Organic inputs reduce costs considerably

Farmers in Mandla, Madhya Pradesh find that despite increased labour, organic inputs are attractive for sustainability in the long run

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According to the Census 2011, there are 263 million people employed in the agricultural sector in our country, of which over 144 million are agricultural labourers. Agricultural labourers are generally those who either do not have land of their own, or whose land is of poor quality and hence cannot earn them a remunerative income. Dumari Singh, in the Banar village of Madhya Pradesh’s Mandla district is one such labourer who had to regularly migrate for his livelihood.

Despite owning 2.5 acres of land, prior to 2012, Dumari Singh would earn barely Rs. 1,000 a month during the kharif (July-October) season, due to the poor quality of his soil. He would often migrate to Mandla district in MP or Raipur in Chhattisgarh or Dholpur in Rajasthan in search of agricultural labour work, where he earned slightly more, Rs. 2,000 – 3,000 per month, during the rest of the year. When the rains were bad, he often spent the entire year working outside.

In 2012, WOTR took up a watershed development project in Banar, after which Dumari Singh could grow kodokutki (inferior millets), and later in 2016, he started growing arhar (pigeon peas) and toor (split peas). He was able to earn an average of Rs. 3,000 per month, in kharif and about Rs. 2,000 in rabi.

Despite this positive change, Dumari Singh notes that his earnings did not rise as much as he wished, mainly due to high expenditure on chemical fertilisers. Explaining the situation, he said “I had to travel three to 10 times to nearby Babalia market i.e. 20 km away from my village in Kharif season to buy chemical fertilisers. I was able to make an income of around 35,000 per year, but I had to spend 3,000- 4,000 rupees in kharif season and Rs. 5,000 - 6,000 rupees in rabi season, for buying urea and other chemical fertilisers.”

In 2017, to address this issue of high dependency of farmers on chemical fertilisers, degraded soil quality and to improve the livelihoods in rainfed areas of Madhya Pradesh, WOTR initiated eco-friendly agricultural practices. These activities were supported by NABARD’s Watershed
Development Fund (WDF) project. Training programmes were started by WOTR on organic farming and vermicomposting in 3 villages of Mandla district namely: Banar, Barbati and Gadadeori. Dumari Singh was one of the farmers who attended the training, which made him aware of organic farming.

In this context, Lalit Kumar Nirmalkar, the WDF project manager at WOTR's MP Regional Resource Centre shares, “In Banar, we gave a demonstration which eight of the 12 village development committee members attended. There was a common fear observed among the farmers about the reduction in yield. They all felt that nobody would compensate them when their yields reduced, after switching to organic practices. But we patiently explained to them that though their incomes may reduce a little in the beginning, their input costs would also go down and quality and productivity would improve”. With time Lalit adds that to battle this skepticism and fear about using organic inputs, they would start with a demonstration on small 30mx30m size plots. It was only after seeing the success on such a ‘demo-plot’ that Dumari Singh eventually shifted over to using organic inputs like vermi-compost and dashparni ark (an organic pest and insect repellant) in 2017.

Dumari Singh expresses his appreciation at the benefit it has brought to him, saying he had never imagined that he would able to grow food on his land due to its bad soil quality. He says “Now I am able to grow paddy, kodokutki and arhar (pigeon pea), maize and til (sesame seeds) in my own plot. My input cost has also reduced a lot by using home-made manure like vermicompost. My per-year input cost of fertiliser has reduced by about 50% over a single season by using vermicompost and other organic manure. One however has to be prepared for a lot of additional labour and preferably have access to manure from livestock in order to consistently use organic inputs”, he concludes.