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Self sufficiency in the times of Covid-19

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Utthan promotes self-sufficient food production areas with internal dependencies, as the pandemic causes disruptions from food to fork.



A 'people to people' social solidarity enterprise in the times of Covid-19 (Image: Utthan)

Reshamben, Manguben and Naseemben, strong women leaders of *Vanita Shakti Mahila Sangathan* and *Ekta Mahila Sangathan*, have always argued that government ration shops under the public distribution system should purchase all essential foodgrains from the local area, to the extent possible.

“Why should we sell the produce outside our village and thereafter procure foodgrains from outside through the public distribution system? Why can't the government think of strengthening the local economy?” The women have similar queries about local seeds, fodder and other such products.

The argument about procuring locally except when there is a need has been echoed by many feminists and a few economists. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the government is trying its best to reach out to all families across rural and urban areas, several reports of civil society groups indicate omissions in meeting the food security needs of people.



Women work on strengthening the local agricultural economy (Image: Utthan)

The relief provided by the government will last for a week at most, say people from Tataniya, Ratol, Gadhda and Bhadra villages in Mahuva block of Bhavnagar district. The food distribution and safety net programs fail to provide food to the most vulnerable people. On the other hand, most of the foodgrains have been lying at the village level, due to lack of transportation or due to speculation about getting the expected minimum support price from the Agricultural Produce Market Committees.

Responding to the crisis

Utthan has worked intensively for nearly 40 years in the drought-prone coastal districts of Ahmedabad, Amreli, Bhavnagar and Kutch as well as the poverty-stricken tribal districts of Dahod, Panchmahal and Mahisagar. It has focused on communicating to and with people from vulnerable communities especially women, and on learning from them.

Utthan is now reaching out to about 5000 marginalised families in these districts to provide them with primary life support of rations and basic essentials, to be able to live with dignity. The Covid-19 crisis is being leveraged for the benefit and empowerment of these communities.

Utthan decided to purchase the entire foodgrain stock from the community for relief support to the identified families. The purchase was made from women farmers who would otherwise have sold their produce at the prevailing low rates at the local market to ward off the cash crunch. The payments have been made into the bank accounts of women, who may not be landowners but toil on the fields.

A simple model has been worked out. Based on a rough estimate of the foodgrains required for the vulnerable families of a particular village, a relief package was worked out. Women farmers were approached to ensure if they have the stock and are willing to

sell at a 'fair' price. These farmers were asked to weigh the grains and prepare packages as per the specifications laid out with the help of local leaders and the Utthan team. Farmers and local leaders ensured a system where these relief packages were collected by the identified families.



Reshamben working on her farm (Image: Utthan)

Wheat and maize were bought at Rs. 20 a kg while bajra was bought at Rs. 23 per kg for the relief packages from the women farmers at the village. Had they sold this in the market, they would have fetched around Rs.20-22/kg for wheat, Rs.20/kg for maize and about Rs. 25/kg for bajra. Besides, the women would have spent about Rs. 2.25-5/kg for transportation, labour and the entire day spent for this activity. Discounting this, the women got a net price of Rs. 17.40/kg for wheat, Rs. 16.40/kg for maize and about Rs. 21.40/kg for bajra.

From the first pilot of relief support to 1668 families across 56 villages, around 150 women farmers from both the coastal and tribal villages benefitted by the income accrued to them from selling the foodgrains. The women farmers earned around Rs. 6,12,833 through the sale of over 30000 kgs of wheat, maize and bajra. This found way into the 1668 kits, each containing 10 kgs wheat and 5-10 kgs of bajra or maize.

They would have made about Rs. 4,77,496 as sale amount less travel and labour costs had they sold the produce at the market. This amounts to 22 percent net benefit for the women farmers, which is a significant amount. Further, this saved them of the drudgery of travel to markets and the uncertainty of getting the right price. Another, gratifying example of women ensuring their family food security is when few women farmers refused to sell their food crop to this initiative, since the quantity they had was just enough to cover their own consumption.

Over and above this, Utthan purchased sanitary napkins from the women's federation it helped set up, which in turn procured these from the women's self-help groups.

Estimates indicate that 27 percent of the total relief package amount was infused into the local economy by applying the simple doctrine of local production and local consumption.

Interestingly, an extremely important response from most of these women farmers was "I am feeling satisfied and happy that our grains will help many in my own village. Hence, this is a more valuable earning for me."

Single women in particular, felt that they were saved from all the drudgery and tension of travelling and selling their produce in the market, during the gruelling lockdown period.

If this can happen at a larger scale whereby the government buys all the available stock at the local level and redistributes it in local communities, a number of benefits can be reaped. This model will reduce the insecurity of timely availability of foodgrains, save energy consumed in transportation, reduce the level of distress sale by farmers and ensure local taste on the plates of communities.



Women distributing relief material and essentials among communities that are vulnerable (Image: Utthan)

By reducing the labour and transport cost, boosting the local economy and allowing the farmers to invest in a timely manner for the *kharif* season, this model of people to people market turns out to be environment and poor friendly, as well as gender just. As a result, communities would not only become food secure but also seed secure. Only the surplus would be sold outside to help other communities or to urban centres. This *swadeshi* model will result in the speedy delivery of foodgrains without any external costs and internalise the monetary benefits for the local community.

Was this not the dream of Mahatma Gandhi?

Stepping up its response, Utthan is planning a number of initiatives which may later emerge as producer-consumer social solidarity enterprises. Along with women's federations and village level women's groups, ideas of making products that are extremely relevant during this crisis have been developed. These would be distributed amongst communities/populations that are vulnerable.

Some ideas include, making '*mung wadees*' (green lentils cutlets), *sukhadi* (a sweet from flour, ghee and jaggery), *khakhraas* (thin crackers made with flour and oil) and making soaps locally. Apart from this, Utthan plans to reach out to a large number of families with kitchen garden kits. They will grow vegetables not just for themselves but also for those who need it, by engaging them in growing.

The article was written by Nafisa Barot, Pallavi Sobti Rajpal and Utthan team with inputs from Dr. Hemant Shah, Head of Department, Economics, H K Arts College, Ahmedabad.

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