

Knowledge and Resource base for Farmers' Interest Groups

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Small and marginal farmers constitute the largest group of producers in Indian agriculture; 85% of operated holdings are smaller than or about two hectares and amongst these holdings, 66% are less than one hectare (Singh, 2012). It has made proper and timely delivery of inputs and technical services very difficult. Due to inadequate research-extension-farmers linkages, there has been low adoption of innovations and improved technologies in farmers' field. There is a need to organize the farmers for availing the benefits of better technology for the agricultural production. Collectivization of agriculture producers, especially small and marginal farmers, into Farmers Interest Group has emerged as one of the most effective pathways to address the many challenges of agriculture but most importantly, improved access to investments, technology and inputs and markets. Collectivization of farmers can be done through mobilizing farmers into groups called Farmer Interest Groups (FIGs), forming Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), strengthening farmers' capacity through training on agricultural best practices for enhancing crop productivity in sustainable manner, ensuring access to and usage of quality inputs and services, and facilitating access of the producer groups to fair and remunerative markets for marketing the crop produce as well as their value added products, where feasible. Farmers Organizations are participatory platforms for improving decision making capacity and stimulating local innovation for sustainable agriculture. Discovery-based learning is related to agro-ecological principles in a participatory learning process throughout a crop cycle (Braun *et al.*, 2000).

Farmers' Organizations are seen as a useful organizational mechanism for mobilizing farmers' collective self-help action aimed at improving their own economic and social situation and that of their communities. Such organizations were perceived to have an ability to generate resources from their members. Empowered farmers' organizations in form of SHG, FIG, FPO can act as convergent points or platforms for solving local problems and mobilizing human and financial resources for sustainable development (Manalili, 1990). When the farmers are facilitated to organize groups, trained and guided properly, they can attain tremendous development goal which would eventually make the group self-reliant and self

sufficient. By organizing, farmers can be empowered to produce, add value, market their commodities and develop effective linkages with input agencies such as financial service providers, as well as output markets. The establishment of Farmer's Interest Groups (FIGs) and farmer's federation helps in gaining the confidence of farmers in the agriculture sector (Singh and Srinivasan, 1998). The Indian government has been promoting a different form of collectives called Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), FIGs to address the challenges faced by the small and marginal farmers, particularly those to do with enhanced access to investments, technological advancements, and efficient inputs and markets (Hellin *et al.*, 2009; Department of Agriculture & Cooperation, 2013).

An effort is being done in four adopted villages of NCR to address the strengthening of rural agriculture sector in terms of production, productivity, technological empowerment, capacity building and knowledge empowerment of small and marginal farmers through Farmer Interest Groups (FIGs), with the objective of mobilizing farmers into agriculture-driven farmers interest groups through participatory approach for capacity building and generating knowledge and resource base and to develop forward and backward institutional linkages of farmers interest groups.

To develop agriculture driven model villages, four villages have been selected namely Khajurka (Palwal, Haryana), Kuthbi (Muzaffarnagar, U.P), Rajpur (Aligarh, U.P) and Beenjpur (Alwar, Rajasthan). After the need assessment of the villages it was realized that farmers were not organized in a group and they are working individually in their respective social system. Since they were working individually, they could not get the benefit and facilities of government machineries and schemes. Therefore, farmers were mobilized for collective approach in the villages and after formation of farmers groups, technological and capacity building interventions were carried out on the participatory approach.

To enhance production, productivity and profitability of farmers and make them self sufficient following activities were conducted:

1. *On farm assessment and demonstration of improved agricultural technologies.*

A participatory rural appraisal along with well-structured benchmark survey was conducted for the assessment and agro-eco system analysis of existing situation. After conducting the baseline survey, bio-resource mapping, topographic analysis, agro-ecosystem analysis and problem identification, the major problems identified were low yield of paddy, wheat, mustard, forage sorghum and vegetable crops and lack of improved management practices for higher production; low production of milk and high incidences of livestock diseases. Therefore, for technological empowerment of farmers through FIGs, demonstrations on location specific improved crop varieties were conducted.

During *Rabi* 2015-16 demonstrations on location specific improved varieties of wheat, mustard, lentil, gram, spinach and carrot were conducted. Farmers in all the villages liked IARI varieties, although the Wheat variety HD 3086 performed better at all the locations. The performance of the IARI Kharif crop varieties at farmers' field in project villages were also assessed through collective approach.

2. *Making quality seed and technologies available among farmers through farmer to farmer seed exchange*

The availability of quality seed is most important input for enhancing agricultural production and profitability. Through collective approach the quality seed of different crops and varieties were made available to the farmers. Through this initiative farmers could get good quality seeds of latest variety and getting high yield and good economic return through this. The seed is also spread among farmers through farmer to farmer seed exchange programme.

3. *Capacity building of farmers*

The capacity building activities of farmers were undertaken to enhance the skills and knowledge of group members. The Training at villages included soil testing and nutrient management and soil health card distribution programme, Agro-Advisory Campaign, Swacha Bharat Abhiyan, training on health, sanitation, nutrition and hygienic practices, training of women farmers on nutrition garden, training on importance of different bio-fertilizers e.g. Azolla, BGA, Azospirillum, PSB and Azotobacter for rice and vegetables crops along with demonstrations on the application method, training on improved agricultural practices for climate change, Soil and water mapping with the use of Participatory GIS etc. In addition, various training programmes exposure visit of farmers to different institutes, exhibition, and farmer's fair were also organized.

4. *Establishment of Knowledge center*

For Establishment of Knowledge center in these village different approaches were adopted like wall magazines on different crops and Farm Libraries with literature, booklet, leaflet, and other reading materials.

5. *Agro-advisory service*

The farmer group members were linked with mKrishi service with an ecosystem that empowers them to make sound decisions about agriculture, drive profits and conserve the environment. Through this platform farmer were getting information on weather, soil, fertilizer and pesticide, market prices and Facilitate better production and cultivation practices.

6. *Linkages with Line Department*

Convergence and linkages of farmer group with other department were established after identification of organizations such as KVK, ATMA line departments, marketing agencies, financial institutions, input agencies, etc working in project area. Farmer's organization helps in accessing technical support through convergence of financial institution and linkages with developmental organization.

Conclusion

Farmer's organization is critical and central for sustainable agriculture. There is a need to organize the farmers for availing the benefits of better technology for the agricultural production. Farmers in a group can use their resources in an efficient way towards achieving profitable outcome with the help of technical guidance and mutual help. Farmers' Interest groups, networks or federations can all make a huge contribution to raising awareness and campaigning for change. In majority of cases, strong local organizations are, and will continue to be, key to building sustainable development of agriculture.

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