So what I want to do for the main part of this presentation is to show a short film called *The Grinding Stone*. It features 2 women smallholding farmers in Tamil Nadu, South India, talking about the traditional method of grinding finger millet (*ragi*) using the grinding stone, and comparing this method with what has become the norm nowadays which is to have it done by the electric powered millet processing machine in the local factory.

The film is one of the outcomes of the *Changing Farming Lives in South India Past and Present* project which was a partnership with a local NGO, Green Foundation. This organisation works to promote sustainable farming amongst local farmers with a particular focus on the preservation of genetic diversity.

The film encapsulates in a nutshell what the project was about, in using oral history, as an arts and humanities approach, to enable elderly farmers to tell their stories and recall the changes they had experienced during their lives, particularly changes in crop production, food consumption, and weather patterns. At the same time, we were just as much interested in the stories, beliefs, rituals, and performances they associated with farming, food, and weather.

So in this film, Gundamma, a farmer now in her 80s, passionately voices what she regards as the strengths of the traditional method of grinding *ragi*. She says:

‘Use the stone to grind, see how tasty it will be
‘See how strong I am from eating stone-ground *ragi’

She is talking here about her historical experience of a food system that used to be based on the widespread cultivation and consumption of millets in this part of India (Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu).

The grinding stone grinds the *ragi* seeds into flour and represents a human rather than a mechanised approach to the post-harvest handling of this millet. In her view, the move to modern electrical processing has meant some significant losses: she mentions in particular the taste of the *ragi mudde* dish.

This used to be the traditional farmers’ meal in this region, eaten both before and after work in the fields; it is made from 2 ingredients, finger
millet flour and water, and usually eaten with pulses or curd or greens, or meat.

Gundamma also credits the traditional method with health giving qualities: she mentions the imparting of bodily strength, and other farmers we interviewed told us about how this method allows the full retention of the fibre, calcium, and iron which finger millet is known to possess.

In fact, ragi’s higher nutritional value in comparison with rice, which has largely taken over as the staple food since the Green Revolution, is one of the arguments used in the current campaign to revive the cultivation of local finger millets. A significant social movement in the southern states of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, this campaign views the restoration of finger millets as a crucial climate adaptation strategy in a rain-fed but drought prone agricultural region.

With an estimated 2 degrees C rise in mean temperature predicted over the next 25 years resulting in a net reduction in agricultural production in Karnataka of around 2.5%, ragi varieties offer the capacities of requiring just one-fifth of the amount of water needed for growing rice, and of withstanding up to 30% reduction in rainfall.

But back to Gundamma’s story: as significant as the actual narrative about finger millet and the grinding stone are the accompanying songs: part of an oral tradition that goes back centuries, they first of all add an emotional dimension to her narrative.

The first song we heard is about an important south Indian goddess, Gangamma (Mother Ganga) worshipped by villagers particularly in south Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. In this guise, the goddess is experienced when there are heavy rains which, while protecting against drought, also become excessive.

As a result, lakes and tanks breach their bunds and overflow, threatening to rapidly submerge surrounding villages. In the song, this threat is imminent and the goddess, it is believed, requires appeasement, so the town-crier is hastily called to see what he can do...

In fact, many songs were sung quite spontaneously by women during the interviews, and also sometimes by children in the household, suggesting the importance of singing in local farming culture. I think we should see this performance of songs as a significant act of cultural resilience.
They keep traditions alive, maintain a sense of togetherness and community, and enhance quality of life by enabling performers to access inner emotional resources to face farming challenges.

Now the Gangamma song may seem a ‘random’ song not apparently related to the main narrative as it invokes spiritual beliefs about a particular deity. But this merely underlines how intimately farming lives are connected to wider systems of folk religious faith that nourish and sustain them.

Singing, celebrating seasonal festivals, offering prayers, performing a range of rituals and ceremonies both on the farm and in the village, provide farmers with a meaningful sense of agency, summoning feelings of control over forces of nature, with the perceived capacity, for instance, of securing rains, appeasing wild animals, or warding off diseases.

This small film illustrates the crucial cultural and historical dimensions of food and agriculture, much neglected in mainstream international development discourses. It conveys the idea of food as a meaningful and historically evolving human experience, with culture creating abilities through the expression of feelings of pleasure from taste, of love for family, of community togetherness and women’s solidarity, and through connections with spiritual forces beyond the immediacy of the material and the secular.

In conclusion, I would suggest that cultural forms such as traditional knowledge, folk religious beliefs and customs, stories, songs, and other performative rituals, comprise a crucial dimension of any ‘capabilities’ or capacity-building approach; and relatedly that only a partial and superficial understanding of such cultural forms can be attained without historical investigation and knowledge.