PLANTING THE SEEDS OF SECURITY

An Oxfam collaboration helps farmers in Nepal learn new techniques to adapt to a harsh climate to feed their families and earn a living.

BY DIVYA AMALDI | WINTER 2024

In the Sudurpaschim province of Nepal, land and opportunities to make money are drying up. Agriculture is Nepal’s main economic activity and employs nearly 60% of Nepal’s people, yet farming families are struggling to grow enough food to feed their children a nutritious diet.

“When we have balanced rain and sun, we have good crop production,” said Tikeshwori Malla, a farmer in the Doti district. “We used to have enough food from our fields and didn’t have to buy anything from outside.”

Water is scarce in this area, so farmers rely on rainwater. Unpredictable rainfall, coupled with extreme weather such as crop-destroying hailstorms, has created a situation where farmers must buy food they once grew. In times of good rainfall, Ganga Devi Malla, a farmer in Jorayal Rural Municipality, Doti district, told us she could work the land for six months and her family could live off the yield for the rest of the year. Now, she says, “We work for the whole year, but we have nothing when it’s time for the returns.”

RE-ENVISIONING THE AGRICULTURAL MODEL

It is common for men from this region to work abroad and send money back home to their families. Ganga Devi Malla took care of her family and managed their farm while her husband worked in India. She also earned money renting out rooms in her home, which brought her an unexpected opportunity. Local Initiatives for Biodiversity, Research and Development (LI-BIRD), a nonprofit that was renting from her, told her about a project it was administering in the hopes of reducing the impacts of climate change on crops. The initiative was Sowing Diversity–Harvesting Security (SDHS), an Oxfam project running from 2019 to 2023 that aimed to improve the food and nutrition security of women and Indigenous smallholder farmers in four districts of Sudurpaschim province.

Oxfam and LI-BIRD partnered to run farmer field schools, where farmers learned about crop diversity and then planted and studied new crop varieties better suited for the changing climate on their farms. Over the course of the project, Oxfam and LI-BIRD established 236 farmer field schools throughout the four districts.

They also set up six seed cooperatives. The cooperatives secured certified seeds, which went into seed banks and were sold to private companies, governments, and farmers to turn a profit. Before this project was implemented, almost 80% of farmers...
lacked access to quality seeds—even though agriculture is a source of livelihood for the majority of the population. Aakash Koirala, a LI-BIRD senior program officer, explained that many farmers got their seeds from informal markets, which meant “the quality of the seeds was not that good and did not give good outputs. ... [B]ecause the production was not good, it risked their food security.” The seed cooperatives not only generate income, but they ensured that more farmers—43,266 of them, to be exact—could obtain higher-quality seeds.

SUPPLYING FARMERS WITH THE TOOLS, TECHNIQUES, AND CONFIDENCE TO GROW

The farmers in Ganga Devi Malla’s group decided to grow a type of domestic wheat known as white dabdi, which is more tolerant of harsh climate conditions and requires less fertilizer and water than other varieties of wheat. The farmers learned that sowing seeds in parallel lines would yield more wheat from fewer seeds. Prior to participating in the field school, Ganga Devi Malla said, “We survived as farmers but we didn’t know all the techniques, so we were doing more work and getting less returns. Now we work less, and the wages are increasing.”

Tikeshwori Malla agreed. “We had a traditional way of farming from our ancestors. They used to grow crops very close to each other.” By attending farmer field school twice a week, she learned to grow plants at appropriate distances and to grow different crops in separate plots. She also received instruction in how to make liquid fertilizer and the best times to water, fertilize, and weed crops.

“There is nothing like LI-BIRD,” she said. “We have learned many things that we did not know, things we never experienced before.” In addition, the field school’s reach goes beyond its students; Tikeshwori Malla said participants are sharing what they’ve learned with other villagers.

Participants also learned to advocate for themselves. “After they enrolled with the school it helped them develop their public speaking skills,” said Koirala, the program officer. “Before, they didn’t used to speak up in open platforms.” He reports that many have become involved with local politics.

Although the project concluded this year, Oxfam in Nepal and LI-BIRD worked closely with government agencies to provide support for sustainable food and nutrition security. “Even after our project is completed, the schools that we have started here will remain with the help of the government agencies, [as well as] the projects that we have been running, like choosing the type of seeds, then working on production of that seed, and then marketing it correctly,” said Koirala.

Equipped with the tools and techniques to tackle the impacts of climate change, Tikeshwori Malla and other participants await the fruits of their labor. “We expect that things will be good for us in the future,” she said.

Reporting by Jean-Sebastien Durocher.