

Turning flowers into school fees

Agri-Entrepreneur spots an opportunity for widow Rani

Marigolds and the advice and expertise of a local entrepreneur are transforming the lives of smallholders in one of India's poorest regions.

These farmers face challenges familiar to smallholders all over the developing world. Erratic rainfall and poor irrigation facilities, high input costs, and dramatic variation in market prices for their produce all create great hardship.

Kishor Murmu trained as a Syngenta Foundation India Agri-Entrepreneur in India's northeastern Jharkhand State. His role is to offer agricultural advice to local farmers, help them access credit, and to sell them the seeds and other inputs they need to earn their livelihoods from often tiny and poor quality parcels of land.

Murmu took a fresh look at these farmers and their land and suggested that they try growing marigolds. Commercial cultivation of marigolds had not been tried in the area, but the crop is naturally rainfed and grows well on barren uplands. Marigolds can also be harvested for six months, and so provide steady income, while their low cost of cultivation make them suitable for poor and first-time farmers.



It quickly proved a success, with farmers whose barren lands had previously earned them nothing reaping up to INR 40,000 (approx US\$620) from 0.1acre of land, with input costs of just INR3500 (approx US\$54).

Murmu also connected the farmers to traders to ensure there was a reliable market at fair prices for the flowers. The farmers themselves add value to their produce by making them into garlands, which has helped contribute to an average increase in income of around INR80,000 (approx. US\$1235) per farmer. This success attracted the attention of other smallholders in the area, and now some 60 farmers are growing commercial marigolds.

One of these is Rani Devi, a widow who owns only 0.1 acre of barren land. She, like many whose land is not suited to vegetable production, was forced to work as a laborer in a nearby city to provide food for her two small daughters, but still there were many days of hunger, and she could not afford to send her girls to school.

When Murmu facilitated a plantation credit scheme to help poor and first time farmers to cultivate marigolds, Rani signed up. With earnings of INR30,000 (approx US\$465) from her crop in only five months, the lives of Rani and her children are transformed. Both girls now go to school, and the family's standard of living has increased dramatically.