

Quality Improvement of Production and Produce through Strong Market Linkage

Block Naugoan is the biggest Block of district Uttarkashi with an area of 37227 sq.km. and 107 gram panchayats in its fold. The literacy percentage of this area is 39 % and the rate of land holding is higher than other parts of Uttaranchal. Agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, forest and water are the main component of this village ecosystem where 98% of population is engaged in agricultural activities. Tough geographical terrain, uncertain weather conditions, scattered land holdings and limited agriculture land are the factors that make the life of people of this area difficult, limiting the options and opportunities for their livelihood.

Keeping these harsh realities in mind, HARC started its work in Rawain Valley for the social and economical development of the local people by strengthening their capacities and imparting the know-how. A development process can be sustained only when people are organized and take the lead themselves. Sense of ownership among the community is the corner stone for sustaining any development process, action and activity. Adopting a collective approach to development, HARC organized the people of Rawain Valley into groups and associations. As a result of various interventions done in the area, Rawain Valley Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association (RVFVGA) came into existence. To develop this association as a self controlled and self managed institution, HARC fortified the internal and external capacities of the association. On one hand these interventions resulted in improvement in quality and quantity of produce and knowledge building of the producer on the other it diversified the livelihood opportunities for the people of Rawain Valley.

Rawain Valley Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association (RVFVGA) took the initiative to deal with the problem of marketing the produce of the farmers in right hands and at right price. To meet the challenge of existing competition in the market, HARC motivated the association to prepare its production plans according to the market demand. Office bearers and members of the association were given opportunity to visit different fruit and vegetable mandis (whole sale market of fruits and vegetables) and have discussion with whole sellers, big buyers and mandi management associations. This exercise helped the association in developing their market strategy in accordance to the demand and supply situation in the market. HARC also trained the association members in grading and packing of the produce. These efforts though resulted in increased production of fruits and vegetables but the quality of the produce was not upto the market standards. To address this problem of the farmers HARC provided technical inputs and hired the services of specialists to help farmers improve the quality of their produce. Through these technical inputs (sowing methods, quality seeds, manure, plant protection, nursery raising) there was a remarkable improvement in the quality and quantity of the produce. The crop production plan since is made more technically. At present there are approx 6000 families in this area who are selling their produce through this association and have directly linked with the market. Due to the agricultural extension program of HARC in this area, the farmers now have learned how to make the best use of their agricultural land and by diversifying their crops they are improving their economic condition.

In the process of capacity development of the association and its members, more than 1000 farmers have been taken to Himachal Pradesh on an exposure to meet and interact with the farmers about their progressive techniques of farming. These exposures broadened their horizon of understanding and they became more confident of making the best use of their land.

These exposures played a great role in developing the entrepreneurship among the young farmers. As there was no agency available in this area to provide technical inputs and information, HARC organized training sessions for the farmers under the guidance of technical experts from two famous agriculture and horticulture universities of Himachal Pradesh. This training took place in the university itself and on the basis of these trainings, a cadre of more than 100 local para technicians was developed who took the responsibility of extending the technical know-how and information at village level in their area.

Other important issues before the farmers were - management of soil, maintenance of soil fertility, protecting plants from diseases and use of the organic pesticides. To deal with these issues and to motivate and encourage the farmers for quality produce, HARC conducted several demonstrations on vegetable production in Rawain Valley. Under these demonstrations more than 500 varieties of different vegetables were introduced to more than 2000 farmers. Since then farmers are more confident and keen to grow a variety of vegetables and market it. The most important issue of crop selection as per the nature and condition of growing area was the main thing that was focused during this training and demonstration.

How the Association came in to Existence

Before the association came into existence, the middlemen and big traders of the cities provided all the agri inputs like seeds, manure, medicines, packing material etc to the farmers of Rawain Valley with a bond that the farmers could not sell their produce to anyone but them. This arrangement inevitably resulted in the traders pocketing lion's share of the profit while the farmers and growers got a miniscule amount as price for their produce. The growers could not raise their voice against these middlemen as they were bound by the bond. Thus the presence of middlemen and big traders resulted in severe exploitation of the growers. The main factors responsible for this situation were lack of technical inputs and agricultural extension services at local level and want of local market for selling the produce. Sending the produce to the mandis on their own was not possible for the farmers as the transport cost was very high. Many a time the produce rotted in the fields only because of paucity of proper and economic transport facilities and bad conditions of the road in the hills. These problems made the growers bear heavy losses in spite of putting their best efforts, sweat and toil in the land.

These problems heightened specially at the time of tomato growing season as tomato is a delicate crop and the farmers did not have proper packaging material for them. The big traders manipulated the farmers' need by quoting a high price for providing packaging material. At the time of formation of the associations the farmers raised this problem before HARC in a monthly meeting of para technicians. Till then HARC had not thought of facilitating or exploring marketing channels for the produce of the farmers its task limiting to forming farming federations. Nevertheless when this problem was raised by the farmers, HARC studied the whole scenario at local level and made the farmers realize that all these problems existed because they were not organized. The lack of collective effort had made it easy for the middlemen to exploit them. The marketing problem and exploitation by the middlemen was the main reason for Rawain Valley Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association coming into existence.

The process of Formation of Association

In Rawain valley, there has been continuous expansion of agriculture techniques through HARC since 1990. To sustain the process and to develop expertise at local level HARC selected a few progressive farmers to give them different types of technical information and trainings, which was further disseminated by them to all other farmers in their area. These informed cadres of farmers were given the title of Para technicians. To have a regular interaction with these para technicians, monthly meetings were held in which they discussed about different aspects of vegetable production techniques and prepared collective plans. This resulted in a sharp

increase in the production of vegetables in this area. In 2001 the farmers produced tomatoes in large quantity but the marketing of this produce remained the main problem. After an intensive discussion about the marketing of tomato in a meeting with Para-technicians, HARC encouraged and facilitated the farmers to get organized in the form of farmers Interest Groups at village level and then in to the association for collective marketing of their produce. HARC built their perspective on collective approach to socio- economic development. This meeting was followed up by several rounds of meetings between the farmers and HARC where the issue was of getting organized and getting rid of exploitation from middlemen. These meetings helped in generating awareness among the farmers about the benefits of collective working for the solution of all their problems like quality production, marketing etc. The farmers themselves decided that all the producers would work collectively for the marketing of tomato. This gave birth to Rawain Valley Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association which, with the help of HARC, became a registered body in 2001 under the society act 1860.

Expansion of Association through organizing Village Level Meeting

The formation of Rawain valley fruit and vegetable association is not a result of single day but it is a part of various interventions that have been carried out by HARC to strengthen the development process for last five years. To develop a clear understanding on the importance of association and its internal and external processes HARC took the members of working committee of the association to Himanchal Pradesh where other associations were functioning. This helped in motivating the farmers to strengthen their association. With the facilitation of HARC, village level meetings were organized by the Para- technicians for discussing and providing the detail information on the objectives and structure of the association to all the farmers in the villages. Only those growers got the memberships who were involved in agricultural practices.

Structure of Rawain Valley Fruit and Vegetable Grower Association

For developing a democratic structure of the association, the 68 villages in the working area of HARC were brought together in 7 wards, with one ward in-charge for each ward. This Ward in-charge was a selected representative chosen from the village level Farmers Interest Groups (FIG). Since then all the ward in-charges automatically become members of the managing committee of the association. They are the link between the village and the association and are responsible for disseminating all the information from the village to association and from association to village. The president of farmer's groups in the village is the member of wards level cluster.

The aims of Rawain Valley Fruit and Vegetable Grower Association

Rawain valley fruit and vegetable association, for the welfare of its members and its organization had prepared the aims of association which are as follows:

- To work for the economic and social development of its grower members.
- To explore the possibilities of production of off- season crops and to increase production according to the demand of the market.
- To protect the interests of the farmers and reduce the exploitation from big traders and middlemen.
- To provide stability to agriculture system thereby improving the economic status of the growers.
- To build up the network with different agencies for getting technical inputs for growers.
- To motivate members to adopt practices of organic farming.

- To develop the skills of farmers to produce crops of good quality and to increase the diversification of crops.

The Strengthening Process of Association

Once the association came into existence, intensive interventions were done to strengthen the operational and managerial capacities of the association. For this purpose HARC organized various training programs on leadership development, management of association, accounts management, development of organizational structure, different production techniques etc. To develop their understanding and knowledge of market trends, HARC conducted exposures and surveys for the farmers to different mandis. These interventions helped the members and office bearers of the association to increase their work efficiency.

To improve the quality of fruits and vegetables HARC conducted an intensive quality campaign at village level in mission mode. In this mission the farmers were oriented about increasing the quality of produce according to the demand of market, pre and post harvesting process, good quality of seed etc. As a result the production and quality of produce increased in Rawain Valley.

This association has now become a source of inspiration and motivation for the farmers of other areas within and outside of Uttaranchal for commercial and organized agricultural activities. The produce of this area like tomato, capsicum, cabbage, peas, potato and French bean etc are being supplied to local market as well as to Mother Dairy, the main marketing agency of National Dairy Development Board, New Delhi.

Organized Marketing System of the Association

The main problem of farmers of Rawain valley was the marketing of their produce as there was no such facility available at local level. This led to exploitation of the growers at the hands of middlemen as they were compelled to sell their produce to these commission agents. HARC made the farmers realize the importance of collective marketing which became the main factor responsible for the birth of Rawain Valley fruit and vegetable growers association.

In the initial phase very few growers joined the association but when this experiment started becoming successful other growers also realized the importance of association and joined the same. In the year 2001, farmers of 5 villages joined the association. At present this number is 36 and farmers from 15 more villages have applied for the membership of association.

HARC exposed these farmers to various mandis, market demand surveys, logistic study and networking with seed and manure companies for strengthening market linkages of the association. As a result of this, seed companies now are participating in monthly meetings of association for negotiation of rates of their products. As a group farmer now have more bargaining power and they can negotiate with the companies on their own terms and conditions. The association which was selling its produce to local mandis initially is now supplying fruits and vegetable to Kanpur, Delhi, Saharanpur, and Dehradun mandis. The reputation of the association as a successful cooperative has now grown so much that this year the growers were able to command an advance of Rs 50 thousand from each whole seller for supplying the fruits and vegetables.

The different interventions and facilitations by HARC helped in building strong linkages with marketing agencies. In 2002, the association fixed the target of 450 ton for vegetable marketing which was achieved. In 2003 & 2004 the target was 700 & 1200 ton respectively, which was achieved with ease. This supply target was limited to Mother Dairy only while the actual supply including other agencies was much higher. The members of the Association also gained monetarily as it made the selection of crops and their variety according to market

demand . Today more than 50 varieties of vegetables are grown in Rawain valley. Now association is looking forward to supply fruits and vegetables to the mandis of Kathmandu in Nepal.

HARC gets the daily rates of fruits and vegetables from the web site of different wholesale markets in the country and provides it to the association. The association disseminates this information to growers at village level. This helps the growers to take right and informed decision about the selling of their produce. The logistic survey report is helpful in providing information to the association about the facilities available in mandis, transport facilities in different parts of the country and government proposals etc which is helping them in preparing their marketing strategy.

Production Packaging Cost

For proper transport and marketing facility, the association now has bought 2300 plastic crates in which it can pack vegetables for the market. This has reduced the packing cost by 95% . At the collection centres which are strategically located in this area, special attention is paid to the grading and packing of vegetables. These measures have ensured that only good quality product is sent to the market. For the packaging of fruits, the association has held discussions with several packaging companies weighing all methods of packaging.

Comparison Details of New Technology Knowledge with Production

Different technical inputs given by HARC have helped the farmers to grow the crops which are in great demand and fetch more price in the market. Rawain Valley Fruit and Vegetable Grower Association has also prepared an annual crop calendar. On the basis of this calendar and geographical features of the region different varieties of crop are being produced. This has resulted in a greater yield per hectare, for instance the production of tomato in 0.1 hectare which was 800 kg earlier has now risen to about 2000 kg. New and feasible technologies like wire staking by farmers in tomato production has increased its productivity. The increasing practice of organic farming has improved the quality of the produce. Today with tomato, other produce like Cauliflower, French bean, Capsicum, Lettuce, Broccoli are also coming in the market.

Reduced Cost of Transport

Farmers initially were not organized and there was no collective approach for marketing, so every grower used to sell the produce individually, which resulted into expense of Rs. 36 for each 10 kg produce. Rawain Valley of Fruit and Vegetable Association reduced the expenses up to 70 percent through collective marketing. This reduced transportation cost gave extra benefit to the growers. Now the association is able to talk directly with transporters and marketing agencies.

To organize the daily routine work, association has employed their 04 members on salary basis in their office. Today association has become so strong that after opening collection centres it is looking forward for ropeways and having their own trucks for transportation.

Details of the Marketing

Rawain Valley Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association is providing marketing facility to its members since 2001. Collection centres have been established at different locations to collect

and grade the produce. One collection centre caters to at least 7-8 villages. The association pays special attention to the grading and packing of the produce so that quality can be maintained and grower gets more profit. This year some new vegetables have been introduced in the market such as lettuce, broccoli, red cabbage, and fruits like pears and apples. These vegetables and fruits have been supplied to different mandis and marketing agencies. Lettuce, broccoli and red cabbage were also exported through a local exporter.

Facilities Provided by Association to its Members

Rawain Valley Fruit and Vegetable Grower Association has clearly mentioned in its by-laws that it will work in the interest of its members. The association is providing following facilities to its members:

- Association has started building a relief fund for its members to save their interest. For marketing of produce of its members the association charges Rs 2 for every 10 kg from its members for generating resources for the relief fund. In case of damage to the produce during transportation of the produce to the market, the association bears the loss of the member by compensating for it from this fund. This saves the respective member from bearing any loss.
- For the availability of high quality seeds and organic manure, association has directly established linkages with seed companies. Growers get the high quality seed at reasonable rates.
- For the marketing of produce, the association has signed agreements with Mother dairy as well as wholesale dealers of other mandis. Association receives and disperses the payment through cheque.
- Association through this process has helped to introduce the produce of small farmers in market who were earlier not able to do so because of low production. By being treated as equals, they have realised the importance of collective effort and today they are increasing their production in an organized way under the patronage of the association.
- Association has purchased 2300 plastic crates for packaging, which it gives to its members. This has reduced the packaging cost by 95%. Association charges its members a nominal charge of 50 paisa per kg for the use of crates.
- Association has made useful agricultural equipments like spray machine, seed sowing machine etc. available to its members with the help of HARC. The members pay fees for using these equipments, which is used for the maintenance and buying of new equipments. Association also buys magazines, new papers etc for collecting and providing information on new technology from agriculture and horticulture universities to its members.
- For maintaining the quality of produce association gives training to its members for grading and packing in collection centres for which they takes help of HARC specialist regularly. For quality control and availability of product in the market, year round crop calendars are prepared according to geographically condition of the region