

# FACE-TO-FACE



*“Anyone choosing to work in the development sector must recognise how one’s professional skills can contribute to an organisation and ultimately benefit the community.*

*Passion and perseverance are essential, as this work demands a lot of commitment, desire to listen deeply, and to bring change. As the sector is dynamic, continuous learning and adaptability are also required”.*

*- Luna Panda*

## TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES: WHY PURPOSE AND ADAPTABILITY MATTER

*Dr. Edith Luna Panda is the Executive Director of [Pragati, Koraput](#). She has over 20 years of experience in the social sector, primarily working with tribal communities in the Koraput District of Odisha.*

*D. Alagu Niranjana recently visited Dr. Luna at her office and engaged in a lively discussion about the changing nature of the development sector. Some excerpts from the conversation are below.*

**Thank you for joining us today, Dr. Luna. Let's start with your early life and education. Can you tell us about your schooling, graduation, and academic life?**

I was born in a small village in Mayurbhanj District, Odisha, where my father worked as a high school teacher. Later, in 1980, we moved to Berhampur, a town in Ganjam District, Odisha, as my father joined the Department of Higher Education, Government of Odisha, as a professor of English Literature. We thus transitioned from village life to town life. I completed my post-graduation in Political Science. Following this, I joined academics and continued there for almost 10 years in two Government colleges (Jeypore and Koraput), having been transferred once.

I studied at Khallikote College, Berhampur, and completed a PhD at Bhanja Bihar University, Berhampur, as my father was posted there. My guide there was excellent; he encouraged me to explore the subject in depth and breadth, rather than confining it to a narrow framework. He was also creatively inclined, writing poetry and drama, which resonated with me as my father had a background in English literature and creative writing. I even edited a poetry magazine as a sub-editor, translating poetry and short stories. This creative environment influenced my choice of guide and my academic journey. I submitted my PhD in 1994 and was awarded it in 1995.

In academia, I primarily taught political science, specialising in the Indian Constitution, comparative politics, international relations, and political thought (both Western and Indian). I wrote several articles, some of which were published and others unpublished, and presented them at seminars.

A critical reflection during my academic time was about the marketability of political science. There was a moment when people shifted from the arts to science, aiming to become engineers or doctors, with little interest in social science. In a national seminar, I presented a paper on the marketability of political science, questioning why people weren't interested in subjects like history or political science, despite their intrinsic value and interconnectedness to understanding a nation's past, present, and

future. Political science, I believe, is such an interesting and vast subject, interconnected with various aspects of life, even capable of interpreting ancient texts like the Mahabharata in terms of politics.

### So, you continued in academics after your PhD. What led to your eventual transition to the development sector?

Yes, I continued as a lecturer, initially in Jeypore and then in Koraput. Coming to Jeypore and Koraput profoundly changed my perspective. In academics, I primarily read books, but I lacked collective local engagement until I came here. Pragati provided a large platform for me to engage with the community. I learned extensively about tribal communities, gender issues, farmers' livelihoods, and local challenges. I had studied its literature and found it to have great diversity in livelihood and a vibrant, unexplored tribal culture. However, I also observed significant issues, including poverty, limited access to quality education, and numerous development challenges. It was an area with immense potential for engagement.

I joined Pragati in 2003. I have had some association with their general body since 2001, gradually becoming more deeply involved. Initially, I wanted to understand the development challenges in Koraput and how the development sector should address them. Through my work, I observed how communities, government, and the development sector were trying to intervene, recognising that everything is interconnected and understanding the actual needs of the community is paramount. It's not about implementing projects based on external ideas, but understanding what the community truly needs. For example, building a school without teachers or passionate teachers is meaningless. I realised that much needed to be done, as the communities were vulnerable, couldn't speak out about their issues and challenges, negotiate with stakeholders or couldn't utilise their resources efficiently for their lives and livelihoods, due to a lack of effective participation in local self-governance. These critical observations deepened my engagement with Pragati.

Pragati has given me immense opportunities to enhance my knowledge and skills through participation in different state, national and international workshops. I have also presented Pragati's experience in the systems of crop intensification, women in agriculture, ensuring forest land rights for women, and women's entrepreneurship and empowerment in various states, national, and international forums. During my journey with Pragati, I feel proud that Pragati is recognised at national and international level- NGO of the Year 2008 for good governance and transparency, the International Keeling Curve Prize 2018 for promoting SRI and climate-smart agriculture, the Nexus for Good Award 2022 for climate-resilient and organic farming, and the Kyoto World Water Award 2022 for sustainable water conservation and management for rural livelihoods.



While I could go back to teaching, my shift to community engagement stemmed from a deeper connection.

### Can you tell us more about Pragati's history and its evolution?

Pragati was established in 1992 and registered in 1994. Initially, projects focused on tribal health, adult literacy, and mostly forest protection. This was their core area: protecting forests, collecting non-timber forest products (NTFP), and advocating for people's rights, including NTFP price fixation and securing user rights for coffee and cashew plantations. They worked extensively on advocacy, organising people, and fostering forest conservation through institutional architectures such as village committees, Panchayat committees for forest protection, and block or district-level federations.

When the Forest Rights Act 2006 came into effect, Pragati immediately facilitated the process by raising awareness, assisting people in filling out applications, and engaging in dialogue with the government administration. We formed a network with about 18 other NGOs in Koraput. We conducted an extensive survey across the district, identifying 40,000 people dependent on forest land and documenting their engagement with it, which was then presented to the District administration. This intensive engagement resulted in around 40,000 people receiving individual land rights. Community rights are a more difficult issue due to several reasons. These land rights provide a crucial identity and ownership, making them no longer considered encroachers, and allowing them to develop their land for agriculture or plantations.

### How did Pragati's focus evolve from forest advocacy?

We observed that agriculture is the primary livelihood, so developing it would greatly benefit the community. We began focusing primarily on agriculture and allied activities, such as livestock and fisheries, particularly with small and marginal farmers. Currently, we work directly with over 50,000 farmers. Our programs emphasise natural resource management, organic and sustainable agriculture, incorporating climate-resilient practices such as the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) and the System of Millet Intensification (SMI), as well as Natural Farming and Agro-ecology. We also have an inclusive approach, ensuring women's participation and, since 2019, including youth in our programs, recognising them as the future of agriculture for dignified livelihoods.





We introduced SRI to Koraput in 2008 and scaled it to more than 40,000 farmers, with support from donors such as the [Tata Trusts](#), [Oxfam](#), [Trocaire](#), and the [EdelGive Foundation](#). Another highly impactful program is diversion-based irrigation (DBI) in hilly Koraput, where pipes divert water from hill streams. We've implemented around 114 such structures, transforming livelihoods and bringing migrants back to agriculture.

In 2012, we introduced the concept of a "Lakhpati farmer". This model involves a half-acre farm under continuous crop production throughout the year, utilising solar-powered pumps for irrigation to avoid carbon emissions. This rotational system with long-term crops, creepers, and seasonal vegetables ensures continuous income. We calculated that farmers could earn over one lakh per year after the second or third year. Around 900 farmers have adopted this model.

We also partnered with international funders like [Digital Green](#), creating and disseminating around 250 farmers' videos on SRI, organic farming, and livestock through Pico projectors. This was a very impactful extension method, as farmers found it more convincing to see their peers from their villages practising these methods.

### **You mentioned women's participation. Can you elaborate on your programs for women?**

Pragati has always emphasised women's participation. The community institutions have equal representation of men and women. We had also facilitated women SHGs, built their leadership capacities and facilitated economic empowerment. Pragati has implemented the *Mahila Kishan Sashaktikaran Parijojana* under NRLM, which focused on empowering women in agriculture. We have a specific program on women entrepreneurship, supporting them through a loan-cum-support model where they repay their loans to groups, and the money is then circulated to other women. This has not only empowered women economically but also enhanced their confidence and self-esteem. Pragati has created space for women in agriculture as managers of their farms, making decisions regarding crops, seed varieties, organic practices, aggregation, and marketing. We form Farmer Producer Groups (FPGs) and Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs). We have around 900 FPGs and six FPCs, including one women's farmer company that primarily focuses on aromatic rice. Pragati has also taken a leadership role in introducing organic rice into the Jagannath Temple through collaboration with the Government of Odisha, including securing the GI tag for Kalajeera rice through one of its FPCs. We have women seed champions who produce, conserve and disseminate the local land races.



### What is special about the System of Millet Intensification (SMI) you mentioned?

SMI was our brainchild, adapting the principles of SRI to millets, as it wasn't widely practised elsewhere. We documented its performance, and it spread like wildfire, particularly in rainfed upland areas of the Koraput subdivision, where millets are the primary crop. This innovation enhanced production and helped link farmers to markets through government programs, such as the Minimum Support Price (MSP), under the Odisha Millet Mission (now known as Shree Anna Abhiyan). We have documented and published our experiences in SMI in national and international publications.

### How does Pragati secure funding for its projects?

We have partnered with a range of international donors, including Oxfam, Trocaire, Digital Green, the Dalyan Foundation, IFAD-Indigenous Peoples Assistance Facility, The Dewan Foundation, the Australian High Commission, and CAF India, as well as national donors such as the Tata Trusts, EdelGive Foundation, IRRI, ICRISAT, and CIP. Our collaborations also extend to various state and central government bodies, such as the Agriculture Department, MKSP, and CSR initiatives, most of which are long-term partners that support our communities. Our unique selling point is that donors value our work and consider it worthy of support. We focus exclusively on areas where we possess expertise, ensuring we provide the best support to our community and prioritise their needs. Ultimately, our accountability is to the community. Additionally, we have worked with several ICAR institutions, universities, and KVKs.



### You've started focusing on youth. What are the challenges and progress in that area?

In 2019, we identified youth engagement as a grey area, particularly in agriculture, where few organisations were working. We initiated a small project with the support of IFAD-IPAF, but COVID-19 disrupted its pace, particularly the physical training component. We then launched a specific project for young women, backed by the Dalyan Foundation and the EdelGive Foundation. This project proved quite challenging because engaging with youth requires intense effort to address the generational differences and their unique perceptions. We employ Youth Community Resource Persons (CRPs) in the field to facilitate effective communication and engagement. We are nearing the end of the first phase of this project, with about 7,500 youth in the program pool. We are documenting the learning to assess its success, as retaining youth and getting them to institutionalise practices is an ongoing, iterative process.

### Pragati has a history of strong political advocacy. How do you approach advocacy now?

The word "advocacy" itself is now often avoided, especially after the FCRA (Foreign Contribution Regulation Act) put controls on NGOs. However, the spirit of advocacy remains. We encourage community members to participate in local governance (Gram Sabha) and demand their claims.

Through our work, we communicate messages. For instance, when we tell farmers to conserve indigenous seeds, it implicitly means "don't use hybrid seeds," which might be promoted by others. We subtly encourage organic and bio-inputs rather than directly criticising the promotion of chemical fertilisers.

When we genuinely do something, like refusing chemicals for the pulses program, our actions speak for themselves. We believe that if community demands are justified, the government will listen. Our role is to build evidence. We don't see this as "advocacy" in the confrontational sense, but rather empowering people to understand their rights and speak for themselves.

### **What are the major challenges Pragati faces as an organisation?**

Pragati faces several challenges. A key one is conflicting agendas. Many organisations enter communities with different motives, creating confusion. Our message, therefore, must remain clear and distinct.

Hiring committed staff and retention are other hurdles. It is challenging to find qualified and passionate individuals willing to work in rural or remote areas, as many young professionals prefer higher salaries, comfort, or office jobs. The "social work" sector often struggles to attract educated youth for these reasons.

Climate change also poses serious risks. Unpredictable heavy rains, especially during harvest seasons, force us to devise ground-level coping strategies to protect farmers' livelihoods. Legal compliances for Farmer Producer Companies add complexity. Guiding tribal farmers through documentation while fostering leadership for long-term self-sufficiency is a slow, demanding task.

There is also the tension between targets and quality. Some schemes push for rapid scaling, such as creating 10,000 FPCs in a short time, but such targets often lead to failure and wasted resources. We prioritise depth of engagement and quality over numbers, believing that scaling requires strong groundwork and systems, not just ambitious goals.

One of the critical challenges Pragati faced was the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the positive support from our donors and the realignment of strategies have helped us respond to the humanitarian crisis, adapt to the challenges, and, at the same time, make the organisation more resilient.

Sustaining engagement remains an ongoing challenge. Projects cannot simply stop after a few years; otherwise, communities risk reverting to old ways. Real change and trust require long-term, mutually beneficial relationships.

Finally, engaging with youth is critical yet challenging. Understanding their aspirations and designing agricultural models that are both profitable and appealing is essential, but it remains a work in progress.

### **How does Pragati plan to face these challenges in the future?**

Pragati's plans centre on strengthening livelihoods and engaging more youth in its programs. A key strategy is to move beyond providing seeds and adopt a complete value chain approach, institutionalising the entire "farm to market" process to meet the community's broader needs.

Skill development will be tailored to different groups, such as youth and women, so that interventions are more effective. At the same time, a saturation approach will guide our work, focusing on achieving holistic development in select villages within a panchayat. By covering as many households and landscapes as possible, we can build strong models that serve as evidence for scaling up.



Collaboration remains essential. We actively work with government and other development actors, navigating differing mandates by finding common ground and demonstrating results. Equally important is the building of community cadres, ensuring local leadership and continuity even as external professionals come and go.

Expansion will be pursued strategically. While currently limited to one district, Pragati plans to secure broader registrations, but always in line with the saturation model and our capacity. We avoid one-time relief work, focusing instead on stabilising livelihoods for long-term resilience.

Finally, donor partnerships will continue to be values-driven. We work with supporters who align with our vision and avoid over-expansion, ensuring that quality and integrity remain at the core of all our efforts.

**Based on your 20+ years of experience, what lessons would you share with someone entering the development sector, and what advice do you have for NGOs focusing on deep community engagement?**

***For individuals entering the development sector***

Anyone choosing to work in the development sector must begin with a clear understanding of what they are committing to, beyond job advertisements or experience certificates. It is essential to recognise how one's professional skills, whether in writing, research, or media, can contribute to an organisation and ultimately benefit the community. Passion and perseverance are essential, as this work demands a lot of commitment, desire to listen deeply, and to bring change.

Equally vital is a willingness to engage at the field level. One must be ready to learn directly from the community, communicate in its language, and understand its cultural context. Academic knowledge alone is not enough. Because the sector is dynamic, continuous learning and adaptability are required. Thinking creatively, applying new insights, and adjusting approaches are also necessary as challenges evolve. Above all, individuals need commitment and resilience to sustain themselves in demanding rural environments.



***For NGOs focused on community engagement***

For organisations, sustainability depends on nurturing leadership beyond the current generation. Building a strong second line of leaders ensures that the vision and impact continue over time. Equally

important is team building, which brings together people who find value in their work and remain committed to the larger mission, not just the paycheck.

Every NGO must also stay accountable to the community. Programs should be rooted in local needs. This means prioritising quality over quantity, delivering meaningful results even if fewer people are initially reached. Strong evidence of impact is crucial, both for gaining the trust of communities and for engaging government, partners and donors.

Flexibility and adaptability are also key. Be prepared to re-work approaches based on community dynamics and contextual specificities. An integrated approach, which considers the interconnected aspects of people's lives and livelihoods, is necessary to ensure that development efforts are truly holistic and sustainable.



*Dr. D. Alagu Niranja is the Research and Knowledge Management Officer at the Centre for Research on Innovation and Science Policy in Hyderabad. He can be contacted at [alaguniranjana@crispindia.org](mailto:alaguniranjana@crispindia.org)*

**AESA Secretariat: Centre for Research on Innovation and Science Policy (CRISP)  
Road No 10, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India**

**[www.aesanetwork.org](http://www.aesanetwork.org)**

**Email: [aesanetwork@gmail.com](mailto:aesanetwork@gmail.com)**