



Prabhavati poses with the low cost composting model she developed.
Photo: Ramesh Sharma

The greening of Self Help Groups

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Self-help groups (SHGs) for women living in the Terai of Eastern Uttar Pradesh are moving beyond the usual SHG goal of helping women improve their socio-economic status. These groups are also being utilised to mobilise their members as agents of change and advocates for not only gender issues, but also sustainable agriculture. Farmer Field Schools have played an important role in the capacity building aspect of this “greening” process, which has involved bringing together many different extension and support mechanisms.

Self-Help Groups

The plains in the Terai region, at the foothills of Nepal Himalayas, have good rainfall and fertile alluvial soil. The majority of farmers can be categorised as small or marginal, with average land holdings of less than an acre (about 0.4 hectare). Agriculture is the main source of employment and livelihood in this region.

The area has a feudal background with a caste-dominated society. Rural women of the region have very limited access to credit, information and extension services, in spite of their major contribution to agricultural activities and their ever-increasing responsibilities as their men migrate to the cities. To help empower these women, Gorakhpur Environmental Action Group (GEAG) initiated the formation of women self-help groups in 30 villages in Gorakhpur district. Self Help Groups were originally started in Bangladesh as an innovative and “self help” approach to savings and credit, and have proved effective in empowering rural women.

The GEAG SHGs have grown from three groups in 1996, to a total of 310 groups by mid-2002, with approximately 4500 women members in 30 villages. Most SHGs range in size from 10-18 members and 73% of these groups belong to the category of oppressed classes (Dalits) and small-marginal farming families. The group members make a monthly deposit ranging from Rs. 10 to 20 (roughly US\$0.20-0.40c). SHGs have their accounts in a nearby bank. GEAG has ensured a commitment that these banks will provide a loan to the SHGs of up to 4 times their original deposit.

SHGs in a village federate themselves to form a “Sangha”. This organisation is entrusted with the responsibility of nurturing SHGs and making collective efforts for the development of village. The self-help groups and the federation, besides facilitating credit flow for consumption and productive purposes, have played a pivotal role in creating a self-sustained agriculture production support system.

Greening the groups

SHGs have been promoted not only as appropriate institutions to help women improve their socio-economic status, but also as a means to mobilise them as agents of change and advocates for gender issues and sustainable agriculture. GEAG has consciously developed the capacity of these groups through a “greening” process, to equip them with appropriate, sustainable technologies, conceptually as well as technically. These “greened” SHGs have been working to promote and disseminate LEISA techniques and practices, and to establish self-sustained, community-owned extension systems. The groups have spearheaded the ecological agriculture movement and become extension agents of green technologies.

So far, approximately Rs.1,200,000 (roughly US\$24,000) have been lent by the bank and repayment is almost 100%. The savings and loans obtained are used for agricultural production activities such as purchasing seeds, developing vermicompost, buying agricultural equipment and marketing. This has helped to ensure the women have direct control over these productive resources.

SHG Members adopting LEISA practices

LEISA Practice	Number of SHG Members
Bio-pesticide (cow urine, neem products, tobacco, ash etc)	3100
Composting (pit)	2500
Tree plantation	750
Vermicomposting	432
Liquid compost	528
Nadep compost	238
Seed treatment	940
Seed production	580

The major components of the greening process are as follows:

Farmer Field Schools (FFS)

To facilitate sharing of experiences, innovations, ideas and the dissemination of technical know-how on LEISA techniques, FFSs have been operationalised. The FFS have gained popularity amongst farmers not only from the project villages but also from other neighbouring villages. They are run by experienced farmers, who have extensive practical knowledge of the topics covered. Occasionally, experts from outside are also invited. On average 40 farmers, mostly women, participate regularly in monthly FFS sessions. FFS are managed by the SHGs/Sangha, who also decide on the place and topics, on the

basis of the felt seasonal demand. There is one such FFS for every five villages in the project area.

Agro Service Centres (ASC)

In order to ensure the availability of quality inputs such as seeds, vermicompost, bio-fertilisers, bio-pesticides, and treadle pumps (low-cost, manually driven pumps for irrigation), and to facilitate direct marketing of these inputs, Agro Service Centres have been established. These ASCs, established in the clusters of 5 villages, are controlled and managed by the women's self-help groups. Soil samples are also collected in these centres for analysis in a small laboratory established by GEAG. This laboratory makes the necessary recommendations on LEISA approaches.

Master Trainers (MT)

A number of interested farmers have become Master Trainers, after receiving intensive training in facilitation techniques and communication skills. The Master Trainers are selected by the SHGs/Sangha, according to their background expertise and the specific needs of the area. As the Master Trainers live in the villages, they are always available and also ensure ongoing interaction with SHGs.

There are usually two Master Trainers in each village, and they organise regular training sessions in the village according to the felt demand. These MTs are also invited by other NGOs and projects to contribute their expertise. Tijia Devi, for example, an illiterate woman farmer from Awadhpur village, was invited as a resource person for training sessions organised by CARITAS for its Project Managers in Madhya Pradesh. There are several other examples where farmer MTs have helped orient people towards, and convinced them of the viability of LEISA techniques using the examples of their personal field experiences.

Extension System through the SHGs

The three major components of the "greening" process mentioned above are inter-linked and interdependent. However, there are also a number of other support mechanisms linked to this LEISA promotion system:

- **Laghu Seemant Krishak Morcha (Small-marginal Farmers Forum):** Farmers are unionising in this forum to advocate their interests and promote LEISA, at village, district and state levels.
- **Farmer Interest Groups (FIG) and Participatory Technology Development (PTD):** Farmers with specific needs, problems and interests (such as landless farmers, vegetable growers, seed producers, livestock farmers) are being organised to facilitate more focused interventions and linkages. These

Farmer's Interest Groups are formed by members from different SHGs who share a common interest. Non-SHG farmers who share the same interest are also welcome. In the Sardarnagar area they are involved in seed production and collective farming, while in Campierganj most of the interest groups are involved in vegetable growing and livestock rearing. The FIGs are also developed around common problems such as pest and fertility management, and finding solutions through participatory technology development.

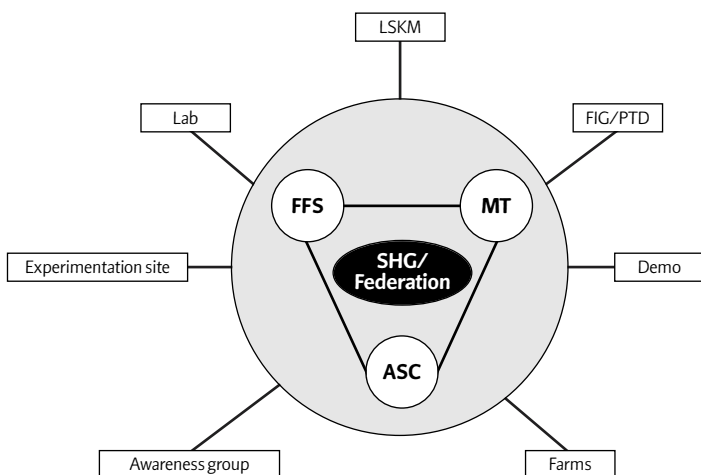
- **Demonstration farms:** Farmers have taken the lead in developing their own farms. These are integrated with households and livestock and function as demonstration models of LEISA farming.
- **Experimentation site:** GEAG has provided land where farmers can experiment, take risks and innovate.
- **Awareness Group:** Selected women from different SHGs, as well as interested men, have come together and formed a cultural group to promote LEISA through local culture, for example, through street plays.
- **Soil Health Laboratory:** Through the SHGs, farmers can get their soil samples tested in the laboratory established by GEAG and get necessary advice.



Participants preparing for a field demonstration at a Farmer Field School. Photo: Farrukh Khan

Looking ahead

Extension of LEISA practices through women Self-Help Groups has been effective and meaningful. It has ensured that women have access to information, techniques, institutions and the means to experiment with new techniques. Women are able to do better within their recognised roles through the skills acquired and the confidence gained during this process. At the same time, gender-mainstreaming efforts have enhanced their position and contributed to their emancipation. They are now able to unionise and advocate for their rights in a traditionally male-dominated society. Their enhanced control over resources and increased decision-making capacity, backed by the skills they have acquired, have given a meaningful dimension to low-external-input agriculture in the area. The adoption of LEISA practices has significantly reduced the use of high-cost external inputs like chemical pesticides and fertilisers, thereby increasing the net gain to small and marginal farming communities.



The SHG extension system

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