

## Land is life

### Context

India is now among the countries with the highest gross domestic product and will soon occupy third place behind China and the USA. Yet only a small segment of the population is benefiting from the upswing. Development is stalling in rural areas, which are still home to roughly two thirds of all Indians. Some 30 per cent of the population live below the poverty line, on less than US\$1 per person per day. On the Social Progress Index, India ranks only 101<sup>st</sup> among 133 countries.

When it comes to discrimination and violence against minorities, India comes off particularly badly. The Indian caste system even further accentuates social differences. People who do not belong to a caste, called Dalits, as well as indigenous ethnic groups like the Adivasis are systematically excluded from society. Their chances of escaping poverty on their own are negligible.

India's economic boom is increasingly exacerbating conflicts over land and natural resources. The Government's pro-economy policy encourages land grabbing by large investors and this is leading to ever greater marginalization of smallholders and day labourers. The latter must struggle to eke out a living from small fields, mostly with rudimentary tools. The HEKS/EPER Country Programme for India addresses these people. Special attention is devoted to women, who face even more discrimination.

### Objectives, priorities, activities

The programme aims to enhance food security and raise the incomes of marginalized ethnic groups such as Dalits and Adivasis in the four southern states of Tamil





Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Karnataka. The country programme encompasses the following activities:

- 1. Access to land:** Specialized partner organizations support landless workers in completing the requisite administrative formalities for owning a plot of land. The land will ensure that there is enough food for them and their families.
- 2. Improving agricultural production:** HEKS/EPER promotes ecological and sustainable agriculture based on grain varieties adapted to local conditions, as well as intercropping.
- 3. Income support:** To secure a minimum income, beneficiary families become part of value chains and sell some of their agricultural produce on local and national markets. Moreover, women in particular are encouraged to set up small businesses, which is facilitated, inter alia, by putting them in touch with government savings and loans schemes.
- 4. Empowering civil society:** Grassroots organizations are built up and networked among themselves. Villagers are enabled to play an active part in village politics and to claim their rights.
- 5. Resilience building:** Southern India's farmers are being affected increasingly by seasonal droughts and tropical storms. HEKS/EPER instructs small farmers in climate-appropriate agricultural practices and in water management in order to bolster their resilience.

## Target groups

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Casteless (Dalits) and indigenous ethnic groups (Adivasis), with special emphasis on women.

## Partnerships, networks, alliances, memberships

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HEKS/EPER works with small and medium-size Indian partner organizations. At the federal level, they organize themselves into land rights forums. HEKS/EPER India is a part of «Act Alliance India» and cultivates strategic partnerships with various national and international organizations active in the realms of land rights and sustainable agriculture.

## HEKS/EPER on the ground

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HEKS operates a Coordination Office in Chennai (Tamil Nadu) with a Country Director and four other staff members.

## Topics and working approach

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Human rights are the top priority in all projects. Official and government offices are held to account and advantage is taken of existing government-run poverty alleviation programmes.

## Progress

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HEKS/EPER has been active in India for 59 years now. In the preceding programme phase, HEKS/EPER focused on access to land for landless Dalits and Adivasis. Over the past 10 years, Dalits and Adivasis have gained access to some 100,000 hectares of land, with the support of HEKS/EPER and its partner organizations. HEKS/EPER also fostered access to natural resources, such as seeds. To



protect traditional seeds, local seed banks for smallholder families were built up during the past few years and handed over to the local community. HEKS/EPER also supported small farmers in accessing government resources (for example employment and irrigation schemes or widows' pensions), promoted small animal farming and provided training in ecological agriculture.

The dimensions of the Indian subcontinent are larger than those of other HEKS/EPER priority countries – in terms of size, population and the scale of poverty. HEKS/EPER will therefore further narrow its geographic and thematic focus. Instead of providing ad hoc assistance for several different groups, comprehensive support is to be given to individual communities.

**Country:**

India

**Programme costs 2018:**

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**HEKS/EPER No.:** 363.000

**Responsibility:**

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