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WORKING WITH COMMUNITY AGRONOMISTS TO REACH WOMEN FARMERS

OUTCOMES AND LESSONS LEARNED BRIEF

BACKGROUND

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and PepsiCo are partnering to promote women’s economic empowerment in the potato supply chain in West Bengal, India. The partnership aims to demonstrate the business case that empowering women makes good social and economic sense, leading to the adoption of sustainable farming practices, improved yields and income for farming families, and increased profitability for companies. The project uses multiple approaches to reach, benefit, and empower women in the potato supply chain, strengthening women’s land tenure security, creating improved livelihoods and entrepreneurial opportunities for women, and promoting increased social acceptance of women’s role as farmers. This project is implemented under the Integrated Land and Resource Governance (ILRG) task order, led by Tetra Tech in collaboration with Landesa, with funding from the Women’s Global Development and Prosperity (WGDP) Fund at USAID.

During the 2019 – 2020 potato season, ILRG supported four women Community Agronomists in two communities to reach, support, and empower women potato farmers who are part of PepsiCo’s supply chain in West Bengal. Women (like men) can benefit from mentoring support not only on agronomic practices but also in household and group decision-making, access to credit, use of time-saving

techniques and technologies, safety measures, and market negotiation to successfully engage in the PepsiCo potato supply chain. While external experts may be useful for training in these technical areas, they are not always available when needed for continued capacity-building, mentorship, and problem-solving assistance. Thus, ILRG trained women as Community Agronomists to support local women potato farmers, with the goal of ensuring easy and timely provision of extension support services and access to modern potato cultivation techniques for women in PepsiCo communities and farming households. It was also important to empower these Community Agronomists in becoming community-recognized change makers, mentors, trainers, and support service providers.

Four women in two communities – Dhuluk (Purba Bardwan District) and Boragori (Hooghly District) – were selected to participate in this project in the first year. Project support included a three-day Community Agronomist training program that covered potato agronomy and women’s empowerment principles, on-call support from ILRG Field Agronomists and the ILRG Country Coordinator, and a monthly stipend. Agricultural cooperative societies and PepsiCo staff also provided support to identify potential candidates. PepsiCo, ILRG, and agricultural cooperative societies provided female Community Agronomists with continued technical support. ILRG offered hands-on training, mentoring, and problem-solving support on data collection, data analysis, how to organize field visits, and how to engage with women farmers. PepsiCo Agronomists provided direct guidance on PepsiCo potato production.



Community Agronomist training with PepsiCo staff

JEN PETERSON/TETRA TECH

The purpose of the activity was to test the effectiveness of using Community Agronomists to help PepsiCo staff reach more women farmers within their supply chain. ILRG selected literate women with some schooling (up to grades 8 – 12), with previous farming experience, as well as experience supporting community development programs. The role of these Community Agronomists was to act as a bridge between women farmers organized in women’s groups and PepsiCo staff to disseminate information, technologies, and other services. They supported training in PepsiCo’s package of potato farming practices (POP) and in sustainable farming practices (SFPs), and monitored field-level activities during household visits. In Year 2, they will provide mentoring and support to increase gender equality and address harmful gender norms within the project, as well as support for women who participate in an upcoming Empowered Entrepreneurship Training (EET). Developed by the Johns Hopkins University (JHU) SEE Change Initiative, EET is an entrepreneurship program focused on comprehensive business, self-empowerment, and leadership skills.

OUTCOMES

Over the course of the potato production season (November – March), these four female Community Agronomists supported 71 women organized in seven women’s groups in two farming communities. In addition to providing much-needed local support and mentoring, they also developed their own agronomic, personal, and professional skills. They learned new farming techniques related to potato seed cutting, use of personal protection equipment (PPE), safe storage and use of agrochemicals, and grading and packaging of potatoes, as well as learning about harmful production practices such as crop residue

burning, which have negative environmental impacts. They also learned how to organize training events, prepare reports, and interact with local farm families in a professional capacity.



Field visit and interaction with farmers by CA in Dhuluk
MALA GOSWAMI/TETRA TECH

Their main achievements this year include increased self-confidence and community acceptance of women in non-traditional roles. Community Agronomists developed confidence to meet with farmers – including male farmers – to discuss agricultural issues and provide them with guidance. Community acceptance was a critical success, with farmers welcoming Community Agronomists during field visits, asking them questions, and taking their advice.

Farmers in the community have even requested Community Agronomists to continue field visits beyond the potato season and into the rice season. Working as Community Agronomists helped women overcome personal and social barriers related to women’s public speaking. Engaging Community Agronomists was key to begin to shift social gender norms in these communities, leading men and communities to increasingly acknowledge and respect women as valuable sources of agricultural knowledge, change agents, and leaders.

CHALLENGES

Initially, Community Agronomists were not sure if they could play this role and do their jobs effectively. They were unsure of their capacity, the support they would receive from their families, and acceptance from the community. Their biggest initial challenge was convincing their husbands and family members that they could successfully perform the required tasks while simultaneously ensuring that their regular household duties and roles were fulfilled. In some cases, it took almost two months to prove this personal “business case.” Another challenge was visiting farmers and farm families in their fields and at home, at a time that was convenient to them. This required a lot of flexibility and negotiation, and the Community Agronomists had to adapt their schedules to provide required support. In some cases, farmers were hesitant to share information about their farming practices, especially fertilizer doses and agrochemical use. In addition, in March 2020 coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) restricted the ability of ILRG Field Agronomists to reach these two communities, so having Community Agronomists living in these communities became even more important.

However, the biggest challenge was community acceptance of Community Agronomists, even from women’s group members. Social gender norms establish the roles that men and women are allowed or expected to hold, with advisory roles usually associated with men. With their own determination and support from agricultural cooperative societies to engage and convince key community members, technical support from PepsiCo staff, programmatic support from the ILRG team, and moral support from family members, Community Agronomists were able to overcome these barriers and demonstrate their value.

LESSONS LEARNED

TECHNICAL SUPPORT IS NOT ENOUGH FOR WOMEN TO SUCCESSFULLY SERVE AS COMMUNITY AGRONOMISTS. WOMEN ALSO NEED COMMUNITY SUPPORT

AND ACCEPTANCE. ILRG took a two-pronged approach to promote community acceptance. First, ILRG staff discussed the approach with agricultural cooperative societies (which function as vendors in the PepsiCo supply chain) and PepsiCo field staff, explaining how Community Agronomists could act as a bridge between them and farmers, helping meet PepsiCo production and business goals. Second, the ILRG team met with women’s groups to communicate the benefits of Community Agronomists’ services. Beyond technical capacity-building, PepsiCo, ILRG, and agricultural cooperative societies assisted Community Agronomists to negotiate and develop community acceptance. Agricultural cooperative societies utilized the services of female Community Agronomists to improve networking with their member farmers, organize meetings with women’s groups, and share information, which helped to validate female Community Agronomists’ professional expertise in the eyes of community members.

ENSURING FAMILY SUPPORT FOR WOMEN TO SERVE AS COMMUNITY AGRONOMISTS IS CRITICAL. Getting support and buy-in from husbands and family members is critical during the selection process. In addition to talking to potential candidates, it is important to meet directly with husbands and other key family members, such as in-laws, to explain the importance of the position and the potential benefits that serving as a Community Agronomist have to the family and the community. Sensitive issues such as mobility, time management, and redistribution of household and care work responsibilities need to be discussed with all household members.

IDENTIFYING AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVE SOCIETIES, EXISTING WOMEN’S GROUPS, AND LOCAL LEADERS TO SUPPORT WOMEN IN THESE NEW ROLES IS ALSO IMPORTANT. Agricultural cooperative societies were critical to facilitating the initial identification of potential Community Agronomist candidates, who were later trained and tested for final selection. The support of these local institutions, local leaders, and women’s groups themselves was key to negotiating the eventual acceptance of Community Agronomists.

COMMUNITY AGRONOMISTS WERE ABLE TO PROVIDE MORE FREQUENT SUPPORT AND MENTORING TO PEPSICO FARMERS THAN FIELD AGRONOMISTS. The four Community Agronomists were able to conduct field visits to all 71 women in the seven women’s groups in the two farming communities where they live, and provided them with direct support as needed during the potato growing season. Although ILRG also supported three university-educated Field Agronomists to work with a larger number of women (428 additional women in 10 additional communities, for a total of 499 women in 12 communities), they are located several kilometers away from the communities that are supported by the Community Agronomists, and the Field Agronomists were not able to provide the same degree of close guidance and mentoring support in the field.

COMMUNITY AGRONOMISTS WERE ABLE TO COLLECT FARMER YIELD DATA AND PROVIDED CRITICAL MENTORING DURING COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS. The Community Agronomists successfully collected yield data from over half of the 71 women they supported, despite COVID-19 restrictions, because they were physically located in the communities and could easily reach out to their neighbors. They were able to help farmers maintain their records and calculate yield, and provided important feedback on the success of the potato growing season.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FROM THE COMMUNITY AGRONOMISTS THEMSELVES

KUSUM RAY, COMMUNITY AGRONOMIST, BORAGORI

“I feel proud to be associated with this because of the appreciation and respect I received from the villagers, even male farmers. My father also started taking my advice during this potato season, especially for keeping

records and he started using PPE regularly on my advice. That is my biggest satisfaction. This additional earning has made me more confident about my abilities.”

ARATI BESRA, COMMUNITY AGRONOMIST, DHULUK

“I have been able to prove that I can do this. Initially, my husband doubted my ability to perform. It took almost two months for him to acknowledge my efforts. Now I have not only acceptance but I [have] respect from other women and male farmers too. I am learning many new things and I am trying to apply those learnings at my personal level and also reaching out to many women like me.”

CONCLUSIONS

After overcoming some initial hurdles, Community Agronomists are confident and capable of providing essential mentoring services to PepsiCo farm families. The communities have increasingly acknowledged and valued their technical expertise, with farmers soliciting their support for activities like record keeping. Family members have become supportive, acknowledging the importance of positive female role models, further demonstrating the importance of engaging men and the wider community on women’s empowerment. As they noted above, the Community Agronomists are proud to be part of this innovative women’s empowerment initiative and they are saving their earnings for future needs, including health care and asset accumulation.

This activity increased women’s self-confidence, expanded perceptions on women’s roles in public spaces and as technical experts, and initiated dialogue on redistribution of household and caring responsibilities. These results are important to broader outcomes on gender equality and women’s empowerment and provide a solid foundation to upcoming Year 2 activities on changing social and gender norms. The work carried out by the Community Agronomists also increased PepsiCo’s capacity to reach, benefit, and empower women farmers beyond scheduled trainings and meetings. Community Agronomists reemphasized SFPs and monitored field use of PPE, which supported increased adoption of improved practices that will ultimately increase productivity in supply chains.

For more detailed information on the ILRG partnership between USAID and PepsiCo, please see the Integrated Land and Resource Governance Task Order under the Strengthening Tenure and Resource Rights II (STARR II) IDIQ. <https://www.land-links.org/project/integrated-land-and-resource-governance-ilrg/>; https://www.land-links.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ILRG_Global_Fact-Sheet.pdf