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SEEDING HOPE

Women's Collectives
Create Pathways for Change

Volume 4

of the Extraordinary Work of 'Ordinary' People:
Beyond Pandemics and Lockdowns



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Introduction

About MAKAAAM

MAKAAAM is a national alliance set up in 2014 and has members that include women farmers apart from organisations and networks. Its main aim is to ensure recognition and voice to women as farmers as defined by the National Policy on Farmers 2007 that includes all the people engaged in agriculture and allied activities-labourers, forest workers, livestock workers etc. MAKAAAM strives towards bringing in a layered analysis of patriarchy and other forms of socio-economic differences such as class, caste, religion into the area of women's work around natural resources.

Background

The pandemic and the lockdown that followed brought about a lot of distress among various sections of women farmers and foregrounded the question of women's unpaid work as never before. The distress was further aggravated due to the disadvantages that women face due to caste, patriarchy, class and other forms of social discrimination. Increased instances of violence have been reported across social groups. However, hunger, lack of incomes and the increased work burden due to lack of food and work opportunities in many ways summarise the plight of women farmers across diverse groups in India.

Women farmers are engaged in multiple livelihood activities such as cultivation, wage labour, fisheries, livestock, forest work etc. During the pandemic women farmers from each of these sectors found themselves in severe distress. They did not have the money to invest in agricultural inputs, many had not been able to sell their farm produce which was lying in their homes due to lack of storage facilities. Much of the produce was also destroyed as markets remained inaccessible. Minimum support prices have generally been inaccessible to single women farmers who usually market their produce through private traders, but the lockdown period further brought down the prices making it difficult for them to even meet the cost of cultivation. Women forest workers could not sell their non-timber forest produce (NTFP) for the same reasons. Marketing activities of women's collectives, farmer producer organisations (FPOs) had come to a standstill and they were looking to receive credit and market support for a seamless operation of their activities.

The demand for work was very high and yet public employment programme, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee (MNREGS) had not opened two months into the lockdown, creating further distress, especially for single women who are the sole earners of the family. Many of them saw themselves competing for wage work with the returning migrants.

Studies done in Maharashtra, Gujarat and several other states by MAKAAAM partners showed that a large majority of the women farmers had not in fact benefitted from

the relief programme announced by the Prime Minister- Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY). Lack of documents, bank accounts, absence of land ownership meant that women remained excluded despite the relief measures. However not all outcomes have been adverse as the stories that we present here tell us.

Despite the adversity we have numerous cases where women farmers and their collectives, innovated and negotiated their way to address the problems of hunger and unemployment.

What the stories tell us

This is a collection of stories of women's collectives in initiating and taking the lead in ensuring that support is extended by way of food and opportunities of work.

The thirteen examples are among the many where women's collectives, village assemblies, or even individual women farmers came forward to extend relief to people. Sometimes they came in to assist the government in relief work but at other times also had to wage battles with the local, state and national governments to ensure that relief be provided. These are examples from the states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Delhi, and Uttar Pradesh

These women-led initiatives have shown pathways for grassroots solidarity-based economic initiatives. These are stories of how ordinary people have played extraordinary roles in extending relief, waging battles with the state and mobilizing local communities to act in the face of this adversity.

Self- provisioning and community production and solidarities have been very crucial in these trying times.

Many of the cases also show the way to a non monetised economy and social solidarity. For example, commodities were exchanged for other commodities over money. Panchayats came forward and ensured that work opportunities were created and that relief through food was extended. These examples provide us the space and opportunity to move towards social solidarity economies which allow for reciprocity that results in circulation of goods and services and do not rely on monetary exchanges.

Resilience is a useful concept to discuss the different stories that are documented here. Our use the concept however goes beyond the idea of adapting to circumstances in the absence of choice. The feminist understanding of resilience recognizes the issues of power and social justice and sees resilience as also resourcefulness i.e the ability to innovate for positive outcomes.

We see its usefulness in understanding the human experience of adversity and in informing policy and practice.

A feminist reading of resilience also recognizes the mediating process that are critical for mobilizing agency in the face of adversity such as the present pandemic, but also the pre-existing ones around which society is organized-caste, patriarchy, class etc.

The case studies point out that this resilience or the ability to innovate and adapt in creative ways has been part of a broader process of women's empowerment. Each of the initiatives tell us a story of the mutually enriching processes between the communities and the organisations that worked with them.

Way forward

As an alliance MAKAAAM actively engaged both on the ground through relief work, but also at different fora- National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) the Niti Ayog, State governments etc. and put forth its recommendations for strengthening public systems related to food and employment. It put forth immediate demands of ensuring that the food distribution system or the PDS should be universal and not be limited to those who have the documents. It should also be expanded to include nutritious food and not just cereals. One of the major demands of MAKAAAM has been to expand the public works programme to provide assured employment that includes works that enhance the productive assets of women farmers.

In the long run this could be seen as an opportunity to rebuilding, supporting and strengthening ecologically sound rural livelihoods of women. However, it means that robust investments need to be made in agriculture, water and other commons that women depend on and policies that help to protect and enhance their access to resources and not to dispossess them of it. It calls for a vision that brings focus on to women's human rights and transforms the current model of development through reimagining and redistribution of power and resources.

We believe that these examples hold important lessons for reviving livelihoods, in a post COVID India in seeking new pathways to strengthen social and economic solidarities.

1. Makaam Delhi Rises to the Crises

Authors : Dr Soma KP, Sulekha (Action India) & Mubashira Zaidi

MAKAAM Delhi came into being in March 2020 around the time that the lockdown was imposed in Delhi. We came together in the backdrop of the riots that took place in East Delhi in late February 2020. Although several of us were located in Delhi and were engaged with MAKAAAMs agenda in varied capacities, we came together as a team with the realization that we would need to support communities in times of crisis across Delhi and its vicinity through our collective efforts. We were also able to extend help and support to our sisters in distress across the Northern states to strengthen their efforts for mitigation of hunger across their regions and to help build resilience. .

The populations in the *bastis*/settlements in Delhi were migrants to the city or had been living in slum settlements after having been displaced and rehabilitated from their slum settlements within the city to the rehabilitation locations on the fringes. The lockdown very quickly drove them to distress as their daily wages were lost, creating circumstances of hunger and distress within a week or two. Many were autorickshaw drivers, domestic workers, vegetable sorters and vendors, or ran petty shops and home based workers. The sudden lockdown led to an immediate crisis as consumption was based on the everyday income. Hunger became the first impact along with the impending threat of homelessness for those who lived on rent.

Two organizations associated with MAKAAAM - Action India's Mahila Panchayats and Sabla Sangh units swung into action forecasting the likelihood of a lockdown situation in early March 2020 itself. They provided a kit of food and essentials to support the most vulnerable female headed households to survive the pandemic crisis for a couple of months. They and others reached out to the urban poor as well as the migrant rural poor living in the city across 12 locations, in *bastis*/slums and rural segments of farmers, nomadic herders, and vendors on the fringes of the city. Establishing systems and communication lines to deliver ration and food relief with state agencies as well as relief groups to these unserved populations became the first priority. Lists were made of the most distressed persons, calls were given to the relief groups that members were enrolled in and consequently, food and ration was transported across the city. Wherever distress calls were received from, support was provided with help from donors in Delhi relief groups, to populations who were considered outliers with no documentation in the city. Sanitary pads produced by women's cooperatives in the factories located in rural areas were provided to young girls and women across the *bastis*, mostly free of charge, and students from the schools and Universities joined this drive. Soon even the state government began to rely on the coordinated relief efforts and their committees reached out to relief collectives to provide ration and medical facilities.

Through Delhi MAKAAAM's efforts 5,600 households in Delhi were reached with ration relief over the 4 month period, as well as support to 100 children with supplementary foods, about a fourth of which was supported by Goonj and a significant amount was mobilized as contributions from Delhi relief groups . More coordination was required to reach the rural population in the city who were invisible to the administration.

Support was extended to other states as well, with the help of Delhi Relief collective and other individual donors for seeds/food and grain banks to more than 400 single women with small grants for micro business and household relief in Delhi. The team coordinated and facilitated the travel of many migrants to Bihar, Assam, Madhya Pradesh and provided shelter to about 4000 people in Delhi.

Members also took initiatives to discuss and promote kitchen gardens, biodiversity restoration and natural composting as an enterprise in parks and common lands in some pockets of the city.

Following the easing of the lockdown, the relief work generated a consolidated feeling of solidarity and collectivisation which continues to enable the group to function in a manner to provide support with a priority to tribal and *dalit* populations for purchase of seeds and support for single women to set up small enterprises, to find work and medical support during crisis as the spread of COVID continues.

Women are now organizing to set up their rural- urban supply chains for commodities such as spices, wheat and low cost sanitary towels. The hope is that some of these efforts and initiatives will become sustainable and provide relief at this time of recovery and distress.

The resilience of communities to survive the lockdown and of single women in the multiple locations has much to do with the forethought ,quick response and enormous support received that relief could be provided from multiple quarters hence gives hope for a resilient future.

2. A People to People Social Solidarity Enterprise Model

Authors : Nafisa Barot & Pallavi Sobti Rajpal

Photo courtesy Utthan



Distribution in Ratol village, Mahuva block, Bhavnagar District, Gujarat

Utthan's work of initiating gender sensitive, grassroots processes of empowerment amongst the most vulnerable for nearly 40 years has been in the drought-prone coastal districts and the poverty-stricken tribal districts of Gujarat. Today, it directly touches the lives of 1.4+ million people of 412 villages in six districts of Gujarat.

Building Women's Federations' with the capacity to independently sustain empowerment and inclusive development processes emerged as a key strategy. Five such Federations have grown into social institutions working to secure rights of rural women and the marginalized. A sizeable number of the 8000+ members have worked on experiments in agriculture, animal husbandry, fisheries while strengthening their rights over private/ public resources and their identity as farmers in the last 15 years.

Post COVID lockdown, Utthan's community contact brought out that the first repercussions of the sudden lockdown were being felt on the plates of those who were already on the margins. With supply chain disruption of food and vegetables, fear of food availability was high amongst cash strapped families. Field data highlighted that while Government intent was good, a huge gap remained in meeting the total need, now magnified due to returning migrants. Valiben Palash of Raiyavan village, Dhanpur block was worried about selling her wheat and maize. Single women were particularly facing issues of transportation and worried about getting a fair price. Only 24% farmers had sold their Rabi crop and nearly 40% had not received PMKSY entitlements in July 2020.

Photo courtesy Utthan



Shakuben, Relief Partner (L) & Valiben, Farmer (R) of Raiyavan village, Dhanpur block, Dahod District, Gujarat

Conversations with women leaders led to a decision to leverage the crisis by implementing a People to People Social Solidarity Enterprise model in the Relief initiatives. The idea of solidarity being to collectively deliberate with community leadership, support the most vulnerable through an empowering process and by building allies amongst different groups. The model comprised directing solidarity through relief support to bring rations and basic essentials to 3618 families across 139 villages of Bhavnagar, Dahod, Panchmahals and Mahisagar districts. All the food grain requirement would be purchased from women farmers/ agripreneurs who would have otherwise resorted to sell their produce at any available rate, due to their desperation to meet the cash crisis. Alongside, a data analysis of the gaps in accessing food basket under PDS & Anna Brahma Yojna in 120 villages was presented to relevant block and district officials. Dialogue with Sarpanchs were also initiated.

Vulnerable families were identified with the support of village leaders, Federations' membership and Panchayats. Farmers who were finding it difficult to sell their grains in the village and its vicinity were approached through women leaders and Village Development Committees. Utthan's rapport, existing interventions with women farmers and the appropriate price being offered helped to smoothen the roll out. The payment towards this purchase was deposited into women's accounts, mostly non land owners but had put their sweat in tilling 'their' land.

This process of purchasing grains from individual women vis-a-vis a grocery store was more time consuming but helped connect people in need of grains with people who wanted to sell it. Valiben was relieved as she could sell her produce at Rs. 19 per kg, had she sold it in the market during normal times, she could have got Rs. 20-22 per kg. but would have spent Rs.5/kg on transportation. *"This money was saved as I could sell it locally."*

The collectivized grains were made into individual kits by community leaders and Utthan's team and distributed with support of youth and Panchayats. Solidarity led to providing rations of worth Rs. 54,27,000. 78 women farmers sold 44136 kg grain to the initiative, making an income of Rs. 9,12,980. This amount was thus infused back into the local economy, into women's accounts. Comparatively, women got a 16% benefit by selling at their doorstep with no worry of drudgery and fair price. Most of these women farmers were *"feeling satisfied and happy that our grains will help*

many in my own village. Hence, this is a more valuable earning". On another gratifying note, few women farmers refused to sell their crop to this initiative, since the quantity they had was only adequate to cover their own consumption.

Women's Federation leaders had always questioned, "Why should we have to sell outside and then that comes back to us through PDS, from outside? Why can't Government think of strengthening the local economy?" This has been echoed by many feminists and a few economists. By applying this Model on a larger scale, if Government buys and redistributes all grains stock/products locally it would help reducing food insecurity of timely availability of food grains and level of distress sale, energy saving in transportation. Local taste could be ensured in the plates of communities.

Photo courtesy Utthan



Gitaben at Samarthan Mahila Sangathan's office packing WFs produce into kits

3. The Solidarity economy of the women forest produce collectors of Dahod, Gujarat

Authors : Sejal Dand & Neeta Hardikar

Photo courtesy ANANDI



Jamran village Mahuva flower collection centre by RASKUM Mandli

Ratanmahal Adivasi Mahila Sajeev Khet Utpakakane Vechan Mandli (RASKUM) is a tribal women farmers and forest producers' collective. Established in 2008, it has 572 members located in Devgadhi Baria block of Dahod District in Gujarat, promoted by ANANDI (info@anandi-india.org) and Devgadhi Mahila Sangathan. Dahod is the eastern most district in the semi-arid region of Gujarat in western India with nearly 75 % population of scheduled tribes. It is also one of the poorest 200 districts of India where migration is a source of livelihoods.

ANANDI – Area Networking and Development Initiatives, a feminist organisation emphasizes on consciousness raising, consensus building and collective problem solving as strategies for social transformation in leadership of rural women. RASKUM also called Ratanmahal Mandli, is one of seven such collectives ANANDI works with and is engaged in processing of organic and forest produce, vegetable cultivation and organic food production.

Need for intervention

The months of March to May 2020 of the lockdown were also the peak forest produce collectors' livelihood season since the major forest produce of *Timru* leaves and *Mahuva* flowers are collected and sold in this period. The number of collection centres set up by the Gujarat State Forest Development Corporation and by private traders had drastically reduced in the region due to restrictions on mobility. This led to an unprecedented crisis for the forest dwelling communities whose major source of incomes during the season came from these forest products.

Photo courtesy ANANDI



Nandaben of Devlikuva village with her traditional crop on the forest rights land she has successfully claimed on her name

The government of India's TRIFED department had raised the price of *Mahuva* flowers from Rs. 17/- to Rs. 30/- per kg to step in to ensure that the tribals got a fair price, but in absence of any regulation or mechanisms for collection, the prices obtained locally remained between Rs. 17 to Rs. 20 per kg for most of the season.

It was on 9th of May, 2020 that the local tribal women's FPO normally engaged with production and sale of vermi compost, organic seed propagation and a local catering business discussed the problem of the forest produce collectors over a telephonic meeting with its executive body and promoting organisation ANANDI. ANANDI ensured administrative support which further enabled the Mandali take the decision to support the community and forest produce collectors. However, it meant that the members would largely have to engage in the trade of *Mahuva* flowers by finding better market price for the produce within 2 days.

Ratanmahal Mandali executive members set up 3 primary collection centres for *Mahuva* flowers in the villages where many of their members were based while simultaneously looking for local markets for the produce. After some effort, they found a trader willing to pay them Rs. 40/- per kg for the dried *Mahuva* flowers. The executive members ran the entire operation voluntarily and the Mandali decided that they would run this operation at no profit basis to get the best returns for the forest producer collectors in these distressful times. During the lockdown the forest produce collectors were able to negotiate their access to forest with the guards as that was the only source of livelihoods.

All this while the "phad munshi" - licensed aggregator at the village level were not approached either by the Gujarat State Forest Development Corporation or were equipped with cash to procure locally. Within a first few days, the Mandali realised that some of the forest produce collectors required cash while many preferred to barter their produce for maize or sugar, since supply were short and rates were higher in their own villages. Hence, the Mandali decided to procure maize and sugar in large quantities from the nearest block headquarters to pay in kind. The sugar was obtained for Rs. 40/- per kg while maize was obtained for Rs. 22/- per kg from the market and people were paid in cash or kind as per their preference.

The executive committee of the RASKUM sensed the distress but were also little reluctant to invest their incomes to procure the *Mahuva* flowers, as they feared intrusion of local traders.

Through meetings and dialogues, they resolved to set up collection centres, scales, appointed teams of women and started withdrawing cash from bank. Withdrawing money from the bank was the toughest task as they were the most crowded places but they managed the task.

Outcomes and learnings

The FPO secretary, a young tribal woman aged 26 years, learnt a lot in the process having got the required mobility passes from the block officials, negotiating with the bank which was located 30 kms away to ensure that they got the cash from their account everyday, hiring vehicles to transport the sugar, maize to the collection centres, negotiating with the traders to get the best price without taking on the additional risk of holding a produce for which they had no prior experience in dealing with.

Over the next four weeks, the Mandali was able to procure 16.66 tonnes of *Mahuva* flowers at Rs. 6,86,000/- to support 225 forest produce collectors from 14 villages of Dahod earning an average income of Rs. 3048/- per collector/ women farmer over a period of one month. The Mandali realised that in times of COVID, most *Mahuva* collectors did not have cash flow. Even if the food grains were procured from the PDS shop after struggle, what people needed was *daal*, vegetables, oils and masalas, which was not provided under the PMGKAY. The Mandali thus decided to absorb the additional costs in this initiative.

Their confidence has grown and in the next year, the Mandali plans to intervene in this forest produce during the beginning of the season at a much larger scale to ensure that the forest produce collectors get a fair price for their labour instead of the pittance of the minimum support price being offered to the collectors from the Forest Corporation.

4. The Strength of Localized Production and Marketing: Sreelakshmi Women's Collective shows the way in Kerala

Authors : Usha S. & Arun R.S

Photo courtesy Thanal



Composting being done for the community kitchen gardens

Thanal is a voluntary research and action group founded by a group of nature enthusiasts in 1986. Since then, it has been involved in research on biodiversity and environmental education, training and advocacy at various levels. In the last two decades the focus has been on organic farming / agroecology and food sovereignty, zero waste, chemical safety and climate change. Thanal works at grass root level with farmers, community organisations, NGOs, panchayaths, students etc. on educating, training and empowering them on these topics as well as engagement with the State Government on policy issues. Thanal is one of the organizations which initiated marketing of organic products produced by organic farmers way back in 2003 by bringing farmers and consumers to a common platform. Thanal works nationally on sustainable agriculture with ASHA Kisan Swaraj network Zero Waste in the Himalayan states with other groups and internationally, on issues of chemical safety policies and is an observer in the UN conventions on the same for the last two decades.

Vellar is a small coastal village close to Kovalam, the famous tourism destination of Kerala. This is a small, mountainous and beautiful place with a high density of population and small land holdings. Farming is not a major livelihood activity in this region for several decades. But the active decentralization of governance, formation of women SHGs, awareness about food safety issues, training on organic farming by different agencies like Gandhi Smaraka Nidhi, Thanal and Venganoor Grama Panchayath has led to a significant change in the mindset of people here. Many small holders in this area gradually began cultivating vegetables, bananas, papaya and yams in their land. Around 70 farmers who got training from Thanal became very active in

Photo courtesy Thanal



A woman farmer receiving the seeds from the collective

the last two years and they started producing organic vegetables for their own consumption and later for the market too. Most of them are women farmers. Initially, they were farming individually using family labour but later some of them started forming small groups.

The Sreelakshmi collective, formed in 2018 with 15 women farmers as members (broadly in the age group of 35-70 years) have been quite actively engaged in production and sale of organic vegetables. The group cultivates in an area of 3.5 acres. They are now almost self-sufficient in terms of seeds and organic inputs. During the lockdown they faced several issues, with marketing becoming a major challenge. The families lost income since they could not move out for work. Most of the people in this area are daily wage workers or working in hotels, shops and such other establishments in and around Kovalam tourism destination. But most of these establishments closed down due to the pandemic. The Government provided some immediate relief by giving food and other basic essentials. But families were financially broken. During the pandemic, the Government acted quickly to support lakhs of migrant workers in the state by giving food and shelter. Panchayats played a key role in initiating community kitchens through support from many local groups, business establishments, families and Kudumbasree groups. This process helped farmers who were finding it difficult to sell their produce and to share their produce. These community

kitchens were also helpful for the old people living alone, sick people and those who were dependent on hotels for their food etc.

With no transportation available during the lockdown, women farmers could not go to the market to sell their vegetables, which are perishable. Later, few active members of the Sreelakshmi group found out that their neighbors were in need of these vegetables and identified them through telephonic calls and through their ward members. Thus, they started supplying vegetables to 25 households initially. Through this process, this women's group could feed 90 people including children from 25 families with diverse kind of vegetables from their own farm land, which was a very fulfilling moment in their lives. The production went up, with good sunlight and intermittent rains being very favorable. More over, people had time to take care of their farms. During lockdown, the staff of Organic Bazar (an organic social enterprise started by Thanal in Trivandrum – www.organic-bazaar.in) made a call to all organic

farmers to find out their problems. The OB came forward to collect vegetables from their farm and it became a great help to the women's collective. This motivated many local small producers and many of them got seeds from Sreelakshmi women's collective and started vegetable cultivation. These women became the resource team, helping the new members to do organic vegetable cultivation.

The pandemic also brought in more discussion on food production in the state and government decided to increase production of vegetables, tubers and fruits in the state. Agriculture department and Kudumbasree Mission also started supplying seeds. Members of Sreelakshmi collective also got some support from Kudumbasree Mission. The 2 key lessons from this experience were the need to produce food locally through local organizing and secondly, the need for developing local systems for planning and marketing of produce.

Photo courtesy Thanal



Chandrika Amma in her kitchen garden

5. The initiative of the Korchi Mahagrame Sabha during the pandemic

Author : Kumaribai Jamkatan, Korchi District, Gadchiroli

Photo by Ms Omita Bawankar



Poster display and guidance to women leaders during the kharif season on agricultural topics such as kitchen gardens, organic farming, secondary produce, government prices and local seeds and planting.

About Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi

Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi (AAA) is a non-governmental organization, started in 1984. It has its roots in Sampoornkranti Andolan (Total revolution movement) launched by Jayprakash Narayan in the 1970's. Founder members of AAA were inspired with ideology of Jayprakash Narayan. The organization is known for its role to build the capacities of the community for self-reliance and empowerment. The Organization assists rural communities without being tightly bound by any intentionally learned 'isms' for social change. It facilitates people to find their own solutions rather than offering any readymade solutions, a kind of self-help movement was initiated by the founder members. AAA has built up CBOs like cluster federations of SHGs, Krantijyoti Mahila Sanghata, Jankalyan Apangjan Sanghatna and Mahagrame Sabha (block level organization in Korchi block of Gadchiroli district). Mahagrame Sabha is a non-registered autonomous organization which is a loose platform of the constitutional village assemblies or the gram sabhas.

In Korchi block it has a membership of 80 gram sabhas. It has been built with the idea of democratization of the gram sabhas in every sphere of governance. The Korchi Mahagrame Sabha has taken up issues like implementation of the Forest Rights Act; struggle against land acquisition done for government projects (i.e. interstate electricity supply line, iron ore eviction); auctions for *Tendu* leaves etc. They also helped flood affected needy people in Ettapalli block of Gadchiroli recently. The main role of AAA has been to provide support in building these organisations across the district. During the pandemic these gram sabhas came forward and supported the needy people with food and other essential supplies.

The initiative of the Korchi Mahagramsabha during the pandemic

Photo by Ms Omita Bawankar



Kumaribai speaking to the women's collective

Efforts of the Gramsabha

COVID-19 has wreaked havoc around the world, making it difficult for people to make a living. In the meantime, people have no job guarantees, no opportunity to collect forest produce and no opportunity to sell it openly. In such a situation, the leaders of some Gram Sabhas in Korchi taluka of Gadchiroli district came together and thought that the lockdown of COVID-19 has made life difficult for the masses. They decided to distribute essentials from the Gram Sabha fund. Then they made a list of items by going door to door asking people what their needs were. They ensured that an official resolution was made in the Gram Sabha (village assembly) and organized a small program in the village. In particular, single women and persons with disabilities etc. most vulnerable group were given priority. Ration kits were distributed by four Gram Sabhas in Gahanegata, Salhe, Jhankar Gondi and Kukdel in Korchi taluka following all the precautions such as wearing masks, using sanitizers and keeping the required physical distance. The ration kit included essential items like rice, pulses, red chilies, salt, oil, potatoes, onions, soap, sugar, tea, etc. Single women were provided with essential commodities, seeds for agriculture, organic manure and seeds for Kitchen Garden by MAKAAAM, different Sanghatans and Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi. Preference was given to PwDs and single women.

In the meanwhile, Kukdale Gram Sabha planned to provide employment to the people and plant trees in the open lands from the compensation amount

received due to losses incurred by the setting up of the tower line. 5500 pits were dug by 110 persons of 110 families, each digging 50 pits. Wages were paid to these families at Rs 250/day and the work was completed.

Obstacles to decentralized decision-making

While this exemplary work was being done by the Mahagramsabhas, the district collector unilaterally sealed the accounts of the Gram Sabhas citing irregularities in the proactive relief work done by the gramsabhas. People had to suffer as a result of these actions by the district Collector.

At that time, the guiding organization 'Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi' and Mahagram Sabha Taluka Korchi updated the records of these Gram Sabhas and helped the

government to prepare the required report. However, the District Collector refused to recognize these accounts and to the fact that the gram sevak or the village secretary should be a signatory to the account of the Forest Rights Committee or the Forest Rights Monitoring Committee formed under the Forest Rights Act or the PESA Act. The process has been stopped by threatening that the amount in the Gram Sabha account will be transferred to the Kosh Samiti's account. It was only when 19 Gram Sabhas of Korchi and Kurkheda talukas came together and filed a case in the court at their own expense, that they temporarily opened the account for the distribution of wages and royalties from *tendupatta* and other non-timber forest produce. However, the case is still pending in the high court as they are still not allowed to use the compensation money.

The Mahagramsabha did face the wrath of the district administration, but it has only come out stronger out of this entire process.

6. Moving towards change and adoption of organic farming through the crisis

CASE STUDY-HDRC

Authors : Arif Mirza, Rajesh Lakum & Sunita Mendonza

Photo by Kamlaben S.Samir



Field Day-Black Gram "Dolaria Chana" Jayaben B. Damor Village: Navaghara, Block: Meghraj, Dist. Aravalli

Human Development Research Centre (HDRC), an organization in Gujarat, has over five decades of experience of working for Dalit Rights Movement, Women Empowerment, Child Rights, Land Rights, Tribal & Forest Rights, Sustainable Housing, Health, Education and Livelihood Programs for the underprivileged in Gujarat. It aims to end social exclusion of these impoverished micro-communes through a Rights-based approach i.e. empowering marginalized communities to know and claim what is enshrined in the constitution and law rightfully by bolstering the capability and increased accountability of individuals and institutions who are responsible for respecting, protecting and ensuring fulfilment of these rights of the pauperized. HDRC endeavors to strengthen CBOs through direct intervention programs so that eventually as the final output these initiatives are owned, controlled and managed only by such people or groups. At present HDRC is tirelessly working with the underprivileged communities in 27 Talukas of 11 districts both in rural and urban Gujarat.

On 24th March 2020, a nationwide lockdown was declared by Government of India to avoid spread of the Coronavirus in wake of the global pandemic of COVID-19. The sudden and hastily planned absolute shutdown of the whole country for three straight weeks left millions of underprivileged in the want for food and other basic supplies to survive and maintain their livelihood. This resulted in great hardships to many, especially the groups from vulnerable and marginalized communities. Millions of migrant workers, daily wage earners, small vendors, poor widows, old aged people

were adversely affected with this sudden lockdown. The subsequent lockdowns and the virus outbreak itself increased concerns about long-term effects of the pandemic on these deprived sections, who are often worst-hit by any and all natural or man-made disasters.

Apart from the above sections, farmers were one big community which were severely facing the downside of the lockdowns. The farmers could not reach their own lands to till it which in turn has affected their crop yields, in some cases the entire crop was ruined as farmers were not able to look after their crops altogether. In particular, condition of women farmers had become very abysmal. Realizing the gravity of the situation, quick assistance was extended by HDRC. At the same time, the stock of the current situation of women farmers' groups was taken under the purview of the organization. Out of the information gathered from reliable sources, it is learnt that this season has been totally wasted and even the means of earning the daily bread were not left with these women farmers.

Taking cognizance of the above-mentioned situation, women farmers residing in 10 different villages of Meghraj Taluka of Aravali district were identified. As part of immediate relief, ration kits were distributed to these women by the HDRC. A total of 280 kits were distributed, a single kit of ration provided sufficient quantities to cater for more than 15 days of food requirements of a small family. Because of the lockdown, these women could neither get out of the house nor had the money to run their livelihood. The ration kits provided by the HDRC in such times of distress proved to be extremely helpful for these women to run their daily circuit.

In this entire intervention, women farmers had requested for seeds and organic pesticides helpful to them for crop cultivation to be provided. In order to materialize their requests, it was decided by HDRC and WGWLO to help them with this to improve their condition. About 300 female farmers were benefactors of this support and were provided with quality seeds and organic manures to make these women

Photo by Kamlaben S.Samir



(L) Wheat "Tukdi Gehu" Bhavnaben S. Varsat Village: Pahadia, Block: Meghraj, Dist. Aravalli, Gujarat; (CL) Wheat "Tukdi Gehu" Sumitraben S. Khant Village: Valuna, Block: Meghraj, Dist. Aravalli, Gujarat; (CR) Desi Mustard Seeds Manjulaben R. Khant Village: Valuna, Block: Meghraj, Dist. Aravalli, Gujarat; (R) Black Gram "Dolaria Chana" Bhanuben M. Khant Village: Valuna, Block: Meghraj, Dist. Aravalli

self-reliant even after the ill effects on their produce due to the lockdown. They were mainly provided with a variety of seeds of maize, gram, urad and moong amongst major cereals and pulses for cultivation, while seeds of Okra, bottle gourd, cucumber, etc. were distributed for their kitchen gardens. Besides, as a part of ongoing support, tribal women from 10 different villages were also extended expert help and basic training in field to make organic manure and organic pesticides which reduced their cost.

At the outset of this program, most women were apprehensive about the kits being distributed by the HDRC. Despite in need, many a women refused to take the kits because fearing the kit might be COVID-19 infected. But these women and other such groups were made to understand the vision of the HDRC and they were thoroughly briefed by respective village leaders about the sanitization process carried out before packaging and further distribution.

Although the kit had items sufficient to cater for 15 days but the women carried on through the roughest period of their lives with these kits. In some cases, they made use of these kits for about a month because that was the only significant source of survival supplies they had in such difficult times. Seeds saved their next season!

Photo by Kamlaben S.Samir



(L) SIR Method Wheat "Tukdi Gehu"; (C) Different types of brinjal and chillies - Kitchen Garden Sejalben M. Khant;
(R) Red Corn Seed distributed from Meghraj Seed Bank Village: Pahadia

7. Women Farmers' Food and Agriculture Resilience-building as response to COVID-19

Author : WGWLO

Photo courtesy WGWLO



Mahila Kisan Sakhi, Kajal Sharing Information with Women Farmers on Food Security under Campaign Activity - Samarthan Mahila Vikas Sanghathan, Ghogha, Bhavnagar

The Working Group for Women Land Ownership (WGWLO), an unregistered but formal network of NGOs and CBOs has worked since 2002 to advance women accessing and owning land rights in Gujarat. In the last 18 years, the network has worked to advance women's land rights; their identity as women farmers; and their access to productive resources and entitlements. WGWLO has advanced various strategies and models such as community based paralegal workers; block-level resource centres called Swa-Bhoomi Kendras, the learning of which are shared with other like-minded civil society networks and governments. The Swa-Bhoomi Kendras and community cadre of Paralegals and Mahila Kisan Sakhis are actively working in over 225 villages in 15 blocks and 11 districts across Central, north-east and Southern Gujarat with women farmers from tribal, feudal, pastoralist, and other marginalized agrarian communities.

In the midst and the post COVID-19 situation, rural economies and rural livelihoods have taken a severe blow and are facing a slow recovery and restoration of livelihoods. For women farmers with limited access to productive resources of land, agricultural inputs, technology, credit, information and entitlement linkages the coming agricultural seasons presented an added stress for meeting their family's subsistence needs.

When WGWLO asked its members about the distress women farmers had experienced, they found that close to 90% expressed a loss in the sale of their last Rabi produce. Vegetable growing farmers in Tapi district in South Gujarat shared that

Photo courtesy GWLO



Mahila Kisan Sakhi Kanak Distributing Seed Kits to Women Farmers for Kharif Season Farming - SWATI, Patadi, Surendranagar

people were destroying vegetable crops, a rumour was making the rounds that vegetables caused the virus to spread! The same women farmers also had to incur further debts by borrowing seeds for Kharif; and also to purchase ration, other household items etc. Vasantiben Lavjibhai of Patdi, Surendranagar echoed several women farmers' predicament of consuming their preserved seed stock as food as the influx of returning migrant family members stretched their depleting resources.

The struggle to withstand the challenges presented for the coming agricultural season encouraged GWLO and its members to mediate through interventions that worked closely with women farmers and supporting their decisive turning toward sustainable agriculture practices and natural farming.

The intervention GWLO and their members adopted combined a series of actions at different levels by the members. Beginning with building a collective understanding among the network members of the implications for Kharif agricultural season and for women farmers especially, this understanding was taken to women farmers locally through the women's federations and block level community cadre of paralegal workers and Mahila Kisan Sakhis. Digital communications tools and methods such as informative audio and video messages through Whatsapp, and mobile tablets, virtual meetings played a crucial role in keeping women farmers connected to their federation leaders.

The local women federations among GWLO's membership and the block level community-based cadre have been the frontline anchors in executing this program and its strategies with their local women farmers.

The Mahila Kisan Sakhis reached more than 15,000 women farmers with messaging on information regarding growing kitchen gardens, agricultural practices using locally available resources, diversifying cultivation practices and crops for longer term food security also beneficial for the land resource, promoting use of local, indigenous or improved variety seeds rather than hybrid seeds. Meeraben Padhiyar in an interior village in Ahwa, Dang found the audio messages on sajivkheti practices extremely novel – *"we receive useful information on how to make natural fertilizers without having to go anywhere."*

In a more material way, as a response to the need voiced by many women farmers before the Kharif season of not being able to afford necessary inputs for cultivation, support of seeds, fertilizers and pesticides WGWLO was able to mobilize support from donors and other social philanthropists for 4,200 women farmers, especially single women farmers, women agricultural laborers and women farmers from the reverse migrant families. Seeds of the prominent major local food crops (both indigenous and improved) were provided along with support for women farmers to collectively prepare bio-inputs like Panchamruta, Jeevamruta, Panchagavya and others.

Nascent seed banks initiated in 2019 of traditional indigenous seed varieties sourced from local farmers, exchanged among WGWLO members, and obtained from other partners and collaborators of the network supported 850 women farmers during this Kharif season. All of these approximately 5,000 women farmers will bring back, on harvest, one-half to twice the amount of seeds back to the community seed banks which will be managed by members of the women federations for further exchange in the next agricultural seasons.

For small and marginal women farmers, the pandemic has caused social, economic livelihood and sustenance challenges that a basic relief works program can help only but temporarily. Collectively, combining relief with the above interventions, WGWLO tried to rebuild their livelihoods, which enabled women farmers to rebuild better.

Photo courtesy WGWLO



Mahila Kisan Sakhi Dariyaben Distributing Seed Kits to Women Farmers for Kharif Season Farming - SARTHI, Santrampur, Mahisagar

8. Nirmala's Story 'We now have an identity as workers'

Authors : Suvarna Damle & Nirmala Kathwate

Photo courtesy Prakriti



Nirmala with women job card holders

About Prakriti

Prakriti works for the empowerment of rural women in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh since 1990 (www.prakritiwomen.in). Work on employment guarantee started in 2005-06 when this scheme was launched in selected districts on a pilot basis. Balaghat in the state of Madhya Pradesh (M.P.) and Bhandara in the state of Maharashtra were among the selected districts where Prakriti in association with gram panchayats, did awareness building and also helped the gram panchayats in identifying work to be taken up under this scheme. During the first phase of the COVID-19 lockdown Prakriti joined in the state level efforts initiated by Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch (MAKAAM) with a special focus on issuance of job cards (a document which is important to work on MRNEGS works)

Need for Intervention

Nirmala's village Sawarmendha is a small cotton growers' village with about 150 households in Nagpur district. For last few years there has been a decline in cotton yield despite the increase in the input cost forcing many farmers to sell off part of their land. Cultivated area in the village has thus been on a decline leaving wage workers effectively jobless. The pandemic and the subsequent lockdown has further worsened the situation. Usually women get continuous employment in sowing,

Photo courtesy Prakriti



Job card holder with her bank pass book showing wages deposited in her account

weeding and harvesting seasons. With the pandemic however women were finding it difficult to get wage work. Cultivators were facing losses and were therefore unwilling to hire labour. They were relying on their family hands among whom were the children and returnee migrants from cities. Single women were thus competing with the family hands for the few available jobs.

Until recently neither Nirmala nor the women from her village knew about MNREGS. Though they were aware that Government was doing some work in the village it was understood as any other scheme/work and thus did not pay attention to it. She learned about MNREGS at a training at Prakriti which she later shared with the women. About 18 single women from the village who did not have job cards but were in need of work were identified. Nirmala made the effort, collected the documents and submitted them to the Rozgar Sevak (employment servant) for issuing job cards.

The Rozgar Sevak was not keen to issue job cards to these women and resisted taking any action despite repeated requests to him and the Sarpanch (Village assembly head). Finally, her efforts bore fruit and he issued the job cards to all of them.

However, getting the job cards was the first challenge and the greater one was to motivate the job-cards holder single women to put forth a demand for work under MNREGS. Many of them had some misgivings about the scheme and thought that working on MNREGS work sites was

not as dignified as working in the farm. So I explained to them that work under employment guarantee is similar to farm work and in fact they will get better wages under employment guarantee scheme. The single women could not go to far off villages for wage works as they could not leave their children alone and thus preferred to work in nearby farms. However, this year due to heavy and untimely rains, it was difficult to go for weeding and now although harvesting has begun availability of wage work is very little owing the low yields.

Outcomes and learnings

In this tough time, Nirmala succeeded in motivating the job card holder women to start work in MNREGS and at first three of them started working. Ujjwala and Chanda were among the first who started to work and are now very happy. They reported that the wages in MNREGS are better and one of them said that she received wages for one day's work although she could not report for work due to incessant rains.

Nirmala narrated stories of women who were suffering from uterus prolapse and other gynaecological problems due to which it was difficult for them to pick up cotton and store it in the waist belt. However, at MNREGS, they are working in social forestry, which is convenient for them. Though the wages are not very high they find it more comfortable. Importantly they said they feel that with the job card they now have an identity and recognition, and they are also entitled for security and emergency health benefits, something that they never receive as a farm worker. All single women working in this scheme are delighted that they can talk to government officials in the capacity of job card holders.

The rozgar sevak too is satisfied with these women as they are working sincerely and so he doesn't need to supervise them often. For Nirmala this has been a great learning experience, firstly to know and understand the scheme better, but importantly to mobilise women in times of crisis to ensure that the government system works to their benefit. She now hopes to be actively involved in village level planning for MNREGA.

Photo courtesy Prakriti



Women working at MNREGA site

9. Women Farmers Response to the COVID-19 Crisis in Yamuna Khaddar

Author : Vikram Singh;

Co-authors (Translation and compilation) : Risha Ramachandran & Mubashira Zaidi

Photo by Vikram Singh



The youth group in Yamuna Khaddar are packing the relief material for distribution during the COVID 19 National lockdown.

Direct (DND) flyover to Wajirabad, has many establishments such as commonwealth stadium and Akshardham temple but is also known for its farming belt and the farming community living in the area since India's independence. 'The Delhi Peasants Cooperative Multipurpose Society (DPCMS) under contract with the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) allotted plots for farming and collected rents for the same which was scrapped by DDA in 1966 but the rent was collected from the farmers until 2010. However, shortly after two years the settlements of farming communities were ruthlessly demolished.'

COVID-19 National Lockdown and the Role of Women Farmers and Youth to Mitigate the Negative Impact of the Lockdown

The government announced the national lockdown on 24th March 2020, which meant stringent restrictions on mobility and closing down of the local *mandi* (market), challenging the livelihood for many farmers. Even when street vending was allowed by the state, the vegetable sellers of Yamuna Khaddar had to face *lathi* charge by the police. Additionally, the destruction of crops due to the flooding of Yamuna river, led to increase in the price of pesticides during the lockdown, and with limited savings to invest in new cultivation, the farming families in Yamuna Khaddar faced imminent deepening of poverty.

Photo by Vikram Singh



Vikram taking Saturday special moral education class with the children of Yamuna Khaddar.

Mala, a woman farmer at Yamuna Khaddar, who lived off her rented farming plot by selling the produce at the nearby *mandi*, says that, with the additional shock of the lockdown she stared at possible starvation and calamity for her family. Like Mala, many of the residents here are from Uttar Pradesh or Bihar who migrated to find employment in the capital city. Vimala Devi migrated from a small village in District Badaun, Uttar Pradesh, over 20 years ago. For Vimala, farming has been one of the main sources of income since then. But with the continuing difficulties to earn from agriculture and with the additional distress brought upon by COVID-19 lockdown, she decided to diversify her business. *'When I began to suffer with poor returns from farming, I put up a pakora cart (savory stall) at the local mandi to support my family'*. Given the high cost of farming, some other women farmers in the area also showed their entrepreneurial skills and also diversified their livelihoods. Gudiya, a young women farmer, set up a plant nursery which she says *'is helping me with my economic situation and is also an eco-friendly option that will support in efforts to reduce the pollution'*. These instances of women entrepreneurship have emerged during this time of crisis, without any backing from the state, but have proved life-saving for their individual families and have been an inspiration for other poor families in the area.

Amidst various uncertainties, women in Yamuna Khaddar have come to the forefront and showed leadership in bridging networks of support wherever possible. Mala for instance raised the issue of food scarcity in the community and

challenges in accessing ration from PDS shops or through e-coupons. She contacted an active youth member of the community, Vikram, who further raised the issue with civil society groups such as the Basti Suraksha Manch and concerned individuals. Mala and Vikram managed to collect ration for 1400 needy families of the area, that included 100 widows and single women families.

Similarly, unable to work and cut off from the city, migrant labourers settled in the forest area were on the verge of starvation. With Gudiya's help, Vikram, visited the migrant workers to understand their plight and contacted Basti Suraksha Manch and MAKAAAM Delhi to provide emergency relief in the form of food and other essential items. Through this initiative, over 110 migrant families were provided with ration and other relief materials. The community leadership and initiative that Gudiya, Mala and Vikram displayed helped collectives like MAKAAAM Delhi to reach the vulnerable families.

An indirect effect of the pandemic has been the closure of schools and *anganwadis*. Women farmers fear that their inability to buy smartphones and poor electricity in

the area will result in their children losing out on education and increasing the rate of school dropouts in the community. Ramashree, a farmer herself, raised the concern of increasing drop out of girl children from school during the lockdown period, which is further increasing the incidence of early marriages for girls and complete discontinuation of education. Her own children have been unable to keep up with their studies. Vikram, his brother, and friends volunteered to teach children especially girl students up to 7th class for free. Though they began with Ramashree's five children, today they are supporting the education of 250 children from Yamuna Khaddar. Vikram emphasizes that the aim is to empower the farming community and their future generation by supporting their children's education and providing awareness on farming to reduce exploitation of their community.

Lessons from the pandemic

In the absence of basic rights, women and the youth from Yamuna Khaddar showed leadership and took initiative to collectively build a network of support by contacting civil society groups such as MAKAAAM Delhi and Basti Suraksha Manch. Such a community response exemplified the strengths of a community in mitigating risks emanating from gaps in the society aggravated by the COVID-19 lockdown. The pandemic has definitely shed light on the existing challenges and vulnerabilities of marginalized communities but also demonstrated the resilience of people, their capacities, resources and initiatives that helped in coping with an unprecedented crisis situation.

The experiences captured in this case-study are as conveyed by Vikram Singh who played a key role in the relief work at Yamuna Khadar with MAKAAAM Delhi during the COVID-19 National Lockdown.

Photo by Vikram Singh



Men and women are engaged in harvesting the crops during the month of May 2020. The farmers were going into debts after being unable to sell these crops at the nearby mandi due to the lockdown restrictions.

10. Alternative models of women farmers during COVID-19

Author : C. Bhanuja, Director, REDS

Photo courtesy REDS



REDS (Rural Environment and Development Society) is a not for profit NGO working in 58 villages in 10 mandals of Ananthapuramu district in Andhra Pradesh. It has been working on women's rights, child rights, Human trafficking education, agriculture and natural resource management for the past 25 years. REDS has collectivised farmers, majority of them being women, into Farmer Producer Organizations (FPO) to promote mixed farming and address severe agrarian crisis prevalent in this largely drought prone district. In the context of COVID especially during the lock down period REDS along with women farmer's collectives made efforts to take up necessary relief in providing marketing facilities and distribution of food to vulnerable households. Relief and rehabilitation work was carried out in coordination with government line departments.

The sudden lock down had thrown the small and marginal farmers and migrant labourers into severe distress due to lack of employment, marketing and food. At the same time those who have migrated to other places started coming back to their native villages and this resulted in huge social and economic pressure in the rural areas. Single women and women from farmer suicide families were the worst affected. Farmers and milk producers faced huge problem in marketing their produce. The situation demanded a large scale coordinated intervention to provide food to the needy and marketing facilities for perishable produce.

Photo courtesy REDS



Intervention

REDS team in coordination with the FPO leaders worked out a strategic plan to identify the problems and arrange for purchase of produce from farmers and distribute to the needy. To start with REDS team along with the FPO Members made field visits to villages and found out that greens and vegetables were readily available and banana and papaya were ready to harvest. REDS and FPO leaders discussed with the farmers, FPO's procured the produce and distributed food baskets containing 20 items included dry ration, eggs, vegetables, fruits etc. to the families who were unable to purchase food. In addition, they were also supplied with face masks and sanitizers. FPO also procured 9 varieties of millets and Pulses, kitchen garden seed kits and ground nut seeds from women farmers and supplied to other farmers free of cost for Kharif season. Relief activities were carried out across 10 mandals and 30 villages in the district.

In Kamarupalli village in Anantapur mandal, a crisis situation arose when a covid case was diagnosed and entire village was declared as a red zone and high vigilance was enforced. R. Suseelamma, leader of Anantha Grameena Women Farmers Producer Organization procured all the vegetables and fruits produced by women farmers in the village and distributed free of cost to needy households.

In Poolakunta village also in Ananthapur mandal 220 households who owned milch animals could not sell their milk. The FPO Board Member Ms. Arunamma and REDS in coordination with district administration,

set up a dairy at the village outskirts and collected all the milk from the village and sold to private traders thus provided marketing for milk producers.

A District co-ordination committee was formed at Ananthapuramu district level with all government line departments and some NGO's including REDS to carry out a survey of problems and for coordinated relief work. Thanks to several organizations and individuals the relief work could be carried out in many villages and help was extended in the form of finances, suggestions and coordination.

Relief was extended to altogether 7200 needy families which included daily wage labourers, farming households, single women, old people and migrant labourers.

Food baskets were provided to 500 families in 24 villages. Health and Hygiene products were provided to 300 families for the benefit of women and adolescent girls. 100 households who did not have ration cards were given 10 kg of rice along with 5 kg of ragi.

50 kg feed packets were supplied to 73 families owning milch animals in two villages Kamaarupalli and Poolakunta. Seeds were supplied to 223 households in Kamaarupalli, Kurugunta, Poolakunta and Kodimi villages.

Outcomes

Coordinated efforts of providing relief has proved that women farmers coming together and doing collective farming and collective marketing has enabled them to have reserves of food and seeds and thus could provide them to others. Supply of seeds to other farmers has provided seed security for the following kharif season along with providing income to the women farmers who produced the seed. Government agriculture department and district Collector recognized the potential of the women farmer FPOs and 'have come forward to make arrangements for purchasing produce from FPO's through MARKFED and are involving women farmers in all schemes implemented by agriculture department.

Photo courtesy REDS



11. COVID-19 lockdown and women farmers: Need for the intervention

Author : Fatima Burnad, SRED, Tamil Nadu

Photo courtesy SRED



SRED FPO distributing food relief packages

Society for Rural Education and Development (SRED) established in the year 1979 has been promoting need based and issue based movements among the grassroots workers communities. Main focus of the operational communities is women from dalits and rural tribal communities.

SRED is involved in capacity building of local leaders and the People's movement leaders. At micro level SRED's intervenes to address the issues of violence against women, caste and gender discrimination, livelihood challenges, denial of health and education. At the macro level, SRED joins hands with the SRED promoted movements and other movements in campaigns, advocacy, networking and alliance building for promotional actions at state level in the State of Tamil Nadu and at National and International levels.

SRED mobilized and promoted Rural workers movements among Dalits, Landless labourers, Irular tribal, Brick kiln Workers, Bullock cart workers, Quarry workers, dalit women (Rural Women's liberation movement) Women Farmers, sex workers, Mathamma (dalit women dedicated to goddess) and street vendors. Capacity building and updating are given by SRED. The movements are focusing on land and political rights.

Women from these communities are being trained in Agro ecology; organic farming practices even though they have no lands. They are trained to trace government lands

Photo courtesy SRED



Seed packets distributed amongst the women farmer groups

that are under the illegally encroached by other caste communities and to reclaim their right over the same. As they have internalized the need for Landholding they located the government lands in their villages, and with the help of Revenue officer reclaimed 7.55 acres and then 5 acres of land and started cultivation collectively. After harvest each woman who worked in the land got a share. There are such women collective farms in 5 districts where women are engaged in collective farming.

COVID-19 Pandemic and the intervention

COVID-19 Pandemic consequential lockdown started on the 24th March 2020 continues till now with certain relaxations. The poor people were left without food and without any source of livelihood. They virtually had nothing to eat and had no means to look for survival. Women were subjugated to domestic violence and other forms of violence against women. The governments were not bothered about providing the poor people with means of survival; they only asked them to be shut at homes and in a hurry opened the state run liquor shops ignoring the plea of women not to open. This further increased violence on women. Dalit women were raped and murdered. Families had no work and no money to buy food. Non availability of food increased violence in the family. Women suffered without income, unable to repay loans, unable to feed the family.

A relief amount of Rs. 1000 was given by the government and this did not reach everyone. This amount could not sustain them longer. Children who depended on midday meals went foodless as the schools were closed down. Absence of public transport denied women farmers of collective farming to communicate with other women farmers. After sowing millets they were not able to visit the farm during the lockdown period.

When everyone else was struggling to find the means of survival of their families and villagers, Shakila, one of the Women Collective farmers' leaders, started thinking differently and acted differently. She collected relief materials consisting of food and protective materials and distributed them to the villagers. It was a voluminous work. Yet escaping the eyes of the police she stealthily went from door to door and gathered whatever she could collect. She organized a team of volunteers. She mobilized provisions from Buddha Movement Trust 4 times and distributed them to aged single women, physically challenged, to all tribals, washer women families in her village.

SRED supported women farmers with Rs. 1000 each and distributed food materials on three different occasions worth Rs.1000/- each. Shakila volunteered to support SRED and helped in distributing it to other collective farm leaders.

When they were able to travel within the district, Shakila and her team started harvesting whatever was left in their collective farm. She also called other collective farm leaders and guided them with the plan of utilizing the collective farm yields and to mobilize support of philanthropists from their respective villages and towns, support from the state government, Buddha movement trust and SRED. They identified COVID-19 affected families and helped them to survive the pandemic.

In their own villages they established community kitchens, cooked food and distributed it to the villagers. The state government provided 3 LPG freely.

Her act saved many lives, prevented poverty deaths and suicides due to non availability of food. 3000 families through SRED could get cash transfers in their accounts in addition to the food kits, face masks, kabasura Ayurvedic drinks (immune booster and preventive drink).

They kept alive the collective Farm with women Farmers, irrespective of the pandemic threat and the restriction of movement. Other women are now being lured to initiate such initiatives of collective farming and they are very confident that they can face any sort of challenges and withstand any calamity in future. Neighbouring villagers are inviting the collective farm women farmers to start collective Farm.

Having land collectively is strength, creating more immunity against the corona virus- no fear about the virus- each woman reached out to other women who were in need. As collective farm members they stood united, supported each other and showed that being united for a common cause redeems and helps to overcome any pandemic challenge as they could withstand the challenge posted by the deadly COVID-19 pandemic. Movements are not dying instead growing stronger particularly in challenging times like the pandemic.

Photo courtesy SRED



women farmers coming together and doing collective farming

12. Back to Millets in the wake of COVID-19

Author : Women's Initiatives (WINS)

Photo courtesy WINS



WINS and Mahila Rhythu Vedika

WINS -(Women's Initiatives) has, in the past three years, succeeded in strengthening and enabling 1080 tenant cultivators & agricultural workers belonging to scheduled caste in 35 villages of Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh. This has empowered them economically and politically. They are now confident of adapting agro ecological practices, investing their skills in economic organizations like the farmers' producer organizations; they are now empowered to voice their concerns through the forum 'mahila rhythu vedika' for women farmers' rights. The energy, commitment and courage displayed by these women in farming, in taking forward their learning to contribute to the growing knowledge of collectivization of the poor and marginalised women is praiseworthy.

The month-long lockdown was unbearable for the women. Further extension broke them financially, forced them and their families to go hungry, and pulled down their morale. With no means of transport available, marketing the harvest, grazing cattle became difficult. As a result, crops withered, cattle starved, and the yield of milk was reduced. Due to strict government advisory barricades were erected in neighborhoods reporting positive cases. This traumatized the women who were going through hell clamped inside the house with no work. Added to this they fought irrational fears of contracting the dreaded infection with no cure, compounded by the

Photo courtesy WINS



Reddy rani interacting with Kranti (Left)

myths and misconception around it. COVID relief package of free dry rations given by the Government which were inadequate, did not help the poor women as the queues were long and shops closed early as per Government orders. They often had to return empty handed and hungry.

CG gallu and Rompicherla mandals, in Chittoor District, AP is a rainfed region. 60% of them grow only hybrid tomatoes twice a year which fetch a good price but with huge investment costs. They also work as wage earners in others' farms. The mono crop culture, be it mango gardens or groundnuts, also led them to misery. They had small patches of land (few cents of land) which was mostly left barren, as they thought it would never be, worth the while to work on. It was then WINS entered with the idea of organizing women farmers, giving them twelve types of vegetables to grow in their kitchen garden, which came in handy for them in these testing times.

Though millets were their staple diet, it was almost extinct for forty years. It became unaffordable for them as it formed only 1% of cultivation in their villages. Moreover, rich people started using it with experts recommending millets as a source of healthy food to boost the immunity and fight COVID. After we educated them about this, the women went back to cultivation of millets as an affordable source of nutritious diet. This coupled with cow based natural farming methods for kitchen garden and horticulture crops came to their rescue.

Women farmers who were impressed by the revival of traditional methods and crops were encouraged to get involved in the process.

MRV identified women both tenant/small holder farmers who were keen in outperforming others in farm work. Members who had demonstrated knowledge and use of organic farming methods and reaped the benefits were chosen. 225 women preferred to grow finger millets, 110 pearl millet, and 40 brown top millet. The collectives had discussions about many challenges in growing millet crops ranging from stalk not germinating and seeds wither, to crops not drying out at the time of harvest, seeds decomposing due to rain, crops eaten away by owl/ birds/ pig menace, they also tried to find a way out for all these. Their found hope in pearl millet.

Collectives got involved because millets were rain fed, short duration crops. They were convinced about becoming self-reliant in the future in uncertain situations caused by natural disasters and ensure food security even during such difficult times.

Women's contribution in the labor intensive farm work is trivialized and treated as insignificant. The women could not assert themselves in their survival struggle. The support of WINS by educating them, building their confidence; facilitating rights assertion to counter the challenges that exist in the system helped these women farmers to mobilise. WINS ventured into the villages for the first time where no experts or functionaries of the Agricultural department had ever visited.

WINS realized that fighting hunger is possible and in the hands of Producers (women) and they have the reasons and rights to eat good and enough food, to sustain them. It is not merely agriculture related work, but insight on gender that stands out, and attracts women to see themselves as individuals with potential. It reinforces the fact that food is the foundation for health. As producers of food, they not only ensure food security for all.

13. Hapur women farmers' journey to economic solidarity and self-reliance

Author : Sulekha Singh, Action Aid

Background

Action India has been engaged with grassroots women, adolescents and children's issues from underprivileged communities to address their health, rights and entitlements for several decades. The work extended from Delhi to Hapur block of UP in 2011 to strengthen the economic, social and ideological empowerment of women. They sought to address women farmers issues for recognition of their invisible work and role, and sought to organize 200 women workers in 4 villages. A team of 10-12 women who are farm labour now lead the process.

Intervention in COVID times

The group lease and production system broke down when the lock down was announced as landowners were unwilling to lease their land, as family members returned home and chose to work on their farms themselves. 10-12 women from the group therefore decided to look for alternative opportunities to overcome this crisis of loss of income from the farming activity.

The women members, belonging to different SHG groups in their respective neighbourhoods, decided to set up an alternative economic enterprise of masala and condiment processing and sale. Each took loans from their respective SHGs and pooled the resources as working capital to buy spices and value add, package and retail these produce in local markets across 20 villages in their vicinity. Gradually a steady demand evolved due to the assured quality of their produce and their supply chain extended to customers in Delhi through their social action networks to encompass 900 households in the NCR region regularly. Regular feedback enables them to establish a regular market.

Impacts of the Intervention

Hapur block is in the vicinity of Delhi. By organizing this group of 12 women for an alternative economic activity in the hinterlands of Delhi NCR region these women were able to explore new avenues for economic resilience to tide the crisis. Through their existing institutional networks they were able to set up opportunities for self-reliance and employment as well as strengthen their solidarity. Each woman contributed to the effort by taking a loan to invest in the raw materials, they laboured together to grind the masalas and to market produce through various channels. They diversified and purchased wheat as well to value add and sell at a profit.

Outreach

The financial stability from this work has motivated the group to sustain through the COVID crisis months to persist and expand their collective enterprise. Now 75 SHG groups with a membership of 12-15 women each is demanding their produce, which ensures a steady demand and income for 12-15 women. They are exploring the potential to expand their market to other villages as well as across Delhi. A business plan is now in place whereby they hope to expand their enterprise and include more women.

Results

The women's collective is now expanding its range of products to include Zeera, Ajwain, Methi, Makkai, Bajra, Jaggery, Mustard oil, gram, chickpea, Rice, Pulses etc. They have learnt how to value add, process and market their way out of distress to sustain themselves through solidarity economy. Gradually they plan to take land on lease again for collective natural farming and to produce for the business, after providing for themselves. They plan to expand to urban markets where price and scale advantages exist. Their newly acquired skills in business planning, pricing and marketing have given them a lease of confidence and some financial stability, while creating viable assets to plan for the future. They hope to grow as a natural farming value-added women's enterprise, based on natural manures and local seed such that chemicalized agricultural practices can be replaced to benefit health for all. Inclusion of more vulnerable women in the enterprise, to ensure stable livelihoods and better health for women from their own communities remains a commitment. They plan to invest in a seed bank as well to set in motion a process for wellbeing and restoration of dignity for women farmers. The collective has enabled them to draw upon resources and skills that would have been impossible individually and proximity to their markets has enabled them to manage the processes horizontally.

Key Learning

Resilience has emerged through drawing on existing skills and natural resources, and collective solidarities have enabled them to draw on their own pool of strengths. They have learnt that quality and price standards must be tailored to local or market thresholds. The enterprise has given new hope to collective solidarity for economic and social empowerment of these women.

Lessons learnt and Way forward

Case stories in this volume have shown how women have led the way differently during COVID-19 than what is done 'normally' and there is lot to learn from these women-led stories for future.

All these stories reflect the following:

1. First thing that the women's collectives made sure was that their members and even other poor and/or single women had access to grains in those difficult times.
2. Learning which emerges clearly from this is that women's collectives and women's leadership not only comes up with innovative ideas to reach out to more women in the times of crisis, but they are also sensitive to the needs of poorest, most vulnerable women, and accommodate their way of working and interventions to suit the needs of women. With a gendered impact of COVID-19, such women's collectives play a huge role in healing and in reaching out to women with due blend of sensitivity and professionalism.
3. The other important learning is that local, decentralized models managed by women's collectives are much needed to ensure food availability to women, especially when climate is uncertain and supply chains may get disrupted. A variation and mini model of circular economy managed by women can lead to sustainable supply chain.
4. Learning from case stories of Thanal, Kerala; WGLWO and HDRC, Gujarat; and Korchi Mahasabha, Maharashtra reflects how women have gone beyond short term, have thought about medium term and have emphasized the need to also produce locally, including by having organic vegetable gardens and availability of seeds for the next season, which was used away for food during lockdown.
5. The case stories from MAKAAAM Delhi and Yamuna Khaddar also point to the need for understanding the rural urban continuum, especially in times of crisis. Women from farming communities living in cities were invisible to the administration. In both these cases women from the rural and urban areas forged alliances to support each other during relief work and showed a way for the opportunities for long term rural-urban solidarities.

As an alliance MAKAAAM actively engaged both on the ground through relief work, but also at different fora- National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) the Niti Ayog, State governments etc. and put forth its recommendations for strengthening public systems related to food and employment. It put forth immediate demands of ensuring that the food distribution system or the PDS should be universal and not be limited to those who have the documents. It should also be expanded to include nutritious food and not just cereals. One of the major demands of MAKAAAM has been to expand the public works programme to provide assured employment that includes works that enhance the productive assets of women farmers.

In the long run this could be seen as an opportunity to rebuilding, supporting and strengthening ecologically sound rural livelihoods of women. However, it means that robust investments need to be made in agriculture, water and other commons that women depend on and policies that help to protect and enhance their access to resources and not to dispossess them of it. It calls for a vision that brings focus on to women's human rights and transforms the current model of development through reimagining and redistribution of power and resources.

Most importantly we believe that the State needs to be more willing to learn from strengthen and partner with women-led interventions in seeking pathways to strengthen social and economic solidarities.

We owe this document primarily to the women farmers and their collectives who struggled, innovated and adapted resolutely amidst the crisis and showed us that there is always an alternative!

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Vikalp Sangam is a platform to bring together movements, groups and individuals working on just, equitable and sustainable pathways to human and ecological well-being. It rejects the current model of development and the structures of inequality and injustice underlying it, and searches for alternatives in practice and vision. About 70 movements and organisations around the country are members of its Core Group (listed below).

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