

## 2023 General Assembly Meet of Vikalp Sangam Concludes in Kerala



Group picture of all attendees of the 2023 General Assembly Meet of Vikalp Sangam

**D**evelopment Alternatives joined the list of 40 members representing 25 like-minded organisations under the Vikalp Sangam network to discuss alternatives for development in the 2023 General Assembly Meet from November 03-06 at Farmer's Share in Shoranur, Kerala.

The Vikalp Sangam (VS) is a nine-year-old process that brings together people's movements and organisations working on solutions to the ecological and climate crises, food insecurity, social conflict, and other such problems affecting millions of people in India. It promotes alternatives to small-farmer based agriculture, sustainable building, decentralised water and energy production, women's empowerment, alternative education, traditional and new people's art forms, craft-based livelihoods, among others<sup>1</sup>.

The General Assembly of the Vikalp Sangam, known as the 'Core Group' until October'23, is the decision-making body composed of representatives of all member organisations (about 80). It sits once a year in-person to review the yearly chart of activities with their efficacy and plan for the next year. The 2023 General Assembly Meet was attended by 40 members from 25 organisations, including Development Alternatives.



Discussion on the Manifesto and the Framework on Day 2 and 3

In the meeting, a 'People's Manifesto for a Just, Equitable and Sustainable India' was finalized, to be released by early December. The Manifesto sets out suggestions to advance India towards dignified livelihoods, ecologically sensitive economic policies, tackling social exploitation and discrimination including casteism and patriarchy, ensuring that everyone has access to basic needs, securing rights of marginalised groups including gender and sexual minorities, enhancing budgetary support for health and education, and other such actions. The 2024 General Elections and state elections were

<sup>1</sup> Vikalp Sangam, accessed at <https://vikalpsangam.org/>

identified as ripe grounds for advocating for the Manifesto with the local and national government, with hopes that the need for a just, equitable and sustainable India gets recognised, and the suggestions of the Manifesto taken up, fully or partially, by the parties.

Another important document floored for discussion was the revised framework of 'In Search of Radical Alternatives'. The Framework lays out principles for the Vikalp Sangam and is revisited once a year to keep the network's advocacy relevant to the times. Additionally, considering that the VS network turns ten the next year, the plans for a National Vikalp Sangam, in late 2024, as also a series of other events, yatras, and gatherings in several parts of the country were deliberated upon.

Two important highlights from the 2023 General Assembly Meet of the Vikalp Sangam network were the venue of the meeting – the Farmers' Share and the concluding interaction with the tribal community in the Vazhachal forest division in the Thrissur district.

The Farmer's Share is a permaculture and crafts learning centre located on the banks of the Nila River in Shoranur, Kerala<sup>2</sup>. Established by Ambrose Kooliyath in 2017, the 10-acre area of the Farmer's Share houses a permaculture farm, a pottery unit, handloom units, a pond for pisciculture and an open space for experiential learning on food, clothing, architecture and much more. The three days of meetings of the 2023 General Assembly were facilitated at the main campus of the Farmer's Share and benefitted from living through the practices of localised and dignified livelihoods.



Interaction with Dr. Madhu, Founder, Forest Post and a community representative in a common house within the reserved area

The interaction with the Vazhachal forest division's tribal community, on the other hand, was organised as a closure of the meet on the fourth and final day. The community was the first in the state to receive Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights. Anchored by Dr. Manju Vasudevan, about 65 tribal women from eight villages are leveraging their traditional knowledge to produce lifestyle and food products under the banner of Forest Post. These products are sold in the nearby markets, via participation in fairs and exhibitions, and online through their website and Tribes India (an initiative of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs). Yet, demand and fair pricing has been a challenge due to which, the tribal women are today only working 14-17 days a month on the products, spending the rest of the days engaged either under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) or in household chores. Resolving these barriers has immense potential for amplification of community-led production. Some organisations are now stepping in to support the process.

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<sup>2</sup> More about the Farmer's Share can be read at <https://vikalpsangam.org/article/farmers-share-towards-dignified-rural-livelihoods/>