



The Influence of Community Nutrition Gardens on the Nutritional Situation of Women in Madhya Pradesh, India.

**SECURING NUTRITION, ENHANCING RESILIENCE (SENU) - INDIA
RESEARCH BRIEF 01/2022**

Published by:

Deutsche Gesellschaft für
Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

Registered offices:

Bonn and Eschborn

Securing Nutrition, Enhancing Resilience (SENU) Project

Safdarjung Enclave, A-2/18,

New Delhi – 110029

T: +91 11 4949 5353

F: +91 11 4949 5391

www.giz.de/india

Author:

Lisa Rueck

Responsible:

Ms Susanne Milcher, Project Director, SENU India, GIZ

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GIZ is responsible for the content of this publication

On behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic
Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

January 2022



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COMMUNITY NUTRITION GARDENS TO PROMOTE DIETARY DIVERSITY IN MADHYA PRADESH

The Indo-German Projects 'Securing Nutrition, Enhancing Resilience - India' and 'Water Security and Climate Adaptation in Rural India' implemented by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) in cooperation with the local NGO 'Parmarth Samaj Sevi Sansthan' piloted 20 Community Nutrition Gardens (CNG) in Chhatarpur and Sheopur districts of Madhya Pradesh from 2019 until 2021.

CNG is a social engineering initiative in which women, organised in self-help groups (SHG) under State Rural Livelihood Mission (SRLM), are encouraged to set up a CNG in a community area of at least 1-hectare size in a village. These SHG women jointly develop the garden on the community land allotted to them through Gram Panchayats and relevant Government departments. The SHG members get the usufructuary rights over the land and the garden.

The aim of CNG is to promote year-round nutrition-gardens and household consumption of its produce which shall lead to increased household food security and dietary diversity on a sustained basis for women and their children.

In the CNG pilot, 255 women were involved in the gardens. Under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) the women are receiving wages for the garden maintenance and monetary incentives to take care of the plants. Furthermore, MGNREGS is the key scheme to provide input costs in terms of pit digging, procurement of saplings or pit filling. The CNG model has ensured convergence of MGNREGS with the Agriculture Department 'Krishi Vigyan Kendras' (KVK), SRLM, and Horticulture Department of Madhya Pradesh towards establishing irrigation infrastructure and fencing, sapling provision, as well as the involvement of agricultural experts. The success of the initiative has led to interest by MGNREGS to further scale CNGs across the state.

METHODOLOGY

In view of the planned upscaling of CNGs across the state of Madhya Pradesh jointly with MGNREGS, a qualitative study was conducted to evaluate the influence of the CNGs on the nutritional situation of women in the two districts. The data collection was conducted in two villages each in Chhatarpur and Sheopur districts of Madhya Pradesh in December 2020 and January 2021. It comprised four group interviews with women self-help groups, seven semi-structured interviews with male and female Parmarth staff, five semi-structured interviews with district officials, four participatory observations of CNGs and 10 participatory observations of food preparations at the women's houses. The evolving transcripts were evaluated according to the inductive qualitative content analysis.



≡ KEY FINDINGS

The findings show that the CNG intervention is likely to positively influence the nutrition situation of women in Madhya Pradesh by improving availability, access and utilisation of fresh vegetables.

During a group interview, a female member said: "Whatever vegetables are grown we try to take it home, cook and eat it. We try and cook whatever vegetables are available in the garden". Moreover, it was observed that the women included at least three food groups in their prepared meals which illustrates their dietary diversity.



During the Covid-19 pandemic and its strict lockdowns stability was maintained, by enabling the women to have access to nutritious food despite, for instance, closed markets.

In regard to the Covid-19 pandemic, a group member shared the following: "We had enough vegetables from the CNG! We had enough to eat, there was no reason to worry!".

Additionally, the CNG contributes to the end of work-related migration.



As the project enables the women to work within their villages, the need to migrate outside for work becomes less necessary. A woman voiced her attitude towards migration as follows: "Why should we bear all the problems of migration. We can take care of our kids here, feed them and be with them... why trouble ourselves with all these kids (while in migration). We get the same wages here. So why will we migrate outside?". Ending work-related migration will contribute to stabilising the nutritional situation of the women and their families in the long-run.



Furthermore, the CNG pilot provides a capacity development component through the active support by the local NGO Parmarth as well as the involvement of local Anganwadi workers and 'Accredited Social Health Activists' (ASHA) workers.

These counterparts provide access to knowledge, as the women receive regular advice on gardening, nutrition, health and hygiene practices which also helps to improve their nutritional situation. The improved access to knowledge as well as the regular income generation through monthly wages and the selling of CNG produce contributes to empowering the participating women, both financially and socially. During the data collection, it was shared that the women start speaking up and begin visiting places, such as health centres, which depicts the increase in their confidence and their social status. Despite the relatively short pilot period, positive effects are becoming apparent, as changes in the women's physical health (e.g. increase in energy, strength) and mental health (e.g. feeling of happiness, feeling of security) were reported. One woman, for instance, shared: "Ever since we started consuming vegetables from here, we feel a lot of energy in our bodies".

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UPSCALING OF CNGS

The results show that CNGs are a suitable approach to improve food & nutrition security through local and seasonal food production, thus increasing independence while also generating a source of income for the participants. However, the success of the CNGs depends on a complex interplay of essential requirements that need to be met during implementation. The following recommendations were derived on the basis of the study results.

LAND AND INFRASTRUCTURE REQUIREMENTS

- First of all, it is advisable to choose non-disputable land for a new CNG site with a distance of less than 2.5 km from the village. This prevents potential interpersonal threats and makes it easier for the women to reach the CNG regularly and thus gives them daily access to fresh vegetables and, in the future, fruit.
- Moreover, the study has shown that deficiencies in water supply can jeopardise the availability of produce. An adequate water source (e.g. farm ponds) must therefore be accessible to the SHG women in order to be able to grow produce throughout the year.
- Furthermore, the CNG sites should be protected with proper fencing right from the start to keep out animals, such as Nilgai, that pose a threat to the plants. As it was mentioned during an interview, the fence should be at least 8 ft. high, in order to prevent Nilgai from entering the CNGs.
- And last, it is important to ensure timely payment of wages to enable the women to buy additional ingredients, such as oil and flour, as these are needed for the preparation of meals and the processing of vegetables.

LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS

- Another aspect that proved to be relevant for the CNG activity is the integration of stakeholders, such as the local NGO 'Parmarth', Anganwadi workers and ASHA workers that provide handholding support to the SHG women and cover topics such as nutrition, hygiene behaviour or horticulture. The involvement of Anganwadi workers is particularly beneficial, as they are local village women who are familiar with the SHG women and thus prove to be suitable confidants who can disseminate essential information on the ground. As the CNG initiative is intended to operate in the long run without the support of GIZ India and local NGOs, the involvement of these local counterparts, is of great relevance.

SPECIFIC TRAININGS AND AWARENESS RAISING PROGRAMMES

- To further optimise the availability of vegetables in the future, it is advisable to offer specific trainings, e.g. on organic pest control to promote the provision of organic produce, on seed bank initiation and on preservation of produce to ensure the availability of vegetables (and fruit) even in months when the harvest is poor.
- Furthermore, it would be useful to provide awareness raising programmes to both women and men, in order to acquire new behaviours (e.g. adequate hand washing) and reduce socio-cultural norms and gender inequalities (e.g. unequal intra-household food distribution, decision-making power, freedom to move, etc.) which could limit the women's ability to improve their nutrition.



COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

- Although the project addresses women, the involvement of the community, and in particular men, is necessary. The study has shown that especially during the initiation phase, there is a risk of creating envy within the community or among those people who had previously encroached the land. It is therefore important to focus on clear and open communication within the community and involve them in some way. The same applies to the women's husbands, as the women's participation in the CNGs often depends on the consent of men. Thus, it is vital to involve them in the CNG activity, to gain their trust and approval and to get allowance for their wives to take part in the activity.

WAY FORWARD

Along with ensuring year-round availability of nutritious food for vulnerable communities, SENU wants to promote agro-ecological farming practices, community ownership and convergence of line departments to further ensure the sustainability of the gardens. Some of the main successes that the upscaling aims to achieve are: CNG remains productive beyond the project period, supports household consumption of diverse food, becomes part of livelihood generation and emerges as a nutrition field school in the village.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAMMATIC ACTION:



Choose **non-disputable land** that is as close to the village as possible (< 2.5 km)

Ensure **water**, especially during summer months, e.g. through farm ponds



Provide **strong fencing** of at least 8 ft. height right from the beginning of the activity (natural fencing can be an option)

Focus on **clear and open communication** within the community, especially during the initiating phase to prevent envy



Maintain the **integration of counterparts** (e.g. local NGO, Anganwadi workers, ASHA workers, KvK) to provide the women with handholding support in regard to nutrition knowledge, hygiene behaviour, horticulture etc.

Provide **specific training** on organic pest control, on food preservation, on seed banks



Ensure **timely payment** of wages through MGNREGS

Provide **awareness raising programmes** to women and men to acquire new behaviours (e.g. regarding hand washing) and address socio-cultural norms and gender inequalities (e.g. unequal intra-household food distribution, decision-making power, freedom to move etc.)



Involve men to gain their trust and approval



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