

Women take control of their food security and sovereignty

Understanding the issues and perspectives of the community, giving voice to their ideas and facilitating institutional building are key in bringing about a sustainable and equitable change. Bringing a 'positive change in gender and power relations' remained central to the efforts made by Utthan in influencing change.

Naresh Jadav and Pallavi Sobti-Rajpal

Photo: Utthan



Using traditional method for storage of traditional seeds

Constituting nearly 70% tribal population, the Dhanpur block in Dahod district was once a self sufficient unit. Since the mid 90's, use of chemical pesticides, fertilizers, and hybrid seeds has increased water usage, reduced soil fertility and increased input expenditure rendering agriculture unsustainable. Declining agricultural production, degraded natural resources and reduced forest cover, has led to indebtedness and forced migration for food and livelihood. Today, Dhanpur block presents a picture of degeneration and drudgery. With external forces playing a significant role, agriculture production is no longer based on local communities' decisions of production and consumption patterns. Moreover, the degeneration of traditional culture, wisdom and practices supplemented by inappropriate government policies has made agriculture more external oriented.

Under such changing situations, women are the most affected. They have over time borne the double brunt of degeneration of natural resources and decline of traditional culture. Work drudgery of tribal women increased due to water, fodder and fuel wood collection. Women had to travel to distant places and spend long hours in search of fodder, fuel wood and water, which had a direct impact on their health. Feminization of poverty and erosion of traditional tribal culture diminished the status of women. The perpetuation of stereotyped gender roles and work resulted in denial of opportunities to participate in the processes of empowerment leading to low self esteem and confidence.

Consisting of a large number of tribal women, one of the important initiatives taken up by Vanita Shakti Mahila Sangathan (VSMS) has been to improve the livelihood security of women with a biodiversity approach. This group is being supported by Utthan, an NGO. The objective was to improve incomes, reduce drudgery and enhance productivity by creating women owned and managed productive assets and creating support mechanisms. The strategy was designed to integrate government programmes and ensure quality and timely access, through local institutions like the Federation, responsive to gender and livelihood needs of the area.

Three biodiversity working groups were formed to take leadership in managing assets towards food security. The biodiversity groups and the federation leaders were thoroughly trained on various aspects. This significantly contributed to the strengthening of the federation members as leaders and the federation as an institution. Exposure visits were organized to areas where such initiatives have been taken up viably. These efforts increased women's skills, confidence and information base. Alongside, an institutional set up of biodiversity groups was established within the federation to regularly plan, execute and discuss the working of the biodiversity banks, strategies and actions around access to seed/fodder/fuel; accountable to the Representative Council and the Executive Committee of the federation, which monitor their work. This led to improved managerial skills and values of good governance. The biodiversity working groups, active women leaders and the

Executive Committee of the women's federations took ahead the entire process.

Women owned and managed assets-fodder banks and seed banks

The federation has been able to provide affordable, quality fodder (local varieties like bhathori and daangar) to nearly 300 families. 37500 kg. of local and less water intensive Bhathori and Bajri fodder was organically produced through 65 demonstrations on farm bund and in between crops. This banking initiative increased women's scope of access to fodder locally. They confidently linked up with Government cattle schemes to augment their incomes/use at home. VSMS and Utthan successfully influenced commercial fodder crop growers in 3 villages to shift to organic cultivation. This reduced drudgery and conflicts in fodder collection from the forest, reduced indebtedness, augmented income/disposable income and improved nutritional status of livestock.

Over the last three years, 3 seed and 3 fodder banks were set up in 3 clusters amongst 42 villages in Dahod district. Site selection, suitability, risk assessment, identification of traditional and sustainable storage methods were discussed and selected by the women members before finalising these spaces. These banks were aimed at helping people who did not have the purchasing power to access fodder and seed particularly during the times of emergency.

Traditional seeds like black gram (*thuthiya urad*), wheat (*lokvan gehu*, *sharbat* and *tukdi gehu*), gram (*dahod peela channa*), maize (*saathi*, *kathori*) and mag were provided to nearly 400 families. This yielded an output of seed, nearly 70% of which is organic since it was purchased mostly by members of women's federation who were involved in the vermi composting, herbal pesticide preparation demonstrations. *Kala mag*, an extinct variety of seed was sourced at a slightly higher price from interior villages. Four demonstration plots yielded 40 kg. of *Kala mag* which were bought

Utthan, an NGO started its initiatives in the North-Eastern part of Gujarat, the Dhanpur block in Dahod district in 1994. It started working with women in 42 villages. In each village, a women's group, called VSMS was organised consisting of 10-15 women. These groups in turn were federated into Vanita Shakti Mahila Sangathan (VSMS), at the block level consisting of 208 women's groups from 51 villages of Dhanpur block and a membership of 2651 women. The women leaders showed the need and will to break this cycle of discrimination and insecurity to change the situation which impacted them, specifically as women. The members worked on issues identified by women members themselves through various strategies.

Utthan strengthened capacities and skills of the women's federations on various issues like ecological sustainability, biodiversity conservation, equity and human rights. It trained the members on values and skills for good governance for sustaining the institution. Such hand holding of leaders helped the federation to move towards increased independence and sustainability.

into the bank for further sale. This reduced indebtedness, demonstrated shift from hybrid to traditional seed varieties and led to the preservation of 6 local varieties of seed, thus conserving local biodiversity.

The setting up of banks has helped in conserving traditional storage practices and has empowered women by strengthening their confidence in managing their assets. Also, communities were able to differentiate a poor grain of high yielding variety from a rich grain from traditional farming system.

Promotion of sustainable agricultural practices

Shifting to sustainable farming is a better alternative, although slow. This could be possible by shifting from hybrids to traditional seed varieties. Also, women became aware that excess withdrawal of ground water eventually leads to drought and desertification pushing them to depend on un-sustainable migration. Women also evolved alternatives to improve productivity in traditional seed varieties as well as its market.

Over the years, 225 families have shifted to organic cultivation, either partially or completely. 240 leaders were trained in vermi compost production and herbal pesticide preparation. The first output of the 180 vermi compost demonstrations provided nutrient support to 270 acres, and this pattern would continue for another 10-15 years. The prevention of use of chemical fertilizers on the 270 acres of land on which vermi compost was used also contributed to the conservation of environment. It prevented the use of 40,500 kg.- 1,08,000 kg. of DAP and 67500 kg. of urea which would have otherwise been used on this expanse of land. The economic equivalent of this means a total expenditure reduction of Rs. 13,63,500. This helped to reduce the input cost of agriculture, increasing disposable income, reducing indebtedness. This also led to decrease in greenhouse gases (not directly measured) due to reduction in fertilizer application in the area to a small extent.

Access to fuel wood

Women raised 38,000 saplings in the nursery and helped in reintroduction and preservation of 5 varieties of medicinal plants (*ashwagandha*, *amla*, *kanski*, *shatavari*, *sahijan*). In return for their labour, the federation provided women with an equivalent amount of fuel wood. By linking up with Government schemes, the women groups planted 1,00,000 fuel wood varieties covering 50 hectares in 10 villages. This plantation is expected to yield 5,58,000 kg. of fuel wood per year, supporting requirement of 1,24,000 families for 10-15 yrs. Afforestation in 4 villages with local varieties of grass (*jijvo*, *dhaman*, *hamata*) were taken up. This contributed to the reintroduction and preservation of 5 varieties of medicinal plants, increase in green cover, reduced drudgery, conflicts and health impacts in fuel wood collection from the forest.

Influencing the Government

The federation established links with local Forest Department, District Administration, Departments of Agriculture, Tribal Development, Women and Child Development. Resources

amounting to Rs.10,00,000 were mobilised for vermi composting, medicinal nurseries and fruit raising through existing government schemes. The local administration visited the work of the federation and advised scale up through linkages with the Government. This is being followed up by the Federation and Utthan. Federation leaders influenced local government to fulfill fodder requirements during acute fodder shortage in the last two years after the stock was exhausted in the fodder banks owing to increased demand. This entire process led to the opening of the Block level Fodder Depot. Nearly 2,500 people were able to access fodder at an economical cost. The Federation prevailed upon the officials and ensured that it is disbursed at a reasonable rate. These efforts helped to ensure and monitor fulfillment of State's responsibility in times of crisis. Linkages with Government Departments also helped to disburse information on various Government schemes in the community. Resource mobilization for various activities provided a fillip to sustainable agriculture, augmented incomes, preventing out migration to a small extent. The federation thus became a conduit for resources to marginalised people and provided additional forward/backward linkages like training, technical expertise, perspective building.

Scaling up

With support from the Small Grants Programme - Global Environment Facility and linkages with available Government schemes under the Tribal Sub Plan, the women's federation has been able to influence considerably the lives of people, especially the women. The success of the first phase showcased the economic viability of the initiative, sustainability mechanisms and collective management skills of the federation. Owing to the demand for similar activities from other villages and with the support of Utthan, the initiative was scaled up based on the lessons learnt from the previous phase. This work was scaled up from 24 villages in the first phase to 18 new villages which showed readiness to set up similar livelihood institutions and related activities. Effective tools like the pamphlet on methods of preparing organic pesticides to control pests, screening of *Samasya aapni, ukel aapno* were used for increasing awareness.

The Federation influenced local Village Panchayats as well. Around 10 village Panchayats passed resolutions to support these activities proactively and micro planning for up scaling work was taken up.

The results of the various demonstrations done by women and men leaders in implementing sustainable agricultural practices in local farming and fruit raising through use of vermicomposting, organic manure, herbal pesticides has showed a shift towards sustainability and food security to an extent. To strengthen the overall initiatives of sustainable farming, conservation of forest ecology and biodiversity and to secure livelihoods of marginalised communities, the federation is in the process of forming an Area Resource Group (ARG) which can take these initiatives ahead, identify and support people in implementation and monitoring and link their product to the market.

Today, the Vanita Shakti Mahila Sangathan continues to strengthen its understanding on the issue through experiential learning. With the advent of threatening environment of climate change and increased use of genetically modified seed varieties and pesticides, women strongly feel the need to continuously resist these moves by promoting conservation of traditional agricultural and life patterns. This, they believe, will enhance their ability for sustaining livelihoods. This has been and will continue to be a challenging process wherein women are constantly renegotiating 'social contracts' with their family, community and the State.

Naresh Jadav and Pallavi Sobti-Rajpal
 Utthan
 36, Chitrakut Twin Bungalows,
 Behind Management Enclave, Vastrapur,
 Ahmedabad – 380015, India.
 E-mail: utthan.ahmedabad@gmail.com
 www.utthanujarat.org



LEISA India readers are not just readers – many of them are promoters and practitioners of LEISA. While practitioners seldom share, our reader practitioners have been patient as well as enthusiastic in sharing how they have used the content of the magazine.

Inspiring cases is a collection of cases indicating the diversity of influence of LEISA India magazine on the minds of readers. We have included the narration of experiences by the readers themselves as well as three interviews. We earnestly believe that they in turn would inspire many more to promote and practice LEISA.

To view the cases please visit: <http://india.leisa.info>