  
Madhya Pradesh in India



## VAAGDHARA

Accredited with Special Consultative Status by the  
United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)



## Preface

Since the evolution of human being, the tribal people have been living in the lap of nature having close association with different bio diversities. The tribal communities have the right to dignity<sup>1</sup> and diversity of their culture, traditional knowledge, practices and customs, which makes them distinct from other sections of the society. But today, the indigenous community is seen as the most disadvantaged and vulnerable in the world. However, this need to be acknowledged that the distinct culture and the way of living of this community can be proven significant in attaining several sustainable development goals, be it related to eradication of poverty, malnutrition, improved health, quality education, gender equality, water, climate action, etc.

For the countries like India, having agriculture-based economy, the agriculture practices hold the key to push millions out of poverty by creating fair work opportunities and improve food and nutrition security. Throughout the centuries, this community has developed agriculture practices adapted at extreme environments like in hilly areas, their practices preserve soil, reduce its erosion, conserve water and reduce the risk of disasters, while in plains, cattle grazing and cropping in sustainable ways helps in conserving the biodiversity. The food items grown by using such practices are also particularly nutritious, climate resilient and well adapted to their environment. They often grow local or native species of crops, suitable according to local contexts, and are more resistant to temperature, rainfalls, droughts, altitude, flooding or other climatic conditions.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has considered indigenous people as invaluable partners in eradicating global problems like hunger and climate change.<sup>2</sup> The time has arrived when it has to be realized that the way of living and livelihood of these communities can inculcate us about conserving natural resources, traditional agriculture practices, growing food in sustainable way, live in harmony with nature. They are a source of inspiration, having multiple solutions to the global challenge and hence, without seeking their help, protecting their rights and reducing the increasing levels of inequalities, the achievement of SDGs by 2030 cannot be imagined.

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<sup>1</sup> Article 15 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states that Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information.

<sup>2</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations: 6 ways indigenous peoples are helping the world achieve #ZeroHunger



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## Acronyms

COVID-19	Corona Virus Disease
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nation
HLPF	High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development
ILO	International Labour Organization
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
NCBI	National Center for Biotechnology Information
PLA	Participatory Learning and Actions
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals

## Background

The indigenous people are the inheritors and practitioners of the traditional cultures and ways of relating to people and the environment. Many indigenous communities help mitigate the global challenges like reducing the impacts of climate changes by protecting the natural resources like forests and rivers.

They have retained the social, cultural and economic characteristics which are different from those of the developed communities. However, even after two decades since the Millennium Development Goals were established in 2000, the indigenous community remains the group – least served and one of the most excluded sectors of the society which could not reap their benefits as others.

Their traditional ways of living, earning livelihoods, and practices are under threat owing to a range of factors, including exclusionary public policies, lack of recognition and protection of their rights and the impacts of climate change. The rising income inequality in the country whether it's related to access to quality education, healthcare, food or their livelihood security, has negatively impacted the lives of the community a lot.

# VAAGDHARA's Approach and Sustainable Development Goals

VAAGDHARA, for more than 2 decades has been working for the holistic development of tribal community, bringing the indigenous community into mainstream development focusing through 3 major themes: True Childhood, True Farming and True Governance. The strength of these themes is the “Sovereignty” which VAAGDHARA believes is the guiding force for achieving the SDGs.

- **True Childhood:** The concept of True Childhood focuses on ensuring the rights of Children by promoting and nurturing vibrant community-based institutions like the Bal Panchayat and Village Development-Child Rights Committees. It aims to facilitate community owned child tracking mechanism and solutions to make Child friendly villages besides influencing the policy makers for developing community led child right's realization. These strengthened institutions

will work to provide quality education for children without any gender bias and will reduce the gap among the various sections of the society moving ahead towards achieving the SDGs of Quality Education, Gender equality and Reduced Inequalities. The state policies addressing the community child rights issues will ensure that no child remains hungry and malnourished achieving the goal of Zero Hunger.

- **True Farming:** VAAGDHARA favours a circular economic approach in the farming system. Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) for sustainable development of natural resources like land, soil, water, vegetation, and livestock following principles of circularity and adapting sovereignty holds the key to sustainable livelihood for the indigenous people. The features of this circular farming are: A nutritive sensitive farming system with community owned seed management system and focus on rain-fed farming; blending of appropriate package of practices in farming for reviving indigenous farming practices and incorporating scientific knowledge; reviving of nutrition pack crops and un-cultivated food items; adaption of diverse perennial crops and vegetations to address vulnerabilities occurring due to climate change. Sustainable livelihood is where there will be no poverty and no hunger. Practicing such type of farming will create a balance in the ecosystem leading to economic growth and the wellbeing of the tribal community.

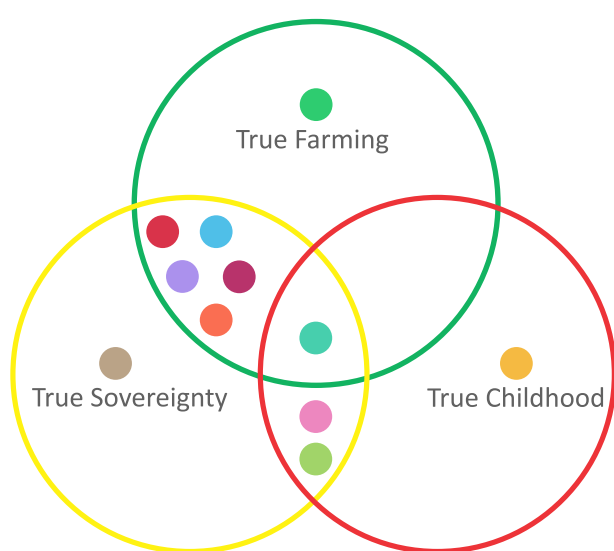


Figure: VAAGDHARA's approaches and linkage with SDGs

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|--|--|
| ● SDG 1: No Poverty.                     | ● SDG 10: Reduced Inequality                     |
| ● SDG 2: Zero Hunger                     | ● SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production |
| ● SDG 3: Good Health and well Being      | ● SDG 13: Climate Action                         |
| ● SDG 4: Quality Education               | ● SDG 15: Life on Land                           |
| ● SDG 5: Gender Equality                 | ● SDG 16: Peace and Justice Strong Institutions  |
| ● SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth |  |

- **True governance:** Empowering the indigenous self-governance organizations and vibrant community-based institutions for leading

<sup>3</sup> United Nations- Department of Economic and Social Affairs

<sup>4</sup> International Labour Organization: Sustainable Development Goals: Indigenous Peoples in Focus



indigenous community development interventions as well as policy level interventions through bottom-up approach on the community issues form the basis of true governance. Engaging the tribal community in development policies and programmes for protecting, providing and promoting indigenous knowledge and traditional customs and practices upholding the Women based community groups for gender equality are the actions that lead to building of strong institutions and promoting gender equality. It is the involvement of the community in decision making and policy framing process that will build a strong economy providing peace and justice to all ending poverty and hunger. Strengthening of institutions favouring local governance will promote gender equality; provide adequate educational facilities which will result in all round development of the community. Systematic growth will lead to

healthier climatic conditions which will develop responsible consumption and production chain to balance the ecosystem.

### About this Compendium

By means of various platforms, VAAGDHARA works to enable the tribal community so that they exercise their rights and the entitlements. The organization facilitates the submission of demands raised by the community through the written statements at the United Nations and strives to protect as well as promote the indigenous practices that lead to sustainable development of the tribal community.

This compendium is the collection of the written statements submitted by VAAGDHARA to the United Nations highlighting the situation of the indigenous community and recommendations for their upliftment.



## Written Statements



## Economic and Social Council

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July 2021

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2021 session  
13 July 2021 – 16 July 2021  
Agenda item 5  
ECOSOC High-level Segment

### VAAGDHARA

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected many aspects of our social and economic life resulting in the breakdown of food and livelihood security of millions in the country. Every section of the society faced several challenges due to its outbreak. People from the rural areas could not escape its hard impact as well. The small and marginal farmers who contribute to about 80% of total population of farmers in the country, were the most affected section of the society. Such tribal farmers couldn't practice farming owing to small landholdings and lack of resources, rather migrate to nearby cities to ensure their livelihood and food security. A quick response was witnessed where the Government provided stimulus packages while Civil Society Organisations, Philanthropists and Individuals various relief measures. But the need of the hour is to enable the communities for making them resilient towards such pandemics and other unforeseen difficult situations. The communities must be enabled to earn living income for their necessity of food, water, housing, education, healthcare and other essential aspects; more than just food and nutrition security assuring a decent living standard of these communities.

Government has been prioritizing various strategies to bring sustainable as well as resilient recovery from COVID-19 and promote economic, social and environmental dimensions among the community. Besides, the Government also needs to strengthen its system of health care, education, electricity and water to increase physical resilience. To make a resilient recovery from

pandemic, promotion of sustainable agriculture practices among small landholding farmers, especially tribal farmers, could be proven consequential. The traditional practices and the culture of the tribal communities have been considered significant in attaining several SDGs. Their lifestyle, based on the circular economy promoting restorative and regenerative processes help in growing nutritious and climate resilient crops. Such practices also help them in reducing their dependency on the markets and make them self-reliant which is taking them forward towards Swaraj – the self-governance. Believing this philosophy, the tribal communities of the tri-junction area were among the communities which were least affected due to pandemic.

VAAGDHARA has been working with the tribal communities for years. Regular discussions with them at various platforms were significant in bringing out various recommendations for making tribal farmers resilient like the need of improving soil health and nutrition as well as increasing availability of ground water. In addition, they must be enabled to produce, use and conserve the quality seeds which will reduce their dependency on government and multinational companies as well as increase their earnings.

A greater focus on utilizing green energy, climate sensitive agriculture and strengthened mechanisms to earn living income is required to help achieve food and livelihood security, long term economic and social development, promoting resilient recovery from COVID-19 and ultimately building an effective path for the achievements of SDGs by 2030.



## Economic and Social Council

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ADVANCE VERSION

2020 session

7 July 2020 — 16 July 2020

Agenda item 5

ECOSOC High-Level Segment

### VAAGDHARA

#### Overview

As the world enters a new decade it has been globally agreed that much more accelerated efforts are required to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Almost two decades have passed, including 15 years of MDGs, but still the indigenous community remains the least served and excluded sector of the society which could not reap its benefits as others. They are the practitioners of traditional cultures and have retained the distinct social and economic characteristics. For instance, their lifestyle was based on the circular economy that promoted restorative and regenerative process wherein the wastes were minimized and renewable sources of energy were utilized. The wastage from a sub-system becomes the resource for another. The food items grown were also nutritious and climate resilient. These approaches reduced their dependency on markets and ensured food security with enhanced earnings. Under economic characteristics, the trading of goods and services was done through barter system, without having sense of profit generation through markets. But due to increased commercialization in today's world, the profit maximization has become the major goal of economic transactions that drives the modern capitalistic economy. It has disturbed the age-old practices and resulted in increased inequality and other challenges, adversely impacting this community in terms of access to quality healthcare, education services, food,

nutrition and livelihood security. Today, their traditional practices are increasingly under threat owing to a range of factors, but this must be acknowledged that their culture and practices are significant in attaining several SDGs.

#### Recommendations

Following are the recommendations to address the global challenges suggested by thousands of tribal farmers participated in tribal colloquium of VAAGDHARA.

- The eco-friendly farming practices, free from the use of chemical fertilizers and that are climate resilient, need to be promoted by the Government, providing maximum benefits to the small and marginal farmers.
- Government should focus on making the communities aware about the methods to grow nutritious food items.
- Decentralization of quality health services and education up to much lower levels in the rural areas is needed.
- Community engagement in planning process would be essential to develop a sense of ownership and responsibility towards achieving the SDGs.
- Through this statement, VAAGDHARA urges governments to consider these recommendations while framing the related policies. The time has arrived to realize that this community has multiple solutions to the global challenges and hence, without seeking their support, the achievement of SDGs by 2030 cannot be imagined.

*\*The present statements are issued without formal editing.*

*<sup>†</sup>The joint statements are presented first, followed by individual statements*





## Economic and Social Council

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17 June 2019  
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2020 session  
26 July 2018–25 July 2019  
Agenda item 5  
High-level segment

### **Statement submitted by Vaagdhara, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council\***

#### **Statement**

The term 'Adivasis' meaning the first settlers, popularly known as 'tribal's' today, had a very long and rich cultural past. Due to marketization, the 'tribal's' are gradually losing their culture, practices and lifestyle. During the 1990s, when the exposure to the outside world influenced the tribal lifestyle and culture, then people started to look outside for the solutions to their issues and these solutions forced them to leave their culture and practices behind. But this was not the end of the problem. In fact, the situation worsens, and considering the persisting situation it is necessary to revive the tribal practices, culture and lifestyle. VAAGDHARA believes that the solutions to any issue pertaining to the community cannot be found outside but exists within the community itself. Therefore, VAAGDHARA started dialogue with the community in informal settings through community-based institutions on the issues related to their life. This dialogue was further strengthened and shared on a massive scale, and further came up in the form of the Tribal Farmer's Sovereignty Dialogue March followed by the Tribal Conclave.

To make community realize its strength and to find solutions to existing problems, every year VAAGDHARA organizes the Tribal Farmer's Sovereignty Dialogue March followed by the Tribal Conclave. The key strategy followed is of 3Ps i.e. Promote – Provide – Protect. During the 21

days Sovereignty Dialogue March, 200 meetings are conducted, and 14,085 tribal farmers are reached in 190 villages. This transact walk is truly a sensitizing journey in knowing the real, pinpointed issues which are area specific and triggering the need of exploring the tribal solutions. Following to this, the Conclave is organized where around 5,000 people participate. Discussions are held around the broad thematic areas of True Farming, True Childhood and True Democracy. The findings from the March are further validated during the conclave and the tribal community takes the Oath for Protection and Promotion of tribal culture and customs. This serves as an excellent platform where both the providers and the tribal's who are being provided come together for dialogue sharing, a place where opinions are raised, demands are made and responsibilities are fixed to protect water, forest and land and to achieve SDG 4, 10, 13 and 16. Following are the key recommendations given by the community in the form of a Charter of Demand, namely:

- Government programs and schemes should focus on strengthening and reviving the indigenous knowledge and practices of the community.
- While developing policies, schemes, programs and projects for tribals, Government should take care that they should not negatively affect tribal culture and traditions.
- Providing true-childhood for every child, by creating opportunities for growth and development through education, eradicating child labor, and checking migration.



## Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General  
1 November 2018  
Original: English

### Commission for Social Development

Fifty-seventh session

11–21 February 2019

Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:  
priority theme: Addressing inequalities and challenges to social inclusion through fiscal, wage and social protection policies

### Statement submitted by VAAGDHARA, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council\*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

### Statement

#### Inequality in India

According to the latest data from Credit Suisse and Oxfam, the richest 10% of Indians own 80% of the country's wealth. At the other end, the poorer half jostles for a mere 4.1% of national wealth. Even more strikingly, during the period of India's rapid economic growth, the rich have been the greatest beneficiaries. Between 2000 and 2016, the share of India's richest 1% increased from 36.8% over 50%. This trend is going in the upward direction, which means rich are getting richer at a much faster rate than the poor. Despite being among the richest countries in the world, India has attracted negative attention in recent years as the second most unequal country in the world after Russia, as per the Credit Suisse's Global Wealth Report, 2016.

Inequality in India is multi-dimensional: There are inequalities in wealth, income and consumption, as well as structural inequalities of opportunity, region and social groups. The rising income inequality has developmental implications leading to a slower poverty reduction and under-

mining the sustainability of economic growth. Inequality in India is not only visible but is also on the rising trend. However, the trend of rising inequality has received far less attention in the Indian context, despite a clear rising trend since 1991. The growing income inequality in India has negatively impacted poor citizens' access to education and healthcare. It makes it difficult for the poor to climb up the economic ladder and increases their risk of being victims to poverty trap. People living at the bottom 10% are characterized by low wages; long working hours; lack of basic services such as first aid, drinking water and sanitation. The billionaire boom is not a sign of a thriving economy but a symptom of a failing economic system. Those working hard, growing food for the country, building infrastructure, working in factories are struggling to fund their child's education, buy medicines for family members and manage two meals a day. The growing divide undermines democracy and promotes corruption and cronyism.

#### Nature and Causes of Inequality

It would be biased to describe India's Inequality in just financial terms while it has many more aspects to be looked upon. For example, there is a stark difference in the quality of education in private versus government schools and rural versus urban schools. While only 31% children in urban India attend Government schools at Primary level, 72% of their rural counterparts have no option but to attend Government schools

because of their parents' inability to pay for the fee. Given that the poor quality of education in government schools - which account for 80% of the total school infrastructure in the country - is an undeniable fact, graduates of these schools are victims of a systemic failure and are set to fail the race with children in private schools. Inequalities creep in right there, right in the very beginning.

Similarly, when it comes to the access to public health services, those with the greatest need for health care - the poor - have the greatest difficulty in accessing timely and quality health care. Out of pocket health expenditures are believed to cause pushing around 39 million Indians into poverty each year (NCBI, USA), further accentuating the financial - and as a result of it other social - inequalities in the country.

Inequalities in terms of gender are fierce too. Despite educational gains, the labor force participation rate for women in India (% of female population ages 15+) in 2017 was a mere 27.21% as opposed to 78.84% for men (modelled ILO estimates). Gender-based violence remains unacceptably high and there are scores of other aspects of life where women are in a disadvantaged situation simply because of their being 'Women'.

In conclusion, it won't be unfair to say that inequalities in opportunities right from one's childhood set the floor for much intense and articulated wide-scale and multi-faceted inequalities later in their lives. Thus, the country is in a sort of vicious cycle of 'inequalities' where poor and already disadvantaged continue to find it difficult to break this cycle.

### **Addressing inequalities**

One has to acknowledge that the government has taken several landmark steps to promote equality in India. But still there is a long way to go to achieve equity. The recent schemes launch by the government in order to address inequality can be seen through these examples. For example,

around 22 crore people were linked to the mainstream financial system by opening bank accounts under Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojna, which is critical to improving their access to credit and ensuring transparency in delivering direct cash transfers.

Similarly, the recent announcement of a flagship National Health Protection Scheme under which Rs 5 lakh cover will be provided a year to 10 crore poor and vulnerable families in the country. This scheme is one of the world's largest government funded healthcare programme and is hopeful to take health care protection to a new aspiration level in India.

Therefore, the government should focus its efforts to achieve equity while addressing the inequality in the country. The continued rise of economic inequality in India - and around the world - is not inevitable. It is the result of policy choices. Governments can reduce inequality by rejecting market fundamentalism, opposing the special interests of powerful elites, and changing the rules and systems that have led to where we are today. They need to implement reforms that redistribute money and power and level the playing field. Followings are some of the areas which, if considered could boost equality:

- The government should promote Farming practices that are eco-friendly, and sustainable in nature, acknowledge the traditional knowledge and wisdom, aim at curbing/totally ceasing the use of chemical fertilizers, and promote soil conservation.
- Agriculture holds the key to push millions out of poverty by creating fair work opportunities. The agriculture policies should focus on providing maximum benefits to the small and marginal farmers who are the actual producers of the food in the country and devoted their lives to the production of food. The sector can be strengthened, inter alia, by guaranteeing

"Fair Support Prices" and not "Minimum Support Prices" for crops, ensuring easy credit availability for farmers and focusing on climate smart and climate resilient agriculture practices.

- There is a need to increase the labour force participation of women by creating more formalized work roles and improving the workplace conditions.
- Increased Social spending, on public services such as education, health and social protection, is also important. Evidence from more than 150 countries - rich and poor, and spanning over 30 years-shows that overall, investment in public services and social protection can tackle inequality.
- The government should promote inclusive growth by encouraging labour-intensive

sectors that will create more jobs, imposing higher tax on the super-rich, implementing policies to tackle all forms of gender discrimination and sealing the "leaking wealth bucket" by taking stringent measures against tax evasion.

However, these well-intentioned policies need to cross the notorious "bureaucratic implementation hurdles" to yield results and make a dent in the large looming inequality in the country. India - along with all the other countries in the world - has committed to attaining the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, and to ending extreme poverty by that year. But unless we make an effort to first contain and then reduce the rising levels of extreme inequality, the dream of ending extreme poverty for the 300 million Indians- a quarter of the population - who live below an extremely low poverty line, will remain a pipe dream.





## Economic and Social Council

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30 May 2018  
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2018 session  
28 July 2017-27 July 2018  
29 Agenda item  
305 High-level Segment

### **Statement submitted by VAAGDHARA, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council\***

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

#### **Statement**

#### **Promoting Community Owned Solutions for sustainable development of Tribal Communities in Western India**

Policies and actions that are framed following a top to bottom approach, sometimes fail to consider the real underlying issues of the problem and tend to address the superficial aspects of it. VAAGDHARA therefore emphasizes on promoting a strong community involvement in the planning process to come up with more pragmatic solutions to the felt needs. The Indigenous communities are a source of inspiration and they have multiple solutions for adapting to current and emerging challenges. It is always important to identify the best practices through the Participatory Approaches. The development of indigenous communities can never be solely in the hands of external stakeholders.

#### **VAAGDHARA's approach in promoting community-owned solutions:**

In order to promote the local solutions, VAAGDHARA has conducted a Tribal Sovereignty

March reaching more than 10,000 individuals. The Sovereignty March focused on identifying the best practices through the participatory approach involving people from different age groups and backgrounds. The best practices which were identified through the process include the following:

Promotion of traditional farming practices — 'Farming practices that are eco-friendly, and sustainable in nature, acknowledge the traditional knowledge and wisdom, aim at curbing/totally ceasing the use of chemical fertilizers, and promote soil conservation. VAAGDHARA promotes Nutri-sensitive farming practices and Sustainable Integrated Farming Systems in order to deal with problems of malnutrition in the area and providing sustainable sources of farming. Tribal farmers adopting these approaches have had improved nutrition levels, especially among the women and children, have reduced dependency on the markets and have also enhanced their income levels through reduced input cost and increased productivity.

Establishing regular dialogue with the community through V-Chopal — To increase the knowledge and awareness among the community on the SDGs, VAAGDHARA has evolved an indigenous learning platform i.e. V-Chopal, for a regular two-way dialogue, where different development issues are discussed and the community members participate in the same. We believe, that an

informed community is always more likely to assert its rights. In this platform, various strategies are discussed to achieve SDGs and the community is also provided with the solutions to their problems, which further provides them with a sustainable path of development.

Developing leaders within the community — In order to develop the leaders, VAAGDHARA is investing in building the capacities of youth, Community Leaders and Community Based Organizations, so that they can demand their entitlements and start the journey towards development. Awareness about schemes, programmes and rights can help the community explore its ultimate power for development of its upcoming generations.

### **VAAGDHARA and the SDGs:**

To achieve the sustainable and equitable development for the indigenous communities, the organization has adopted the above-identified best practices and is making efforts to reach a large number of indigenous families in the Western part of India to promote these local solutions and contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. There is a need to engage communities everywhere to make the United Nations 'Global Goals their local goals' and develop a sense of ownership and responsibility among communities.



## Economic and Social Council

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Original: English

### Commission for Social Development

Fifty-sixth session

31 January–7 February 2018

Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: strategies for the eradication of poverty to achieve sustainable development for all

### **Statement submitted by VAAGDHARA, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council\***

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

### **Statement**

### **VAAGDHARA's Approach to end inter-generational poverty among tribes to achieve sustainable and equitable development for all**

#### **Introduction and Purpose of the Statement**

In achieving the dream of a World Free of Poverty, there has been marked progress on reducing poverty over the past decades. The world attained the first Millennium Development Goal target—to cut the 1990 poverty rate in half by 2015—five years ahead of schedule, in 2010. According to the most recent estimates, in 2013, 10.7 percent of the world's population lived on less than US\$1.90 a day, that's down from 35 percent in 1990. Despite the progress made in reducing poverty, the number of people living in extreme poverty globally remains unacceptably high and as per the World Bank Report, India has made remarkable strides at reducing poverty. Yet 22 percent of the population in India or 270 million people are living below the poverty line. Given global growth forecasts poverty reduction may not be fast

enough to reach the target of ending extreme poverty by 2030. Other statistics suggest, about 31% of the world's "multidimensional poor" children live in India. A "multidimensional poor" child is one who lacks at least one-third of ten indicators, grouped into three dimensions of poverty: health, education and standard of living.

This statement attempts to analyze the key causes of poverty in India and evaluates the government response to these challenges. The document also shares VAAGDHARA's experiences of working with the poor tribal of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat and recommends some practical strategies—based on the experience of organization—to address the poverty conundrum through cost-effective and locally available resources.

#### **Background: Poverty in India**

According to a report by the Johannesburg-based company New World Wealth, India is the second-most unequal country globally, with millionaires controlling 54% of its wealth. With a total individual wealth of \$5,600 billion, it's among the 10 richest countries in the world — and yet the average Indian is relatively poor. Compare this with Japan, the most equal country in the world, where, according to the report millionaires control only 22% of total wealth. In India, the richest 1% own 53% of the country's wealth, according to the latest data from Credit Suisse. The richest 5% own 68.6%, while the top 10% have 76.3%. At the other end of the pyramid, the

poorer half jostles for a mere 4.1% of national wealth.

Rising inequality in India, leads to slower poverty reduction undermine the sustainability of economic growth, compound the inequalities between men and women, and drive inequalities in health, education and life chances. India along with all the other countries in the world has committed to attaining the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, and to ending extreme poverty by that year. But unless we make an effort to first contain and then reduce the rising levels of extreme inequality, the dream of ending extreme poverty for the 300 million Indians — a quarter of the population — who live below an extremely low poverty line, will remain a pipe dream. If India stops inequality from rising further, it could end extreme poverty for 90 million people by 2019.

#### **VAAGDHARA's approach to end inter-generational poverty existing among the Tribal Community**

VAAGDHARA is working in the tribal region of Southern Rajasthan from the last two decades and has implemented a number of development initiatives in VAGAD region. During these years, the organization has seen that the tribal population has been adversely affected by the development in the country because many of them have been displaced from their roots to make way for large dams, or for mines or for similar other 'public purpose'. Besides, the livelihoods of tribals are most endangered due to the shrinking forest area. Their sustainable and traditional way of living is absolutely changed, making them more dependent on the markets. VAAGDHARA believes that if the poverty of tribal is to be addressed for any significant and sustainable impact, then the younger generation of the tribe has to be better educated, has to be better nourished and has to be more aware and confident to deal with the mainstream development. The organization has learned from its experience that

strong Community Based Institutions are must for sustaining the development intervention and we use this strategy of formation and nurturing of Community Based Institutions as a cross cutting approach in all interventions.

#### **VAAGDHARA has adopted a three-point strategy to control poverty which is as follows:**

**Promoting True Farming.** The concept of True Farming refers to 'Farming practices that are eco-friendly, and sustainable in nature, acknowledge the traditional knowledge and wisdom, aim at curbing/totally ceasing the use of chemical fertilizers, and promote soil conservation. VAAGDHARA promotes Nutri-Sensitive farming practices and Sustainable Integrated Farming System in order to deal with the problem of malnutrition in the area and providing with the sustainable source of farming. Tribal farmers adopting these approaches have proved with the improved nutrition levels, especially among the women and children, reduced dependency on markets and have also enhanced their income levels through reduced input cost and increased productivity. Efforts are also focused in establishing the market linkages in order to provide maximum benefits to farmers.

**Ensuring True Childhood—**VAAGDHARA strongly believes that the poverty among the tribals can be tackled only if we focus on ending the inter-generation poverty with a specific focus on the growth and development of children. The organization ensures to fulfil the four rights of a child, i.e. Right to Survival, Right to Protection, Right to Development and Right to Participation, to form a true childhood. A true childhood refers to, one in which a child is able to lead a life where he or she is provided with equal opportunities of development for better, emotional, physical and educational growth. Rather than creating a parallel system, VAAGDHARA focuses on strengthening the existing system like capacity building of various institutions to ensure the

inclusive quality education.

Facilitating True Democracy— VAAGDHARA acts as a catalyst and facilitator by providing platform and network to help the community to voice their concern and to positively engage with policy makers for enabling policy environment. In the democratic space, changes can happen best if the community is aware and organized to seek their rights, to address their social-economic-political issues and to take their issues forward. Therefore, in this regard, the organization is investing in building the capacities of youth, community leaders and most importantly Community Based Organizations so that they can demand their entitlements and start the journey toward development. Awareness about schemes, programmes and rights can help community to explore their ultimate power for development of their upcoming generations.

VAAGDHARA's initiatives are bringing change in the lives of the most deprived communities and it aims to reach at least 1,00,000 tribal families by 2020 to achieve the sustainable and equitable development for all. The key approach in all its interventions is Community Based Institutions and during the series of dialogue held with these institutions following are the strategies recommended for the sustainable and equitable development for all in all our thematic areas:

#### **True Farming:**

- Praise water as godly element, conserve and harvest wherever possible in ditch, pond, pokher, dam, anicut etc. and prevent pollution in waterbodies.
- Adopting True farming in the form of rainfed agriculture, living soils, organic farming, agro-forestry etc.
- Identification of traditional crops, quality seed

production, preserving and establishing system of quality seed production and distribution.

- Adopt traditional food and farming system to fight malnutrition.
- Adopt approaches of food-forest, kitchen garden, nutrition garden, plantation and nutrition sensitive farming systems for food and nutrition security through traditional and modern foods.
- Prevent erosion of soil from farms, pastures, commons, forest and other lands and keep them fertile and improve their fertility.

#### **True Childhood:**

- Village level efforts and coordination with government programs and schemes for overall growth and development of children.
- Providing true-childhood for each and every child, by creating opportunities for growth and development through education, eradicating child labor, and checking migration.

#### **True Democracy:**

- Reviving 'Gram Chopal' for regular discussions, planning and action on development.
- Adopting traditions like Halma and Hundel for revival of indigenous tribal culture.
- Building leadership skills and guiding youth for participation in democratic processes.
- Linking and networking with other institutions and villages for strengthening and sustainable development of village community.





## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission for Social Development

Fifty-fifth session

1-10 February 2017

Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: strategies for the eradication of poverty to achieve sustainable development for all

### Statement submitted by VAAGDHARA, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council\*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

### Statement

Extreme poverty in the world has decreased considerably in the past three decades. In 1981, more than half of citizens in the developing world lived on less than \$1.25 a day. This rate has dropped dramatically to 21 percent in 2010. However, 1.2 billion people living in extreme poverty (in 2010) is still an extremely high figure, and India contributes to one third of this statistic. United Nation's latest Millennium Development Goals Report suggests that despite all economic reforms and other measures taken by the government, India could only manage to reduce its poverty rate from 49.4% in 1994 to 42% in 2005 and 32.7% in 2010. Other statistics suggest that India also accounted for the highest number of under-five deaths in the world in 2012, with 1.4 million children not reaching their fifth birthday. This is a particularly unfortunate situation for a country that claims to be the third largest economy of the world (in PPP terms) and a rising super-power in the continent. The country has definitely made strides in reducing poverty; however, the task ahead remains herculean.

This statement attempts to analyse the key causes of poverty in India and evaluates the government response to these challenges. The document also shares VAAGDHARA's experiences of working with the poor tribal areas of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat and recommends some practical strategies (based on the experience of organisation) to address the poverty conundrum through cost-effective and locally available resources.

### Background: Understanding Poverty in India

To understand the reasons of poverty in India, one must first understand who are defined as poor in India. Earlier, the poverty line in the country was based on expenditure for buying food worth 2,400 calories in rural areas and 2,100 calories in urban areas. Later on, it was defined on the basis of monthly spending on food, education, health etc. And recently a government panel considered people living on less than Rs. 32 a day (USD 0.48 at current prices) in rural areas and Rs. 47 a day (USD 0.70 at current prices) in urban areas as poor. However, none of the above definitions truly represent the characteristics of the poor in India and remain narrowly focused on a person's earning or spending levels.

Noble Laureate Amartya Sen suggests 'Poverty is not just a lack of money; it is not having the capability to realise one's full potential as a human being.' The capability to realise the fullest potential of an individual depends on a range of factors, including the information (or awareness)

and the access to services, and not just a lack of money. Therefore, one simple analysis of the problem of poverty in India is that we are using incorrect parameters to address the challenge at hand. Since the official definition of poverty takes into account only the earnings/expenditure made by an individual, the scope of majority of the government's poverty alleviation programs has been limited to increase the income of the poor (through training, loan, subsidies, etc.). Other low hanging fruits such as information and ensuring access, which have the potential of driving people out of poverty, have not been targeted effectively. So, if we have wrongly understood the problem of poverty, we can never come up with right solutions.

### **Specific examples of accomplishments by VAAGDHARA and remaining challenges:**

VAAGDHARA's experience suggests that information is the most effective tool of empowering people and steering them out of the vicious cycle of poverty. The poor are poor, mainly because they do not have the correct information about how they can make cheap gains in day-to-day lives which may impact their overall productivity and income levels. For example, water borne diseases are quite common in VAAGDHARA's field areas. Once a person contracts diarrhoea and other such disease/infection, the family savings if any are spent on treatment sometimes resulting in significant debt. Such diseases and infections are easily preventable and the prevention tools (for example, chlorine pills or the information about the benefits of boiled water) are mostly free or very cheaply available. Therefore, if educated properly the poor are able to save their hard-earned money and the loss of work days.

Working with tribes in remote villages, VAAGDHARA found that most of the government's awareness generation campaigns do not reach the correct target group, the poor. For example, a newspaper advertisement about a loan scheme

for rural entrepreneurs or the free ambulance service for Below Poverty Line (BPL) families is not effective as the community does not read newspapers. The poor delivery of such simple information costs the community a number of life changing opportunities.

The organisation realised an urgent need to redefine the communication strategies used. In response to this, VAAGDHARA closed/narrowed this information gap by adopting locally appropriate and more interpersonal communication strategies. VAAGDHARA did this by creating teams of volunteers in villages to engage in face-to-face communication with other villages. Each volunteer received training and then was responsible for 10 households in order to remain effective in their efforts. The organisation also arranged for screened documentaries/films to show in the villages at night to educate communities on various government programs. These effective communication strategies resulted in enhanced awareness and increased demand for services leading to visible improvements in government service delivery mechanisms. There was a remarkable decline in the absenteeism of teachers and health workers; whereas there was a modest increase in the work availability under the Government of India Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

Secondly, the organisation identifies reduced profitability of agriculture as another key reason for poverty in rural parts of India, especially tribal regions. Historically, tribes have been dependent on forestry, agriculture and allied activities for their subsistence. Despite the fact that agriculture contributes to only 14% of the GDP, it is still the largest employer in rural India. However, profitability of agriculture has reduced to a variety of reasons including climate change, excessive use of chemical fertilisers, has forced younger generations to give up farming and work as labourers. This has resulted in high youth

migration from rural areas. This is a concern for the agriculture based rural economy as the youth possess the greatest potential to transform farming into a science and knowledge-based enterprise. Therefore, in order to curb migration and tackle the issue, VAAGDHARA has introduced the Sustainable Integrated Farming System Approach which has improved nutrition levels among the community especially women and children, reduced dependency of farmers on markets and has also enhanced income

levels through reduced input cost and increased productivity. Efforts are also focused on establishing market linkages in order to provide maximum benefits to farmers.

Thirdly, the Indian Constitution has made special provisions for development of tribal populations under which separate funds should be allocated in proportion to the percentage of the tribal population. However, often allocation of budget is not in proportion to the population size. This apart, more than one third of the funds allocated remain unspent. The fund allocation and expenditure pattern is uneven which implies that there are many schemes which receive more attention and others which continue to suffer negligence in implementation. In order to address these issues and to advocate for optimum utilisation of the allocated budget, VAAGDHARA has carried out a research study on the Scheme

Wise Performance analysis for various schemes under the Tribal Welfare Fund. The findings of the study revealed that adequate provisioning for allocating resources for financing various schemes is required. It also highlighted those allocated resources for a specific scheme often remain unspent or spent on account of another scheme.

Based on VAAGDHARA's experience of working with tribal communities for more than two decades the organisation identifies the following recommendations for effective poverty eradication:

1. Communication strategies should be appropriately chosen keeping in view the target community's access to various modes/ means of communication.
2. Wage employment aside, focus should be placed on making agriculture and allied activities more profitable and sustainable. The state heads should develop the pro-poor sensitive market and SDG implementation policies for the equitable growth among all sections of society.
3. Volunteerism among local community (especially among educated youth) needs to be promoted to strengthen the local bodies and other institutions, and to create demand for services.





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Commission on the Status of Women  
Fifty-eighth session  
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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

### **Statement submitted by VAAGDHARA, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council**

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

#### **Statement**

The analysis of challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls in India, or in South Asia, for that matter, has revealed a mixed bag of success stories and challenges that have historically been associated with the lives of women and girls. In fact, in some cases, these challenges have multiplied in spite of the Millennium Development Goals. On the face of it, the targets of several of the Goals have been met or are close to being met; a deeper analysis indicates, however, that there have been no significant changes in the power structures within families and communities that have determined a subservient role for women and girls, resulting in a perpetual state of vulnerability to poverty and exclusion from many decision-making processes concerning their lives, including sexual and reproductive rights.

#### **Millennium Development Goal: eradicate extreme hunger and poverty**

In India, defining poverty itself has been a hugely contentious issue. Economists have used

arguments to support their point of view depending on their allegiance to a particular type of political formation. However, in real terms, using the Multidimensional Poverty Index, the empirical evidence indicates that the target of halving poverty, especially in the case of women, has been missed. There are little gender-disaggregated data on the issue of poverty, because income and/or consumption are typically measured at the household level. The information that is available shows that female-headed households have significantly higher poverty rates in both income poverty and Multidimensional Poverty Index terms.

The target of halving the proportion of people who suffer from hunger was so basic and low in aspiration that if the latest estimates of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) of chronic hunger are to be believed, the target seems to have been achieved. However, what is a matter of concern in India is the status of malnutrition. The available data indicate that the incidence of undernourishment went down in Latin America (from 6.5 to 5.6 per cent), China and Viet Nam, but in South Asia, including India, it actually increased, from 32.7 to 35.0 per cent. Further, FAO also tells us that the difference between the prevalence of undernourishment and the prevalence of food inadequacy seems significant, showing that a considerable share of the population is suffering from inadequate food intake, even though chronic undernourishment is not widespread. This is the

case of countries that do not rank among the highest in terms of undernourishment, such as India.

The empirical evidence indicates that there are gender gaps in nutritional outcome indicators. Again, according to FAO, vulnerable women are at greater risk of malnutrition than men, and more girls die of malnutrition than boys. Different forms of nutritional deficiency are of particular relevance for women at various stages of their life cycles. In India, the National Family Health Survey of 2005/06 found that only 52 per cent of women were at a healthy weight for their height, with less than desired weight dominating. This was more prevalent among women in rural areas and those with less education, where the gender gap was also greater.

### **Millennium Development Goal: women's empowerment**

One of the key indicators of women's empowerment is political participation, in particular the number of women in national parliaments and provincial assemblies. In India, there was a marginal increase in the number of women elected at the national level in 2009. The constitutional amendment bill aiming to reserve one third of seats for women has been pending in Parliament for over a decade. Although the participation of women in local governance has improved owing to the quota system, this still has to translate into strategic opportunities for participation in decisions concerning their own lives as well as in the affairs in their communities. Therefore, it is amply clear that the goal of ensuring gender equality and empowering women is very far from being met.

### **Violence against women**

Violence against women continues to be a huge concern. The true picture in this regard is gradually emerging. So far the information has been insufficient and there is a widespread

tendency to underreport such violence. Although specific legislation, the Domestic Violence Act, is in place, its implementation at the grass-roots level is poor and riddled with bureaucratic inefficiencies. The recent cases of sexual violence against women and girls across India are a matter of serious concern and require a long-term vision as well as a plan of action. Likewise, process indicators need to be developed with respect to the timing and nature of implementation of the law.

### **Reasons for underachievement of the Millennium Development Goals**

One significant reason why progress in meeting the Millennium Development Goals has been disappointing on several counts could be that, in some ways, they have missed the point, by focusing exclusively on certain outcome indicators without adequate recognition of the policies and processes that would enable or assist the achievement of the proposed targets.

For instance, reducing child mortality and maternal mortality require a range of interventions in nutrition, sanitation and public health as well as women's access to education and employment. Gaps in one set of indicators would lead to underachievement in another. Secondly, the scale of operation had to be such that it would actually make an impact, overcoming the immediate obstacles that might crop up on the way, because it is not possible to position the Millennium Development Goals in a vacuum. Progress towards the Goals is very often linked to the overall social and economic policies of Governments and the associated processes unfolding in those societies.

Another important factor is that aid from the North, both bilateral and independent, shrunk further, despite the promises made. Although resources were made available by the Government of India through State funding, in the absence of

external aid the space and possibilities for innovative approaches and practices were severely constrained.

Monitoring and accountability at the level of the State have been poor. One of the key problems in monitoring the Millennium Development Goals has been the lack of information with respect to actual trends, and the absence of disaggregated data that would allow for a systematic assessment of conditions on the ground in a timely manner.

In conclusion, we would like to state that the Millennium Development Goals have largely been disappointing in terms of real achievement, even

though they were already modest in scope. One of the key reasons for the underachievement of the Goals has been the fact that they have focused on specific individual outcome targets without taking into consideration the larger processes that are determined by macroeconomic, developmental and social policies on one hand, and social and cultural factors in specific societies, on the other. If one desires aims to measure achievement of a composite indicator, such as women's empowerment, the emphasis should be on institutional arrangements, policies and processes that can deliver positive outcomes.



## Economic and Social Council

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Commission for Social Development

Fifty-second session

11-21 February 2014

Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development

and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all

### **Statement submitted by VAAGDHARA, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council**

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

#### **Statement**

In 1969, Saul Alinsky said that a real development programme was a democratically minded people — a healthy, active, participating, interested, self-confident people who, through their participation and interest, become informed, educated and above all develop faith in themselves, their fellow men and women and the future. The people themselves were the future. The people themselves will solve each problem that will arise out of a changing world.

The words of Saul Alinsky, rearticulated by Julius Nyeere when he said that people cannot be developed, they only can develop themselves, essentially captures the spirit of the present statement. VAAGDHARA is of the firm belief that however we may emphasize a rights-based approach and State responsibility, the empowerment of people and their participation in governance concerning the affairs of their lives, as well as those of their communities, are essential for democracy, harmony and social development. All members of society need to have the opportunity to be able to exercise the right and responsibility

to take an active part in the affairs of the society and the country in which they live.

Poverty is one of the most important factors in the violation of basic human rights of people. In spite of the wide range of statutes favouring human rights, poor people find it almost impossible to claim and access those rights. Societal circumstances, structural poverty and adverse institutional arrangements make it difficult for the poor to live with dignity and be included in society. For instance, the right to a fair trial and the right to equal treatment before judicial authorities are not enjoyed by the poor, as they find that access to these rights is very difficult. We need to work on a two-pronged strategy to integrate extremely poor people into the human rights system. On one hand, we have to empower poor people to increase their ability to access human rights systems. On the other hand, we have to ensure that human rights mechanisms proactively reach out to poor people.

Empowering people has many facets, but its positive outcome is to enlarge life choices, enhance productive capacities and advance human well-being. This notion has been reiterated by the World Bank, which defines empowerment as the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Central to this process are actions which both build individual and collective assets and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational and institutional context which

govern the use of these assets. Therefore, people who are empowered have better chances to bring about desired changes at all levels and shape their own options. In that context, social protection — a vital component of a forward-looking social policy — plays an increasingly important role in promoting the empowerment of people to tackle poverty, in ensuring income security and in addressing sharp declines in incomes.

In India, social protection includes a wide range of programmes and schemes. Some important social protection programmes include food and nutrition programmes, such as the Public Distribution System, the Midday Meals programme and the Integrated Child Development Scheme; housing programmes for rural areas, such as Indira Awas Yojna; and self-employment programmes, such as Swarna Jayanti Grameen Swarojgar Yojana and Self Help Groups.

Currently, the two most important social protection programmes are the Public

Distribution System and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. In fact, the Public Distribution System has now been expanded into the Right to Food programme, enlarging the reach of its social protection.

The area in which VAAGDHARA operates is inhabited largely by indigenous communities (known in India as “scheduled tribes”). The challenges that these communities confront include geographical isolation, distinctive cultures that at times compete with the dominant culture and the unavailability of education and health facilities. In addition, the forests upon which these communities have depended for centuries are being depleted, which leads to livelihood constraints. The communities' notions of social protection also needs to be seen in the context of their social integration. Questions of identity and integration are very complex for these communities and need constant review and

reflection. As emphasized in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, we at VAAGDHARA are convinced that control by indigenous peoples over developments affecting them and their lands, territories and resources will enable them to maintain and strengthen their institutions, cultures and traditions, which is so important for their empowerment, social protection and integration.

Article 5 of the Declaration states that indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions while retaining their right to participate fully, if they so choose, in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the State. The Constitution of India fully provides this space through constitutional provisions such as schedule V and VI as well as through specific legislations such as the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas. Through the Extension, scheduled tribes have the right to participate in decision-making in matters that would affect their rights through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as the right to maintain and develop their own indigenous decision-making institutions.

In addition, the Constitution of India also recognizes the customary laws and practices of indigenous communities for the purpose of the immediate delivery of justice and local administration. The customary laws of tribal peoples, especially in north-eastern India, enable them to promote, develop and maintain their institutional structures and their distinctive customs, traditions and practices. Customary laws are treated by members of a society or tribe as integral to their culture and basic to their identity. These laws reinforce a tribe's age-old traditions and bind it together through normative rules by regulating the social and personal relations of its members. Through institutions such as the village



council, leaders manage the internal affairs of the village. Culture is a community's expression of its worldview (i.e., its interpretation of the reality around it, or what can be called its philosophy) expressed through its customs, social relations and organization, language, rituals, festivals, dress, ornaments and arts. It culminates in its identity.

Over the past decade and continuing up to the present, the relevance, fairness and justice-delivery capabilities of customary laws, practices and institutions are being discussed at various levels in order to ensure that they meet the national and international standards of human rights, especially pertaining to gender justice. The point that VAAGDHARA is underlining through this illustration is that we need a balance of social protection and social integration together with the requirements of international human rights regime. While it is important to introduce new "secular" law into the justice systems of indigenous peoples, it is equally important that we engage with customary law and not ridicule these institutions.

VAAGDHARA believes that the role of national legal systems in establishing a basic social

protection framework is very important, both in terms of adopting new laws and regulations specifically aligned with the ideas of the social protection and in terms of introducing legal instruments aimed at better monitoring of protection and social security programmes. Until the beginning of the past decade, protection programmes such as a guarantee of employment and food security were not a part of fundamental rights. Because of the active role of the Supreme Court of India in expanding article 21 of the Constitution, these rights have now become justiciable. It is also our experience that civil society organizations should be involved in the design and implementation of social protection programmes in partnership with other stakeholders. The role of civil society in monitoring the implementation of social protection programmes is essential. Civil society organizations are well placed to undertake or contribute to that national monitoring by taking the real-life situations of individual residents into account. This creates conditions for the empowerment of people with respect to a crucial instrument needed for their well-being and development.





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