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Capacity Building of Women Farmers through Sustainable Agricultural Practices for Rural Prosperity

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Women farmers in India are the backbone of the rural economy. They are responsible for 60–80 % of the food production, and yet they receive only a fraction of inputs (such as improved seeds and fertilisers), land, credit, agricultural training and information, compared to men.

In May 2013, S M Sehgal Foundation and K+S Kali GmbH started a joint project – Unnat Krishi, meaning improved agriculture. The project leverages the existing self-help groups (SHGs) to disseminate improved, well-established agricultural technology. Unnat Krishi aims to strengthen the capacities of smallholding women farmers by educating them about soil testing, standard fertiliser applications and improved package of practices (seeds, nutrients and pest management). Basically, the project's objective is to make available improved technology, which is otherwise not accessible to female farmers in the region.

The programme further facilitates micro-lending through SHGs to help women procure agriculture inputs and other resources. To increase the financial capacity of SHGs, participating members have to return 70 % of the funds used for agricultural inputs to their respective SHG. To ensure ownership and participation of the local population, a female farmer from each village is nominated as a leader. She acts as local agricultural resource person and facilitator between the project coordinators and fellow farmers.

A baseline survey of 150 households was done at the beginning of the project. It was found that the family size of 54 % of the households surveyed was 7 and average landholding was between 0.5 and 0.1 acres. Around 41 % of the respondents were illiterate. The farm mechanisation was low, amounting to 21 % of the farmers having tractors and only 4 % having threshers.

In the current fiscal year 185 female farmers have benefited directly from the project over two cropping seasons. The yield assessment was done in April 2014. In demo plots, the registered yield increase in mustard and pearl millet ranged from 30–40 %. This translated into higher gross incomes by 2,574 Indian rupees in millet and 5,627 Indian rupees in mustard. Indirectly, over 1000 female farmers benefitted from information on scientific agricultural practices through trainings, field days and exposure visits. The higher crop income in the previous seasons has instilled confidence among the farmers about Unnat Krishi project techniques and resulted into better adoption rates of the techniques.

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