

# Focus Group: Farmland Conservation



**F**armland conservation in a planning context, refers to efforts made to preserve farmland from being converted to other uses (homes, businesses, industrial uses, etc.). Communities often use a three-pronged approach to do so:

1. Creating incentives for farmers to keep farming
2. Removing the obstacles that make farming unprofitable or undesirable
3. Setting guidelines or controls to make sure that the type of farming is the type desired by a community

There are many reasons conserving farmland is important. The most succinct reason is that growing food locally helps to meet sustainable development goals. Here are a few more specific reasons:

Farmland is a finite natural resource: areas with prime agricultural soils are limited and more land can not be created.

Farmland is under growth and redevelopment pressure for other, more profitable uses: around the world, farmland is being converted rapidly to other uses. According to the American Farmland Trust, the United States is losing two acres of farmland every minute to new development. From 1992 to 1997, the USA converted more than 6 million acres of agricultural land to developed uses.

Agriculture is an important part of a community's economy: it provides jobs not just on farms, but also in food processing and related industries and it attracts tourists for its scenic character.

Local farms provide fresh food at a reasonable cost: locally produced food is more nutritious and less costly. Transportation and environmental costs are high for foods that are imported from distant regions and other countries.

There are many intangible benefits associated with farmland, including aesthetic, open space, and sense of place: It is important for keeping the quality of life high for local citizens. Farming is part of the rural lifestyle and is a central part of many communities' heritages.

Farmland offers environmental benefits: it provides wildlife habitat and the potential for groundwater recharge and it helps to mitigate flooding.

Farmland requires little in terms of public service: farmlands, like other resource lands, more than pay for the community services they require. Residential developments require costly school, road, utility, police and fire protection services; farms do not.

Goan Communities will have to respond to the RPG-2021 goals: As the state moves forward in creating larger scale or regional planning goals related to farming, it is important to ensure that the particular farm-related needs and goals of Agonda are addressed and not lost in the mix. This is also an amazing opportunity for the residents of Agonda to take control of their community's future and not leave it purely to the state government.

*“Growing food locally helps to meet sustainable development goals.”*

A paddy field in Agonda





The RPG-21 cited farmland conservation as a key element and included over twenty initiatives to keep farmland from being converted to other uses.



## Regional Concerns of Farmland Conservation (from RPG 2021)

Conversion of agricultural land into urban real estate

Agricultural Tenancy Act

Agricultural land lying fallow

Paddy lands converted to illegal fish farms

Price of rice not rising sufficiently

Traditional crops (Coconut, Mango, areca nut, cashew & pineapple) cultivation has decreased

Lack of labor

Lack of youth interest in farming

Limited processing facilities

Dependence on other states for rice, vegetables, fruits & flowers

Looming global food shortage and population growth

Increasing food prices

Inefficiencies related to the small size of farms

## Measures to Address Concerns (from RPG 2021)

Improving labor pool

Updating farming techniques

Supporting small and traditional farmers

Conserving agricultural land

Increasing productivity and profitability

Reducing agricultural imports

Promoting organic farming



## A Farmland Conservation Success Story...

On day 3 of the workshop, Yogita Mehra from The Energy & Resource Institute (TERI) and Mr. Mahambre, President of the Chorao Island Farmers Club gave a presentation on the benefits of farmland conservation which stressed that in spite of common misconceptions, farming can be a profitable endeavor: large corporations would not be interested in farming if there was no money to be made.

They outlined the process through a case study of the Chorao Island farmers. Ms. Mehra and Mr. Mahambre explained how they created a value added product which allowed the farmers to get the profits normally reaped by processors, packagers and middlemen.

In a little over a year, the Chorao Island Farmers Club developed into a motivated group that sells high-quality rice and is experimenting with growing exotic vegetable crops. It has cooperatively worked to get financing and support from outside agencies, made farming on Chorao Island a profitable endeavor, and has created a model 'apolitical' farmers group that others can learn from.



Yogita Mehra, The Energy & Resource Institute (TERI)



Mr. Mahambre, President of the Chorao Island Farmers Club

For more information about the Chorao Island Farmers Club, you can visit <http://choraofarmers.wordpress.com/>

## Public Outreach Findings

After the presentation, the participants who were not farmers came up with a list of reasons farming is important to Agonda. Each participant contributed one reason to the list.

Notice that many of these are consistent with reasons listed in RPG 2021. This is indicative that Agondans are well aware of the benefits of and need to have productive and sustainable farmland in their community.

- local identity
- food security
- source of income
- sustainable development
- source of food
- agriculture is cost effective
- maintains the environment
- import/export
- source of fodder
- sustain life
- conservation: keeps development from happening

All participants came up with challenges to farming in Agonda. These were in some cases consistent with the challenges in the RPG 2021, but a number were specific to Agonda, and thus demonstrate the need to have a strong local plan that addresses their specific needs.

- impending potential conversion of farmland to other uses
- Agricultural Tenancy Act and land lying fallow
- small size of farms
- cost of rice not rising
- yield and price of coconut has decreased
- insects (mites) affect coconut yield
- lack of labor and high labor wages
- youth have poor perception of farming: low wages and little job security
- dependency on other states for food and price of food increasing.
- lack of water for irrigation
- stray cattle
- lack of mechanization



## Workshop Summary

On the second day of the workshop, the participants broke into two groups. The first group came up with a list of goals for farmland conservation:

### Group 1

Farmland Conservation Goals for Agonda

- Conserve agriculture
- Create/maintain a consistent water supply
- Increase productivity by producing 2 crops per year
- Sell local Agonda grown products at local market (and other markets)
- Promote organic farming
- Seek government assistance to upgrade farming technology and support small scale local farmers

### Group 2

Focused on problem identification/solutions

- Improve labor pool

Problem: wages are too high for laborers

Solution: improve technology to reduce labor & increase yield

- Conserve agricultural land

Problem: low yield and costs of production is higher than profit

Solution: take advantage of government schemes to acquire technology

Solution 2: create a farmers club/self help group

- Promote organic farming

Problem: hard work required to farm organically & chemical fertilizers are cheap/easy/available

Solution: improve motivation & educate farmers about different organic farming techniques through experiments

- Increase productivity/profitability

Problem: fertilization/use of chemicals & unscientific planting

Solution: less reliance on chemical fertilizers and employ scientific planting techniques

Solution 2: increase profitability by processing, packaging & value addition (cashew plantation processing, packaging, trading & systematic marketing)

The products of these two groups were used on the last day of the workshop as the starting point for creating a vision for farmland conservation in Agonda and for setting the first few SMART goals to recommend to the community as a whole. These recommendations clearly lay forward the first steps to helping the farmers in Agonda work together and maximize the benefits to the community while seeking outside assistance and incorporating what was learned in the waste water and economic development focus groups.

**“In 2030 all agricultural land will be cultivated to increase productivity, Farmers will be independent, self-sufficient, and have adequate water. No prime farmland will be lost to other uses.”**

**-Agonda’s Public Vision for Farmland**



# Farmland Conservation Recommendations

## 1. The Agonda Farmers Club

Create a club for all Agonda farmers in 6 months by:

- enlisting members (minimum 5)
- choosing leaders
- registering the club with the government
- meeting 6 times
- developing rules & regulations
- selecting a meeting place

Additionally, Mr. Vivekanand Gaonkar agreed to call an initial meeting and spread the word by March 31st 2010. Resources the participants identified to assist with this goal were the Chorao Island Farmers Club, TERI, Palolem Farmers Club, Department of Agriculture, and banks (to be determined).

## 2. Organic Farming Expert to speak at Farmers Club Meeting

In the interest of promoting organic farming, the farmer's club of Agonda (committee) will seek an expert from TERI to speak at a farmer's club meeting and give a general overview on the benefits and methods of organic farming by January 1, 2011. The participants were specifically interested in organic fertilization methods introduced in the waste water presentation.

Resources the participants identified to assist with this goal were the Chorao Island Farmers Club, TERI, local universities & colleges, and the Department of Agriculture.

## 3. Conduct a Needs Assessment

In the interest of promoting organic farming, the farmer's club will conduct a needs assessment and identify necessary infrastructure, land, and farmers to conduct a pilot project resulting in enough organic fertilizer/compost to supply 500 sq meters of farmland to be utilized by July 1, 2011.



These goals are a strong start to introduce the concept of converting human waste to safe fertilizer and manure for the farming community in Agonda. The potential result may not only reduce the cost of fertilizers for farmers, but also address some of the looming waste water issues for the community as a whole.

More goals are needed to address other issues including a consistent water supply and increasing productivity.