

India | How rural women farmers are solving problems in Gujarat

To celebrate the International Day of Rural Women on 15 October, FAO published four life stories on its gender website (<http://www.fao.org/gender> - Bite-sized stories). These stories illustrate how rural women farmers in Gujarat, India found solutions to some of the challenges they faced. They offer a timely look at how empowering rural women leads to improved food security, agricultural production, economic growth and well-being for families and communities. We feature two of the stories here...

When the price is right...

Like many smallholders around the world, the women farmers in rural Gujarat, India, lacked access to market information and disposable cash to pay for the transport of their products to local or nearby markets. They tended to sell their goods to local traders at whatever price the traders dictated. As a result, they received low returns for their produce, while the traders captured significant profits. Moreover, most of the farmers lacked access to storage facilities. This meant that many of them tended to sell the same agricultural produce simultaneously at harvest time, driving their prices down even further.

In response, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a non-governmental organization of poor, self-employed women workers across India, many of whom are rural women farmers, set up a simple market price information system to help rural women get better and fairer prices for their goods.

How it works

Each day, SEWA sends a text message to a few select members in each village, who have been provided with mobile phones. The messages include up-to-date spot and future prices for major cash crops or commodities in three or four of the nearest markets.

The members post the updated prices (in the local language) on a public chalk board that is easily accessible to the community – usually outside a local government office or health centre. Another member then uses a mobile phone to take a picture of the updated board and send it to SEWA headquarters in Ahmedabad, where the data is triangulated to verify its accuracy.

With this information the women farmers throughout the village are able to sell their produce at higher – and fairer – market prices individually. In addition, they are able to group together and reach consensus to bulk and transport produce to nearby markets, thereby skipping the middleman, increasing their income, and decreasing risk. Some of them have even begun using warehouse receipt systems to store crops while they wait for higher prices. These systems allow farmers to deposit their non-perishable cash crop at harvest time. In return, they have the option to obtain a loan against the deposit, or a partial payment (at a share they determine). Otherwise, they can leave the stock in storage until market prices rise, at which point they can sell it. This has reduced the profit margin that traders and middlemen had once made, but greatly increased the income of the women farmers themselves.

In the long term, the women are able to use the future pricing data to better plan their crops and make more informed harvesting decisions.

A different kind of library

Poor farmers often lack the basic tools and equipment they need for farm work. They may try to obtain such equipment on loan after other farmers have completed their work, but very often they have to do without it, or wait until the equipment is available. This can affect or delay planting and harvesting, thereby reducing their yields and increasing the risk of crises. In response, SEWA developed a tools “library” system for sharing equipment in groups.

How it works

In several districts, women farmers who are SEWA members come together to discuss, identify and agree on the tools and equipment they need most. The women pool their resources to buy a single farm implement or other tool. The equipment is then loaned to each member that needs it at a fixed low rate, on a rotating or as needed basis.

When the tool is not in use by SEWA members, it's hired out to other farmers in the village at going market rate. The income from these hires is used to pay for equipment repairs, or to purchase other tools that may be needed for the growing library. If no new tools or equipment are needed, the income is shared among the members.

The tools libraries stock basic farming equipment such as hand hoes, ploughs and oxcarts. In addition, they stock solar lanterns, solar panels and biogas generators, as well as first aid kits, water quality test kits, and even ropes and stakes for emergency rescue during floods. The library system provides farmers with access to tools and equipment they would otherwise not be able to afford, and helps them to improve productivity and income. There are now numerous self-sustaining tools and equipment libraries in community learning centres where SEWA operates.

