

Brothers and neighbours enjoy an okra boom

Collaboration brings community benefits

Tiny plots don't need to hinder big profits. We've helped veg farmers team up for success.

Maharashtra's capital Mumbai is home to the Bollywood film industry. But most residents of the central-western Indian state live far from the glitz and glamour of the country's revered actors. Most are like Bawan Chibhade, small rural farmers scraping a meager living for their families from tiny plots of land.

Yields stay low because of poor agronomic practices and poverty that often prevents farmers from buying the inputs they need. What little excess food the smallholders can sell brings in only tiny sums. In the *rabi* season, farmers are often forced to look for temporary work away from their farms, uprooting entire families and disrupting school attendance for their children.



Bawan dreamt of a better life. A 2009 seminar run by the Syngenta Foundation India (SFI) proved to be the catalyst. Here he learned about vegetable cultivation, improving yields through better farming techniques, and about higher value crops that could both feed his family and earn him a good income.

With seeds and advice from SFI, Bawan planted tomatoes on his 1 *gunta* of land, about 1/40 acre. To his amazement, he earned INR75,000 (approx. US\$1150).

His three brothers were impressed. "I wanted to do what he was doing. This was the way to a better life, for me and for my children. Earlier it was hard to imagine the power of a single *gunta*," said one. They soon began growing vegetables. With SFI's support, several other local farmers joined in.

SFI's Bhushan Ahire had even bigger ideas for them. He formed a group of 11 growers. By joining forces they could fill the pick-up truck that took their produce to market, maximizing efficiency and reducing costs. With okra as their main *kharif* crop, each earned an average of INR 30,000 (approx US\$460) from his smallholding, aided by the vendor networks that SFI helped establish as far afield as New Delhi.

By 2013, all the farmers in the area had taken up vegetable growing, cultivating in groups of 3-4 to gain economies of scale. Landless farmers were helped to lease land, and a credit scheme operated by SFI in association with IDBI Bank helped each farmer receive credit of around INR25,000 (approx.. US\$380) to invest in farm improvements.

The impact on the whole community has been profound. Weatherproof, plastered houses have been built, motorcycles purchased, and the children – who used to be uprooted each time their parents migrated for work – have been enrolled in school, paving their way to a better future.