

# Study: Women-led groups were key to food security during COVID-19 in India

December 11 2023

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Self help group members in Malkangiri, Odisha, India. Credit: Alliance of Bioversity and CIAT / Thea Ritter

In March of 2020, India's government announced a strict lockdown with just four hours notice, including a ban on the informal and traditional food outlets that [80 to 90 percent](#) of Indians rely on for their main source of food.

In a new paper, "[Applying the six-dimensional food security framework to examine a fresh fruit and vegetable program implemented by self-help groups during the COVID-19 lockdown in India](#)," published in the journal *World Development*, researchers from the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT looked at the effects of a government-backed women's self-help group program in the state of Odisha, India and how it impacted the six dimensions of food security: [food availability](#), access, utilization, stability, agency, and sustainability.

Jonathan Mockshell, an agricultural economist at the Alliance of Bioversity International and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) and the first author of the paper, explains that these groups (women-only rotating savings and credit associations with a long history in India), procured fresh fruit and vegetables from farmers, hired transport, purchased more vegetables from wholesalers, and sold the food to people in local and urban markets via truck, cart, or motorbike.

"Our research has shown that these self-help groups (SHG) are crucial at mitigating fractures in the [fresh fruit](#) and vegetable value chains during the lockdown,"

Mockshell says, "The SHG system provides a 'third force' and model for rethinking and re-engineering current development models by leveraging existing institutions and grass root networks to build resilience in food systems."

Thea Ritter, an [agricultural economist](#) at the Alliance of Bioversity International and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture

(CIAT), and second author of the study, explains that these women were running these programs, called "Veg on Wheels" on top of their household responsibilities and the existing work of the self-help groups.

"They were meeting every night," Ritter says, "There were women who were vegetable and fruit producers themselves or had close links with others outside the group; this helped because they were familiar with the [supply chain](#),"

Ritter added that some groups received [government funding](#) for training in areas like accounting, which some members would later use to start their own businesses.

## **'Six dimensional' food security**

The number of people in or at risk of acute food insecurity surged from 135 million in 53 countries before the COVID-19 pandemic to 345 million in 79 countries in 2023, according to World [Food Programme Statistics](#).



According to researchers, these groups serve as a model for grass root networks to build resilience in food systems. Credit: Alliance of Bioversity and CIAT

In 2009, the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) [defined food security](#) as when "all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and [nutritious food](#), which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."

However, researchers from the Alliance of Bioversity International and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) emphasized two further critical dimensions of food security that came into play in the program they looked at agency and sustainability/resilience.

"In terms of the value chain, agency means being able to sell your fruit and vegetables if you want to and having a say in policies and laws," Ritter says, adding that the researchers focused on resilience (i.e., ability and capacity to deal with shocks in food systems) rather than the traditional view of sustainability, that is, being able to provide for future generations without depleting current resources.

"We didn't have this six-dimensional view of food security in mind when we did the [data collection](#), but it came out of what the respondents in the study were talking about," Ritter says.

## **Future impact**

Mockshell and Ritter explain that there are over a billion members of rotating credit and saving associations, especially in Africa and South Asia.

Given how widespread these groups are, the researchers believe that this model has global applications: harnessing these pre-existing organizations to rebuild fractured supply chains can provide a model for other governments to replicate in times of crisis, such as extreme climate events and conflicts, when both rural and urban supply chains are disrupted.

"This solution is not specific to COVID-19 or India, because with climate change, disasters and conflicts are becoming increasingly common," Ritter says, "If there was a natural disaster in future, the government could tap into and leverage these groups."

Mockshell explained that although the researchers looked at this from a [food security](#) point of view, pre-existing groups could be used to smooth other supply chains in situations where private and public sector presence are limited.

"For example, they could be used to distribute medical supplies," he says.

**More information:** Jonathan Mockshell et al, Applying the six-dimensional food security framework to examine a fresh fruit and vegetable program implemented by self-help groups during the COVID-19 lockdown in India, *World Development* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.worlddev.2023.106486](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2023.106486)

Provided by The Alliance of Bioversity International and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture

Citation: Study: Women-led groups were key to food security during COVID-19 in India (2023, December 11) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-12-women-led-groups-key-food-covid-.html>

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