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climate-smart Agriculture technologies (mulching and drip irrigation) seen inside Tshering Tashi's green house

It has 499 households & a total population of 3 552, over half of whom are females. Stiff terrain, erratic climatic conditions, pests, and wild animals have always posed risks to agriculture in the area.

When Tshering came to settle in the village some five years ago, he witnessed several alcohol-related issues in the community. The villagers, embroiled in a series of disputes and engaged mostly in traditional practices of agriculture, did not have a real source of livelihood.

Most households were poor and had limited sources of income. The vegetables they grew were barely enough for their meals. Tshering wanted to change those ways of life in the village and help bring them out of poverty. One way was to form a farmer's group in the village with a common vision.

"We started building a farmer-group amongst the poorer household members of the village and started vegetable production on my three acres of land," he reminisces.

Tshering tirelessly helped his group members with farming works like preparing land for cultivation and resourcing seed inputs. He named the group "Thuenpa Phuenzhe Sonam Detshen, translated as the "Vegetable farming

group of the four harmonious friends", referring to the famous Bhutanese fable of four animal friends forming an example of true companionship and solidarity.

The group now has 15 core members, seven of whom are males and eight, females. "The female members are more hard-working and caring in the whole chain of events in the group than their male counterparts", Tshering says. One of the most important aspects of the farming group is that they share labour among the members during land preparation, plantations, weeding and harvesting of vegetables.

The group soon started receiving support from the Food Security and Agriculture Productivity Project (FSAPP)* for improved seeds, electric fences with polythene poles, and plastic mulches that protect crops, suppress weeds and retain soil moisture. FSAPP provided its support to this Gewog through the Agriculture Research and Development Centre located in Bajo in western Bhutan and the district administration.



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The vegetable group has more female members than male and supply regular vegetables to the nearby schools

These interventions and the technical assistance from the project provided for linking the farmers' group to the nearby schools for marketing of the produce, soon contributed immensely to their livelihood.



One of the female members of the group trying her hand at a newly acquired mini-tiller supplied by FSAPP on a cost-sharing basis ©FAO/Gopi Kharel

For the last three years, the group has been supplying vegetables to the two schools in the Gewog: the Drujeygang Central School and the Pangna Primary school, fulfilling the demand for vegetables of the region and its schools. The group supplies over 4 200 kilograms of assorted vegetables and fruits to the schools in a month. The schools currently have about 811 students, 45 per cent of whom are females.

A steady and uninterrupted supply of vegetables to these students means they can now consume local, fresh and nutritious vegetables beneficial for their health. This was not possible a few years ago when the majority of the food items were imported. The distant locations of these schools also meant the imported vegetables would no longer be fresh by the time they arrived at the schools, most of the items perishing on the way.

FSAPP's school linkage programme assists the country's Department of Agricultural Marketing and Cooperatives (DAMC) to link farmer groups or producer groups to the schools.

In the whole of Dagana Dzongkhag, the project helps around eight farmer groups supply fresh vegetables to nine schools with over 2 300 students, almost half of whom are females. The project supports such activities in five Dzongkhags in southwest Bhutan.

The group has been instrumental in supporting the school's mess by continuously supplying fresh and organic vegetables for the past few years," Tashi Wangchuk, the Principal of Drukjegang Central School said. "We no longer need to worry about our students going hungry or not getting enough nutrition. We can now be sure these children have what it takes to achieve all-round growth and excellence in performance."

The group meets the off-seasons (November to February) shortages by importing the missing items from their strong networks of farmer groups in other Dzongkhags.

Setting an example in the nation as an active and progressive farmer group, they also donated about 3 000 kilograms of vegetables to monastic bodies in the area and Bhutan's trained volunteer group called "Desuung" (Guardians of Peace), which responds and provides assistance or aids during disasters and emergencies including the COVID-19-related lockdowns.

"I think, coming together as one people with a common goal is all that takes to create wonders," concludes Tshering with a smile.

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