

Women's group completes food chain from field to market



The women who participated in self-help groups established by the Treaty Benefit-sharing Fund Project in Kerala, India, have improved their family nutrition and food security through producing high-yielding and drought-resistant local varieties of cassava identified by the project. But that is just part of the story. The self-help group members have quadrupled their incomes through developing new products for the market such as cassava bread and cakes, and they have shared planting materials with other farmers, thus contributing to conserving their agricultural heritage. Two groups of crops were included in the project:

- food crops such as cassava, yam and ash gourd, which are important for nutrition and food security,
- spices such as pepper, cardamom and nutmeg, which are important for economic development.

The women as well as other local farmers had the benefit of project activities that ranged from identifying isolated farms that still cultivated local crops, to training in cultivation and propagation techniques and support in distributing planting materials of locally adapted varieties.

Over the centuries, innovative Kerala farmers developed unique technologies for the ongoing adaptation of local plant genetic resources. These indigenous practices contributed to farmer selection and breeding of crop varieties that increased yields and resistance to extreme weather and to crop pests and diseases within their local areas. Yet in recent times, those farmers who

maintain traditional farming techniques and cultivate local crops have become more and more isolated. Through the support of the Treaty Benefit-sharing Fund Project, these indigenous practices and well adapted crops have been identified, recognized for what they have to offer, such as the ability to resist drought and extreme weather conditions, and are now being shared with other farming communities. This will increase the ability of farmers in the region to face climate change conditions as well as improve their nutrition and incomes.

Cassava: the ambakkadan variety returns

In 1964, Kerala farmer Ambakkadan Thommi noticed that one of his cassava tubers had an unusual skin color. He boiled it, liked the taste and, the next season, planted 25 cuttings. When he found the variety was high yielding as well as drought tolerant, he gave cuttings to his neighbors. Now named for him, the ambakkadan cassava remained popular among local farmers until the 1980s when it was replaced by hybrid and short-duration varieties. In the 1990s, with the increased price of food crops, local farmers remembered the ambakkadan but found no planting materials available. In answer to this, the International Treaty's Benefit-sharing Fund Project in India identified isolated farms still growing ambakkadan and embarked on cultivating and disseminating the planting materials to help local farmers increase their production and income.

Peermade Development Society, a leading NGO in south India with experience in promoting farmer innovations, designed this project to create market value for local and farmer-developed crops. This meant exploring and exploiting existing market demand by making planting materials available and training local people to establish village-level enterprises for production and marketing of farmer-developed and traditional crop varieties. Planting material and seeds of these varieties have been distributed to different farmers to study the adaptability of these crops in their respective farms. Some farmers already have reported drought resistance of some varieties of cassava.

In addition to the cassava production of the women's self-help groups, other farmers in Kerala who are beneficiaries of the project increased their incomes by cultivating and selling ash gourd and cardamom seeds. On a larger scale, the project has set up an agricultural infrastructure to introduce farmers to the importance of local varieties, trained them in how to cultivate and also conserve genetic diversity of these varieties through model plots and nursery developments, and set up village-level enterprises that will enable the local people to take ownership of their developments and improvements as they share them with farmers in other areas. The project also works with the Central Tuber Crops Research Institute (CPCRI) which provides training in developing value-added products in cassava and yam and has transferred technologies to project participants.

In just one year ...

Project objective I: Develop enterprise models for wider-scale dissemination of farmer-bred varieties among farmers and women's groups. The project has:

- ◆ established self-help groups for 80 women farmers in two remote villages, offering training in value-added production of cassava, yam and ash gourd,
- ◆ supported women in establishing an ambakkadan cassava cultivation enterprise, initiated yam cultivation and extended cultivation of ash gourd,
- ◆ ensured that project participants have more food for their families and profit from sale of both the planting materials and the crop production.

Project objective II: Train farmer groups and other stakeholders in cultivation and propagation techniques for facilitating diffusion of varieties. The project has:

- ◆ identified individual farmers cultivating local varieties and collected planting materials from them,
- ◆ trained 100 farmers in propagation techniques of farmer-developed varieties,
- ◆ established 10 model plots in the project's two districts and selected 14 farmers from other Kerala districts to set up plots in their areas,
- ◆ produced training materials on propagation and cultivation technologies in local language and disseminated them to farmers beyond the project area.

Project objective III: Develop standardized packages of practices for the cultivation and propagation of farmer-developed varieties. The project has:

- ◆ visited individual innovative farmers to study their area-specific cultivation practices,
- ◆ collected accounts of indigenous cultivation practices from farmers, women self-help group members and task force members.

Still to come...

- ◆ Increase number of enterprises for farmers to propagate and sell planting materials, meaning increased income for producer and wider dissemination and use of local crops.
- ◆ Expand linkages with state and national governments, including the National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources and Indian Institute of Spice Research to register the local varieties.



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