

Nürnberg, Germany 12.– 15.2.2020

# BIOFACH2020

into organic



**“Organic delivers!”... common goods and a better life for rural communities**

**“Common Goods Economy is revitalizing and regenerating village life and nature”**

**Interview with Bablu Ganguly, Timbaktu Collective**

The main theme of the BIOFACH 2020 congress is “Organic delivers!” through the positive influence of ecological farming methods. The sixth interview on this subject, in the BIOFACH series deals with the positive effects of organic for common goods.

After 30 years, from the modest beginnings, the Timbaktu Collective has become a best practice example that spreads into many branches of a satisfying rural life with future perspectives in many ways.

**Bablu Ganguly, co-founder of the Collective, can you please explain the mental and strategic roots of the success model?**

First, I must tell you that when we started the Collective, we had no blue print and no strategic plans. Mentally we knew that if we wanted to make change happen, we had to be ready for a marathon – meanwhile the world kept changing and we had to keep changing our strategies, the kind of projects we took up. We started with trying to regenerate and heal a piece of barren land and today we have ended up trying to help regenerate and revitalise the local economy and re-invent, in a way, the Cooperative movement. Resist, Revive, Restore and Re-vitalise has become our theme.

Whatever success we have been able to have, is only because of the concept of Sangha. That is a kind of informal association of the people participating from a village. The Sangha is the core of all our work. When we talk about our work with women, with people with disabilities, with farmers, with the landless agricultural labourers and even the children and youth – all are organized into Sanghas. All Sanghas meet at least once a month. These Sanghas are federated into legally registered Cooperatives with shareholders and elected Directors, etc. Therefore, the strategy has been to

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organize the people at the village level and to federate all these and form Cooperatives. It is through these Cooperatives that the Collective takes up programmes and moves towards transparency and democratic co-determination.

**The Timbaktu model fits very well into the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - do you feel it is necessary to multiply those ideas to spread them over the globe in times of climate crisis and negative impacts of agroindustry?**

Absolutely! I do not think we are doing anything that is not possible to emulate in any part of the world. Our work on ecology or agriculture, our work with women, people with disabilities, agricultural labourers, with children and youth are all common sense work and all of them have to do with human dignity, solidarity and social justice. This comes through revitalization of the local economy, ecological restoration that leads to mitigation of the effects of climate change, environmental sustainability, transparency and democratic co-determination in all aspects of development and business – basically all leading to a good life.

**What is the key element that could be realized in the first step?**

The idea is to build relationships and social capital. Strong, cordial, cooperative, honest and respectful relationships. This is the core and key element according to me. This is also part of the thinking in the organic movement worldwide. We have, I believe, over three decades, built the social capital in this area so that our projects can work and the people can own them. This is not easy and needs to be built slowly and steadily. We all need to learn to trust and respect each other and then the rest will follow.

**Often, organic production of goods is not the greatest challenge when compared to establishing a stable market for the produce. How are you managing this?**

I agree this is the key. Engaging with the market is another essential element. However, the poorer and marginalised people need to engage with the market from a position of strength. Not just numbers but also with some amount of capital. The field out there is not level and we need to help level it. We were able to do this because of the strong support we received from

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organisations like the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, Mumbai and BfW, Berlin and many friends and individuals, who believe that another world is possible, that another economics are possible. No, not just possible, but extremely important.

On the other hand, the consumers are becoming more and more aware that something is wrong. The food that they eat is not particularly tasty or healthy. They are looking for food that is genuinely good, fair and healthy. Over the years the Timbaktu Organic brand has built this trust and the story backing it is true and good.

**You are also board member of IFOAM Organics International, the global umbrella organisation of the organic movement. How do you estimate the prospects for organic agriculture combined with the ideals of common goods economy or is it even time for a breakthrough of organic agriculture and common goods economy?**

Yes, I am a board member of IFOAM Organics International. This has given me the opportunity to travel and meet many people from across the world. Wherever I go, be it India or abroad, the people are want good food. Yet not everybody wants to pay the premium that organic demands. And, this is where the ideal of common goods economy comes in. The consumers should understand that their local farmers also want to live a good life, and the farmers must understand that they are producers of food that the local consumers depend on and so they should produce good food. All should understand the four principles that define organic – Health, Ecology, Fairness, and Care lead to revitalization of the local economy, environmental sustainability, human dignity, solidarity, social justice, transparency and democratic co-determination. This is also the meaning of true cost accounting.

Moreover, this is not related just to Organic but to all goods that we produce and exchange. The principles are the same. And that, only that, will lead us to live a good life. A life that is generous, caring and wholesome.

The interview was conducted by Karin Heinze, BiO reporter International



## Background

### About Timbaktu

Rural populations in India as in other parts of the world have experienced very complex changes and times of unrest in the last decades. The societies and communities of farmers are suffering with migration and urbanisation, as there are not too many future prospects in farming for the next generations. Organic agriculture and socio-ecological communities however open up new perspectives.

A lighthouse example of combining agroecology and social entrepreneurship is based in Andhra Pradesh, South India. Bablu Ganguly and Mary Vattamattam founded Timbaktu (an intentional community) and the Timbaktu Collective (a voluntary organisation/ NGO) in 1990, out of the conviction that something must be done for the further development and support of the rural population. With his experience as a development activist, community organiser, Project Director, and Chairperson at Young India Project (YIP) as well as co-founder of the Federation of Andhra Pradesh Agricultural Labourers' Unions, Bablu with Mary initiated the intentional community called Timbaktu on a 32-acre, dry, barren piece of land. Today it has turned into a collective, rich in many senses and works as a model for other eco-villages and communities.

The Timbaktu Collective, which came out of the experiment at Timbaktu, is a non-profit organisation that works in 182 villages with about 25,000 families. It works on various issues such as

- empowerment and financial inclusion of women from marginalised families
- eco-restoration, protection and conservation of wastelands to regenerate the savannah grasslands and wildlife
- empowerment and livelihood promotion of small holder farmers through organic farming and engaging in the entire food chain from seed to fork
- empowerment and livelihood development of landless agricultural laborers through animal husbandry
- rights of children, youth, people with disabilities and Dalits (Untouchables)



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All towards regenerating the ecology of the area, revitalising the local economy and upholding the rights of rural marginalised communities so that they can live with dignity and in solidarity. The Collective has played a critical role in the promotion of organic farming and marketing in India and the concept of environmental sustainability. It has promoted the concept of producer-owned business enterprises through Cooperatives by incorporating the ideas of solidarity, transparency and democratic co-determination.

## Vita

**CK 'Bablu' Ganguly** was born in 1956.

He was raised and had basic education in Mumbai and Bengaluru.

Bablu studied Commerce at the University of Bengaluru.

## Experience:

Bablu worked with the Young India Project (YIP) from 1978 to 1990.

He co-founded the Federation of Andhra Pradesh Agricultural Labourers' Unions.

In 1990 Bablu Ganguly (Secretary) co-founded the Timbaktu Collective together with Mary Vattamattam (Chairperson) [www.timbaktu.org](http://www.timbaktu.org).

He is a member of the World Board of IFOAM – Organics International and is a farmer, development activist, social entrepreneur and change-maker.

## Achievements:

The Timbaktu Collective works in 182 villages and is partnering with around 25,000 marginalised families (including landless labourers, marginalised smallholder farmers, women, children, youth, Dalits and people with disabilities).

Promoted four independent women's thrift cooperatives that run as alternative banks, with a total membership of 24,000 members, run and managed by women for women.

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Promoted a farming and marketing Cooperative of farmers with 2000 smallholder farmers as members.

Promoted a large community-led conservation and regeneration effort covering around 9,000 acres of biodiverse savanna grasslands and tropical thorn forest in partnership with 10 villages.

The Collective has received various national and international awards applauding its work.

## **Statement Louise Lutikholt, CEO IFOAM Organics International**

### **„Organic Agriculture goes beyond agricultural practice“**

„Organic agriculture is good for the Earth! We know that it's good for our environment. However, organic agriculture is so much more. It has impact beyond agricultural practice and can contribute to community building and social wellbeing. And therewith it helps to reach the SDGs (Sustainability Development Goals).

At two organic project initiatives in the South of India I could see the broader impact of organic. The farmers and their families work together and exchange their experiences, they are empowered by the community to market their products and therewith increased their incomes which allowed them to think about good education for their children, for instance. But the best thing was to see their pride, when we walked with them on the fields and they shared with us their agricultural skills to manage their land organically.“