Harnessing the power of a collective

In Ahmednagar Maharashtra, a local FPO enables farmers to access cheaper agri inputs, benefit from vermicomposting

Vikas Prakash Joshi & Geetanjali Prasad | Dhawalpuri, Maharashtra

The village of Dhawalpuri is located in the Parner taluka of Maharashtra's Ahmednagar district, about 30 km by road from the main Ahmednagar town. Its population is around 5,000 and the major occupation of the people in the village is agriculture. The main crops in the village are moong (green gram), bajra (pearl millet), soybean and jowar (sorghum) in kharif season; wheat, tomato and onion in the rabi season. The village residents largely depend on agriculture as their main occupation while there is also migration to the towns of Bhalawani, Ahmednagar and the city of Pune for seasonal employment as labour, especially in times of drought and crop failure.

The majority of farmers in Dhawalpuri belong to the small, marginal and medium categories. These farmers, like in many villages across the country, have traditionally lacked marketing options for their produce, barring the weekly bazaar in their village; they also struggled to get cheaper inputs and had to travel to nearby towns to buy fertiliser, pesticides, seeds, irrigation equipment and so on. Both time and money were wasted in this process. Farmers in Dhawalpuri generally did not have much surplus to invest nor do they get the benefits of economies of scale as they lack bargaining power; thus leading to the farmers getting a fraction of the value that the consumer pays and not able to get cheaper inputs either.

It was to redress these perennial issues that WOTR helped set up the Ankur Farmer Producer Organisation (Ankur FPO) in Dhawalpuri on December 9, 2016. This was done with support from the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) and the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), under the ‘Soil Protection and rehabilitation for food security’ project (Pro-Soil project).

Key aspects of the success – the vermi composting unit and agri-mall

Since its inception, the Ankur FPO has set up a vermicompost unit and an 'agri-mall', both of which are having a positive impact on the lives of farmers in Dhawalpuri and villages nearby.
Project Manager Santosh Chaudhari tells us more about the ‘success story’ of the Ankur FPO. He says “The vermicompost unit was established in March 2017, after several months of creating awareness among farmers of the need for organic agriculture practices, while the Agri-mall was set up on June 29, 2018.” Govind Kashninath Kute (55) is one such farmer who has benefitted, both from the vermicompost unit and the agri-mall. Govind owns 10 acres of land, of which he carries out agriculture on about 4-5 acres; the rest of his land is fallow. His main crops are wheat, chickpea in the rabi season and moong and onion in the kharif season. He says “When I compare the costs of vermicompost and chemical fertiliser, I can get a bag of vermicompost of 50 kg for around Rs. 400, while for chemical fertiliser it would have cost me at least Rs. 800 to 1000 per 50 kg bag. It also helps to improve soil health.”

Santosh adds that 30 to 40 farmers in the village and around it have purchased vermicompost from the unit. He points out “For an acre of onion crop, a farmer may need 7 to 8 bags of fertilizer. In comparison, he may need 10 to 12 bags of vermicompost for onion but there is still a net saving.”

Besides improving soil health, the Ankur FPO has also set up an ‘agri-mall’ that aims to satisfy all farmers’ needs under one roof. The agri mall which is essentially a shop, has seeds, fertilizer, pesticides, medicines for tackling pests, pipes and drip irrigation equipment. The shop was set up on June 29, 2018. It has done sales of Rs. 26 lakh since then till December-end 2018 and 300-400 farmers have bought products from there, in that period.

Query Somnath Palve, a farmer himself and a director on the Ankur FPO board, on what differentiates this store from others in Bhalawani or Ahmednagar, and he says “We offer on average a discount of around 6-7 % on all items here, relative to what stores in those towns offer. Besides, this price advantage, farmers save on time and money as they can buy their products here rather than travelling 30 km to Ahmednagar or 20 km to Bhalawani.”

A few other farmers gathered at the store add that the personalised care and prescriptions from the Ankur FPO consultant is another big benefit as opposed to the generic products supplied by larger stores in the town.

(with inputs from Santosh Chaudhuri and Utkarsh Bhole, WOTR Parner Unit)