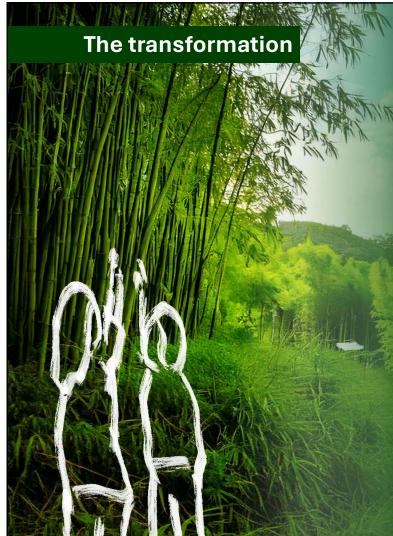


A few weeks ago, the Maddelas heard something that could change the trajectory of their lives. They attended a community assembly, along with 80 or so of their neighbors. The leaders wanted to sound them out on a new project, planting bamboo. They explained that there's a growing market for bamboo to make many different eco-friendly products. They said bamboo could be more widely used in their own community too, for decent housing and larger-scale community facilities. The Maddelas have a small bamboo grove on their land. They've used the fast-growing poles to make some of their furniture, and the young roots are tasty and nutritious. But the village leaders were talking about something on an entirely different scale: planting thousands of hectares of bamboo, with an annual harvest starting six or seven years down the line.

At first, they were afraid that the project would entail turning over their smallholder farmlands to bamboo cultivation. With a seven-year time lag from planting to harvest, this wouldn't work for them at all. Then they found out that the proposal wouldn't entail converting any of the community's farmland, but would use currently unused land that is unsuitable for farming.

The project was also going to bring jobs to the community. There would be planting and monitoring teams, people for the seedling nursery, people to bring the seedlings around the project site, and people for logistics. The idea was that recognized leaders of the different clans would help select the names of the workers so that each clan was represented. Mrs. Maddela thought that maybe her brother could be one of those workers.



The profits from the sale of the bamboo would take a few years to materialize, but when they did, that would be transformational. Having more income from another source within the community would help families break the cycle of reliance on moneylenders and would help reverse migration. The village leaders were already starting to think about what they'd do with the money. The first thing would be to hire their own doctors and nurses and build their own community health centers. This was a high priority for them. The second was education. With steady income for the village, every child could be educated, and there would be enough for a scholarship fund to help them go on to further studies The project would also improve the arterial roads, which are necessary for transporting the bamboo out of the village.

The village elders also knew that financial literacy was low among their community. The bamboo plantation plan included a savings and financial literacy program to teach families how to better manage their family finances, with a focus on the mothers to set a savings goal for all of the families. However, the other problem is that access to banking is non-existent. It would take some technological innovations to overcome that barrier, including access to virtual banking. Even then, they would need to demonstrate that the community had collateral to gain access to loans.

At the community meeting, the village leaders explained that the bamboo roots would be mapped and geo-coded using a microchip for each root. This would make the bamboo countable using drones or satellite technology. That data would turn the humble bamboo plant into a secure, bankable, tradable asset. It would enable the community to give their bamboo a precise valuation, insure it, and use it as collateral.

The Maddelas left the meeting with a lot of food for thought. It was a very lively meeting, with many different opinions. Some of the villagers didn't see it as progress. They saw it as a threat to their traditional way of life, and they had misgivings about handing over control of even a small part of their ancestral land to people outside the community to manage. They said it could be the thin end of the wedge, with all kinds of unintended consequences down the road. Some of the ideas, especially about the technology involved, were hard to grasp. As they left the meeting, Mrs Maddela heard her neighbor grumbling about why the project included financial literacy training. Weren't they capable of managing their own financial affairs?

But Mr. and Mrs. Maddela were among those who were positive about the idea: maybe their ambitions for their community to have decent health care, local jobs, and some money in the bank weren't just dreams after all. For their children, one day, these things could just be part of normal life.