

Innovative experiments by women farmers: sharing experiences from agro-ecology, fishery and kitchen garden programmes

Short proceedings of the workshop organised from 14th to 16 December 2022, Pune

For the last two years SOPPECOM along with MAKAAAM network has been involved in implementing three livelihood programmes for rural women farmers: agroecology based farming, kitchen gardens and fishery. A state level workshop was organised in December 2022 in Pune where women farmers who have been part of this process participated. Around 100 participants across 11 districts - including women farmers and representatives of organisations working with them - participated in the three-day workshop. The objective of the workshop was to discuss learnings from the three programmes so far, and action programme for the year of 2023. Brief proceedings of the workshop are presented here.

Setting the stage

Seema Kulkarni began with the introduction to the workshop, and talked about the importance of such experiments in the current context of climate change, and how they represent alternative pathways to mainstream, dominant model of development. Swati Satpute and Sneha Bhat briefly presented about the three programmes.



Women's experiences



In this session group discussions were held, in which women were encouraged to detail out their experiences of participating in the programme. Group discussions were followed by presentation by each group, in which they talked about both constraints and gains from the programme.

Women practicing agroecology talked about the challenges they had to face in the last two years due to unexpected changes in weather and rainfall or due to crop raiding by wild animals. They also talked about the constraints they had to face being women, single women, belonging to certain castes, or because they were doing something different from the rest of the village. Dalit women farmers from Beed district, who now own the grazing lands that were regularised shared how hiring labour from upper caste for agricultural operations was challenging. The own bullocks/ equipment

for sowing, and often provide their services to the socio-economically better off people and only after they are served would they turn to the Dalits and other poor farmers who have to wait until the very end. Women had difficulties convincing male members of their family to participate in the programme. Other farmers from the village often made fun of the women's 'colourful' fields. Single women especially have to deal with people stealing stuff from their fields. Many women had to suffer losses this year due to heavy rainfall, but they want to continue practicing this model because they see many more benefits of participation: improved quality of soil, reduced expense on inputs, increased consumption of vegetables, increased involvement in farm related decision making. Most importantly they cherish the knowledge they are gaining through the programme, and being part of the group.

Fisherfolk women from Gondia had to face battles on many fronts to establish their group's right over the tank in their village. They faced opposition from their families, community, and their GP members, as nobody believed that a group of women can successfully establish a fishery setup. It was their first time engaging in the activity, so they had to learn all the intricacies of the trade. While in terms of sale, they did not get enough money, women wanted to continue with the programme as this provided a chance to include the local variety of fish in their own diet, and reduce their household expense. But also because they want the new identity they are building of being part of the fish producer group. They are extremely proud about their achievement, that they proved everyone wrong, and showed that women cannot only do the fishing, but can do it better than some of the men's groups in the village did in the past.

The women participating in the kitchen garden programme had a lot to say about how it has helped them. Their consumption of vegetables increased, and they were able to save the money they would have otherwise spent in the market. Some were also able to gain additional cash by selling excess produce. Some women who did not have enough space set their gardens in the courtyard/ field of other women. In one case in Raigad, few women came together and set up a common kitchen garden.

Women's eagerness to continue with the programme was common in all these presentations. They want to continue because they see value in this effort not only because it is supporting their livelihood but also because this provides them a platform to come together, meet like-minded women, be part of a group, and enhance their knowledge.

Conservation of traditional local varieties of seeds



Two sessions were organised to discuss a way forward for preserving traditional and local varieties of seeds. In the first session district wise groups were formed, and participants were encouraged to make a list of foodgrains and vegetable varieties that are now extinct/ not easily available.

Discussion following the exercise produced a wealth of knowledge. Women farmers from each district made a list of many such varieties that they once used, but are not available anymore, along with their characteristics and their uses.

In another session Mr Sanjay Patil (an expert in seed conservation) was the guest invitee for the second session on seeds. In his session he talked about the steps needed to take forward the programme for the preservation and revival of fast disappearing local seed varieties and also the knowledge holders of these varieties. Many action points emerged from this session that would be taken up in the coming year.

Climate change and adaptations

Dr Rajashree Joshi (BAIF) was the guest invitee in this session, and she engaged with the participant women farmers' in the discussion about how they perceive effects of climate change. In her presentation she focused on effects of climate change on women. She especially talked about need for crop diversity and diversifying livelihood options for adapting with the changes caused by climate change.

Crop raiding by wild animals



Crop losses due to raiding by wild animals has been a persistent problem for all the women participants. In this session Dr Milind Watve and Mr Vijay Dethe shared their experiences. They underlined the government policies that have contributed to the current situation, and what steps are plausible for farmers in this context. Both the speakers said that there can be no short term solutions to this wider problem which has emerged from the

overall policy thrust of the Government that has barred any action by humans against wild animals. This has led to the increase in the population of the wild animals and importantly them inhabiting the villages and farms. To address this wider problem, it underscored the need for revisiting the government policy and controlling the wild animal population among other things.

They gave information about the GR of Maharashtra government that provides compensation to farmers who suffer losses due to animal attacks. In terms of action points, they suggested that farmers be encouraged to file in as many complaints as possible to avail of the compensation for crop losses due to wild animals. They explained procedures for filing complaints, and reiterated that more complaints need to be filed by farmers in order to get the government to change the policy related to wild animals.

Livestock

Dr Nitya Ghotge (Anthra) in this session talked about importance of livestock for rural women's livelihood. She talked about local breeds getting extinct due to overt emphasis on commercial livestock rearing. Number of problems associated with commercialisation of livestock production have arisen and these have further been aggravated by climate change. She underlined importance of protecting and building the local breeds of livestock (chicken, goats, cows and bullocks) to support farming activities.

Sustaining the programmes and way forward



Manish Rajankar of FEED, associated with MAKAAAM presented his thoughts on how to take forward the women's fishery programme. He said it would be important to preserve various varieties of fish, in order to sustain productivity of the tank. Reviving 'dead' tanks is an important step before revival of local fishery can be taken up, and women can play an important role in this process. Committees to maintain biodiversity of tanks need to be formed. Special attention has to be given to women's participation in the fishing cooperatives.

Niranjana Maru of Chetana Vikas talked about taking forward the agroecology programme. She said it would be important to maintain local varieties of good quality seeds to sustain this programme. Also maintaining livestock to fulfil the need of manure, and using mulch to increase soil quality would be important. During transition from chemical use to agroecology based farming, it should be expected that there would be some losses. Currently even governments are not able to come with solutions to deal with climate change, so we should be equipped with what we can do at our field level. We should be able to manage water logging/ water scarcity at our farm depending on the rainfall, we need to come up with alternate plans in case of crop failure.

Kaustubh Pandhripande, FEED talked about how these experiments could be taken forward by networks, and how they could be scaled up. He also mentioned as to how networks like MAKAAAM and RRA could learn from each other, and contribute to the work other is doing.

In her closing remarks Seema Kulkarni reiterated some of the action points emerging from the two days' discussion including a programme for preservation of traditional seeds, and capacity building of women farmers for filing complaints of crop raiding. She also mentioned having a sanghatan/ platform of women farmers doing agroecology as an important step towards strengthening the cause of Agro-ecology.

