

Building human capital of small scale farmers: a Coalition approach

Small and marginal farmers benefited from the coalition approach in accessing some of the resources such as technology, credit and markets. Improvement in their livelihood through enhanced production and higher margins in bulking, storing and selling their produce solely depended on the strength of collective action.

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Sorghum and pearl millet are the only crop options for the small and marginal scale farmers in most of the semi-arid tropical countries. Small and marginal farmers with livestock continue to depend on these crops so as to meet their food and fodder needs. The area under these crops has declined and have been pushed to more and more marginal areas. Also, farmers in these areas are often confronted with limited market mechanisms.

International Crops Research Institute for Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT), Patancheru, India, in collaboration with partners, initiated a project focusing on improving the livelihoods of small scale farmers in Asia. The project aims at building human and social capital of small-scale farmers in Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra clusters. This is achieved by strengthening their capacities, skills and knowledge on improved production technologies and strengthening farmers associations by building linkages with input suppliers, credit and market. The project executed in Coalition mode (Fig. 1) has the partnership with universities, private seed companies, feed manufacturers, input suppliers, NGOs and farmer groups for effective input delivery mechanisms. The project was funded by Common Fund for Commodities (CFC), Netherlands.

The small scale sorghum and pearl millet producers face several constraints in production, processing and marketing of their farm produce due to several reasons. Some of them include decrease in market demand; changes in consumer preferences; availability of subsidized wheat and rice to poorer sections through PDS; issues of physical access to markets; structure of the markets; and producers' lack of skills, information and organization. The project therefore focused on organizing farmers into groups/associations, enhancing their capacities for better production and increasing their bargaining power through infrastructure support and collective action.

To help the farmers' access efficient and more equitable market opportunities, several interventions were made. This included supporting the constitution of commodity oriented farmers associations, helping and training farmers to identify new/alternative markets, linking farmers with end users and processors, providing market information to the farmers etc.

Building farmers' associations

As outlined above it was felt that formation of farmers associations at the village level was the first and foremost important step in

bringing them together to build social capital. The farmers growing sorghum and pearl millet were brought under the commodity groups at the village level. The elected group leader is a member of the farmers associations at the cluster level. Each cluster comprised of 7 to 10 villages. The number of members in each group varied.

Several joint meetings were organized with partners and farmers to identify needs. Farmers were supported based on the needs and guided through several field exposure visits and training programs to further enhance their knowledge and skills in various aspects. There was active participation of farmers groups, farmers association and SHGs in project planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Inclusion of women

As women play an important role in agricultural operations in the target villages, women self help groups (SHGs) leaders were enrolled as members in the association. They were trained along with other members in seed based activity and bulking, storing and marketing of produce at village level.

Two models were developed and tested for meaningful involvement of women farmers in project activities.

One model was to involve SHGs in seed distribution; cultivar selection and procurement of seed was done jointly by partner institutions, PMU and ICRISAT. The seed procured was handed over to farmers association to redistribute to respective selected SHGs in Andhra Pradesh (AP) and Maharashtra (MS) clusters. SHGs were trained on importance of improved cultivars and its benefits like resistance to pest and diseases, tolerance to moisture stress, stover quality and better yield when compared to local cultivars. SHGs were given 5% incentive on total sale amount to keep their interest effective. Advantages of this model will enhance awareness and capacity of SHG to understand the importance of improved cultivars in crop production. The message of availability and access to improved cultivars will spread across all communities in the villages.

The second model was on bulking, storage and marketing. Similar to the above model, SHGs were trained in respective activity to make them understand the importance of each activity, both in terms of quantity and quality for better remuneration. To increase the financial capacities of SHGs for grain procurement from project, farmers were linked to credit institutions. SHGs approach the project farmers immediately after harvest and procure the grain by paying 50% amount of the prevailing market price and store the grain in the godown. The balance amount will be paid after selling the produce to poultry feed industry in a month or two. SHGs share 5% on the total amount spent for procurement and pay for godown storage charges to farmers association @ Rs. 2 per quintal grain. This process ensures better price and prevents distress sale of grain to middle men or agents. Also, as the farmer receives 50% price of grain immediately after harvest he/she will be able to meet his/her immediate needs. Moreover, bulk marketing is a win-win situation for both producer (farmer) and the buyer.

