Women Empowerment through Cooperatives

A Case Study of Amrit Dhara Milk Producers Marketing Co-operative Society Ltd. Darlaghat, Himachal Pradesh
Introduction

Himachal Pradesh (HP) is a mountainous State with its topography being mostly hilly and the type of cultivation being terraced. It is one of the least urbanized states in the country with 89.97 % of its population living in rural areas (Census, 2011). Therefore, dependency on Agriculture/ Horticulture is eminent as it provides direct employment to about 62 % of total workers of the State. Agriculture and allied activities dominate the rural livelihood of the people in the state. Agriculture sector contributes nearly 30 percent of the total state domestic product. Apple is the most important fruit crop of Himachal Pradesh, which constitutes about 49 percent of the total area under fruit crops and about 84 percent of the total fruit production.

The mountainous terrain poses many challenges for farmers and communities like poor crop productivity, low availability of per capita arable land, highly fragmented land holding, low retention of water because of sloppy terrain, inefficiency in manually performed farm operations, distraction of modern youth from conventional agriculture due to its toiling nature and non-viability and lack of other income-generating activities. As a result, the rearing of dairy animals has picked up as a major economic activity in Himachal Pradesh. It offers good self-employment opportunities, a steady source of income and an effective tool in upgrading the economic status of farmers. The activity is labour intensive and women oriented, who perform more than 90% dairy operations as an extension of domestic activities.

The Amrit Dhara Milk producers Marketing Society Limited, Darlaghat is one dairy co-operative which is carrying out dairy activity with much success. A study of the society was taken up to understand the operations and its impact on the livelihoods of the members.

Study Objectives

The study of the Milk Producers Society was taken up with the following objectives –

1. To analyze the reasons for joining the cooperative movement by women of the area.
2. To study the initiatives taken by the women in the dairy development of the area.
3. To examine the impact of SHGs as a poverty-alleviation tool.
4. To analyze the impact of training in the women empowerment as well as rural development.

About the Society

The Amrit Dhara Milk Producers Marketing Co-operative Society Ltd., Darlaghat was registered under HP Cooperative Societies Act, 1968 in February 2016. The area of operation of this society is a cluster of 50 nearby villages. The society, basically comprising of Self Help Group of women, started with 15 members in 2008. The members were homogeneous with
respect to their socio-economic conditions. Today there are 202 members working in this group/SHG.

The society was adopted by Ambuja Cement Foundation (AFC) under its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) program, during the year 2008, to train the community on dairy farming, more so on Doodh Ganga Scheme, so as to make the members self-sustained in dairy. Initially, ACF had contributed money to the tune of ten times (approx.) of the contribution made by the villagers for carrying out dairy related activities as seen from the data furnished below:

The above chart shows that the villagers were almost dependent on ACF for the dairy development in the area to start with. With time, the community members were less dependent on ACF and in the year 2017, the contribution made by the village members is almost twice the amount/ contribution made by the ACF which shows that villagers have become independent.

Apart from monetary support, ACF also assisted the community in completing their loan documents and facilitated loans from Banks by providing guarantee. Besides, ACF initiated the program on cattle health viz., Pashu Swasthya Sevika, by choosing 23 women from different villages as Animal Health Volunteers. These Animal Health Volunteers were trained on Veterinary Aid and Feed and fodder management so as to make provide door step delivery of veterinary services in far flung areas of Darlaghat. Apart from veterinary services, the society is also providing cattle supplements, feed, fodder, farm equipment’s, chaff cutter and fodder seeds at less than market prices.
Activities

The society has made much progress in various dairy related activities and the details are furnished below.

Area expansion

In the last 10 years of its existence, the society could expand its operations from 15 villages in the year 2008 to 50 villages during 2017, thus benefitting over 200 members under its dairy procurement operations. The villages covered and the milk production is furnished in the table given below-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Villages and Milk Production</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Villages Covered</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total members</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk Production</td>
<td>730 L/d</td>
<td>3483 L/d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk Collection</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmers Linked (Dairy)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Annual Report of Ambuja Cement Foundation

Apart from increase in membership from 15 to 202 and increase in area (15 villages to 50), the members started trusting the society and sold their milk through the society as it is cost effective and time saving. The various cattle development measures undertaken by the society resulted in considerable increase in milk production per day.

Training & Capacity Building

The women members were provided training in various facets of dairy farming on a regular basis. The training programs covered –

- Breeding, Calf Rearing and Health Management: Members were imparted intensive training by qualified Veterinarian on breed improvement, wherein women were made aware about artificial insemination, identification of suitable breed and awareness about special care of Jersey and Holstein Friesian (HF) breed.

- Feed and Fodder Management: Training was also imparted on feeding to dairy animals, which included the information about balanced diet for cattle, feed supplements and use of dry and green fodder.

- Housing for shelter: For keeping cattle healthy, productive and disease free, good housing is very important. Awareness program was conducted regarding animal housing where the women were made aware about optimum space (depending upon the size of the breed) required for cattle, managing feed, proper ventilation system in cowsheds for fresh air and light inside the shed and regular cleaning of cow shed.
Animal Disease Prevention and Control: Training was imparted on the key areas of health management, timely vaccination of cattle, de-worming, lice control, prevention of diseases, early detection of diseases and first aid to the animals in case of emergency.

Milk testing, increasing milk production, milk handling and storage: The members were trained on Electronic milk testing machine so as to avoid any error in estimation of Fat and Solids Not Fat (SNF), techniques of increasing milk production, milk handling and storage.

Maintenance of Accounts: Trainings were also imparted on maintenance of accounts.

Board of Directors (BOD) of the society visited ACSTI, Shimla and were trained on the roles and responsibilities of Board, how to prepare Business Plan and how to diversify their business.
Breeding

Due to the efforts of the society, there is a considerable change in the type of cattle owned by the members, as seen from the Table given below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Breed Data</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HF (Holstein Friesian) Cross</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cow Jersey – AI</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>543</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross Breed – Al</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Breed</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffalo</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Annual Report of Ambuja Cement Foundation

The above data reveals that the villagers have preferred cross breed cattle and buffaloes. The number of HF cross bred cows rose to 50 during the year 2017 from 4 in 2008. Similarly buffaloes have increased to 278 in 2017 from 94 in 2008 and local breed has decreased from 227 in 2008 to 220 in 2017. This change in trend shows that the awareness programs has helped the community in procuring high bred cows / buffaloes and were able to realize better revenues.

Milk Collection, Sale and Income

The Society started milk collection centers in the nearby villages and right now, there are 24 collection centers, collecting around 5.04 lakh liters per year (Table below). The increase in milk procurement and sales has led to increase in the income of farmers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Milk Collection Centres</th>
<th>Milk Sales (lit/year)</th>
<th>Income of the Society (in Lakhs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013-14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14400</td>
<td>3,60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014-15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>49640</td>
<td>13,89,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>124320</td>
<td>37,29,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016-17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>396000</td>
<td>1,18,00,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-18</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>504000</td>
<td>1,51,20,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Annual Report of Ambuja Cement Foundation

The total sales in the last five years had shown a marked increase, indicating the performance of the society in all fronts relating to the dairy activity. The income has almost grown over 50 times in the last five years, as seen from the graph given on the next page –
Milk, being a liquid and perishable product and with limited local market, required a strong marketing infrastructure to collect the surplus from producing areas and transport and distribute the product in consuming areas. Marketing of milk was the major problem faced by the women and the society could provide them the required support. This has resulted in increase in incomes both at Society and farmer level.

**Initiatives behind the success**

The support of the CSR arm of Ambuja Cements helped the society in stabilizing in the beginning. However, it is due to the continuous initiatives taken by the members that has changed the lives and some these include –

- Twenty three members of the society named as Animal Health Volunteers took training on feeding, heeding and breeding of cattle. These volunteers adopted 2 villages per volunteers to make aware the villagers about the feeding, heeding and breeding of cattle. Such awareness programs resulted not only in increased quantity of milk but the villagers also understood the shelter management and hygiene of cattle.
Because of poor connectivity of roads and shortage of veterinary staff, there was no arrangement for the veterinary aid in case of emergency. These members are providing doorstep veterinary services at negligible cost to the villagers. This has not only reduced the dependency on veterinary staff but also resulted in increase in the production of milk and low mortality of cattle.

Members learnt the techniques of disbudding of horns, which was earlier done by Veterinary pharmacist at the rate of Rs. 200 per cattle but now disbudding is done by these members at negligible cost of Rs. 50 per cattle. Such initiative by the women of the society has not only enhanced the skills but has also lead to economic independence of the women.

Members meet once in a month to review and discuss the progress and problems of their adopted villages; try to identify the potential causes of poor reproductive performance and discuss these problems with the veterinary doctor. These meetings have not only enhanced the leadership skills but has also made them confident.

The traditional fodder crops have been replaced by cereals and cash crops which has resulted in acute fodder scarcity in the area. To overcome the problem, the society bought fodder in bulk from adjoining states at nominal price of about Rs. 3-4/kg and sold it to members at Rs. 7-8/kg, which was low when compared with the local price (Rs. 10-11/kg). This not only saved the time of farmers but was also cost effective.

The society had taken a dealership for sale of concentrate feed to cattle. The society sells it at a profit margin of about Rs. 30-40/bag, which is comparatively lower than the market price. As a result of this, the farmers are saving money and getting the feed delivered at their homes. Such initiative has also developed the management skills in the women of the society.

This society has hired vehicle for the collection of milk from villages. Some of these villages were reluctant to sell the milk earlier because of limited transport facility and high cost of transportation of milk. This initiative of the society members has increased the income of the villagers.

Because of the efforts of the society, now 1,100 litres of milk is supplied to Kamdhenu plant at good rates and the woman farmers are receiving the payment in their accounts which had made them financially independent.
The members of the society not only sells the daily needs of the cattle and machinery used for agriculture at their outlet but also has taken keen interest in selling their products in underserved and unserved areas during local fairs.

Impact of Cooperative Movement on Empowerment of women

The impact of dairy development on women empowerment and their well being can be seen from the following -

- Earlier the life of women was restricted to the four walls of her house, but by joining hands with dairy cooperative; they have increased not only their physical mobility but it has given them exposure to the outside world.
- Dairy development is now viewed as a synonym with rural development as it generated both employment as well as income opportunities for self help groups & helping in improving their standard of living.
- It has also created both social and economic awareness among the rural masses.
- Women are usually under-represented in political and economic decision-making processes but after the active involvement in dairy, women claimed that they are
now taking important decisions in the family and in the affairs in the Cooperative Society.

➢ Majority of women claimed that they realized their self-worth and have developed leadership qualities and have become more confident.
➢ Due to better functioning of the society, the membership and area of operation has increased which resulted in increasing income both at farm and society level.
➢ The society was awarded under the category “Best Woman SHG” by Deputy Commissioner, Solan on the occasion of International Women day 2017.

**Strengths of the Society**

The society could achieve such a progress in dairy activity due to the following reasons –

➢ Mutual trust and faith in each other;
➢ Altruistic approach towards community service;
➢ More importance on social as well as economic interest;
➢ Active involvement of all members of society;
➢ Cordial relationship between Board and members;
➢ Regular meetings and review of problems faced by the villagers;
➢ Focus on customer service.

**Way Ahead**

Some of the future plans of the society include –

➢ Installation of Chilling Plant: As the society has decided to market the milk in the local market and to expand the business by preparing the milk products, it has been decided to install their own milk chilling plant in the coming years.

➢ Own land for storage space: Since the office accommodation is on rental basis and to overcome the problem of storage of cattle feed, fodder and supplements; the society is in the process of buying land for its own use.

➢ Own Training Centre: The vision of the society is to establish its own training centers by 2020 for imparting trainings and conducting awareness programmes.

**References**

➢ *Annual Reports provided by Ambuja Cement Foundation*
➢ *Census 2011*
➢ *Economic Survey 2016-2017*
➢ *Telephonic interviews from Project Director, Ambuja Cement Foundation and Chairperson, President and few members of FPO*