My Journey towards Nutrition Sensitive Agriculture

I am Chetana Malla Shahi, the Principal of Pashupati Basic School Ima, in Mugu district. I am also a Rural Service Providers of NMA project. I was involved in face to face and distance coaching provided by the project which helped me to enhance my knowledge and skills about healthy food and nutrition, especially nutrition sensitive agriculture and its practices. Because of my association with schools, I developed a micro project where I could contribute in NSA through my school.

In remote areas like the one where I work, the government sponsors school meals. School meals are provided to encourage students (particularly girls) to come to school daily and to prevent them from dropping out. Without explicit nutritional objectives, meals served are often nutrient-poor. To raise awareness about the importance of good nutrition, especially for mothers and children in the first “1000 Golden days”, I reached out to my teachers and my students’ guardians, speaking to them about the value of traditional diets that are locally available and the health hazards from junk food. In collaboration with local level stakeholders, I organised trainings for the guardians of my students on improved production of fruits and vegetables, poultry raising and methods of using tools and equipment in agriculture.

In the beginning, women were too busy to attend, but the enlistment of local experts and female community health volunteers built confidence and they began to come. I proposed that the school meals should be healthy diets made locally. With the guidance and support from the NMA project, a committee of women for school nutrition was set up. Coordinated by a teacher, we made plans about kitchen garden in order to increase teachers’, students’ and guardians’ awareness about nutrition and to cook locally-grown fruits and vegetables in school meals.

When a community member provided a piece of land for school garden, we entered into an agreement with the school management committee. With training from District Agriculture Development Office (DADO) and water tank and technical support from the Department of Water, the school started a vegetable garden, for which NMA project provided the inputs (seasonal and off-seasonal vegetable seeds). We organised a group of women to take charge of school nutrition. They also planted the garden. I assigned one resource teacher to monitor the development and trained local women as nutrition teachers. Women group was provided with seeds so that the group could grow their own kitchen gardens at home. We also coordinated with District Agricultural Office to provide training through the Farmer’s Field School. In collaboration with District Education Office and subject specialist, a curriculum about nutrition and nutrition sensitive agriculture for the students was developed and taught at schools. The district water office also helped by providing water tanks from UNICEF.

These days, families that have kitchen gardens are known to sell surplus in the market. Some have switched from growing tobacco which was the only green that one saw prior to the intervention, to growing vegetables. Aware about the health hazard of consuming tobacco and the benefits of nutritious vegetables in one’s diet, people have started cultivating and including vegetables, fruits, pulses, meat and eggs in their diets.

The community understands and appreciates the value of better-quality meals for the students. Sometimes livestock eat the garden vegetables, so the municipality has agreed to fund a fence and has allocated NRs. 700,000 to continue and upscale the school nutrition garden in other schools in Mugu. In addition to using vegetables from its garden, the school now buys locally-grown produce so that local people can earn some income. The women group has requested the local government for seeds and are now asking its support in irrigation. The government office has also provided poly/plastic for greenhouses which women are building to grow off-season vegetables. We also distributed chicks so the women may produce eggs. There was some resistance, since eating eggs or chickens is not customary in that area, but some have started and demand for more chicks now.
Now, my school has been designated a model school! I became the Nutrition Coordinator at district level for the Multisector Nutrition Plan (MSNP). I am very proud of my work, and want to have all schools in the district to have kitchen garden. The project has helped me get involved with many different programmes and it has been a very satisfying experience for me. Also, as we are now connected with local stakeholders, we are committed to continue our work in NSA even after the project completion. I have learned about nutrition and its importance for good health and productive life. I have changed the way that I eat: I used to take Horlick’s, now I eat barley flour and honey. Even in my house I have started a nutrition garden and raise honeybees and ducks. The campaign, “One school, one nutrition farm” and “One house, one kitchen garden” is initiated and upscaled in other schools as well. The usefulness of the Mountain Agro – ecosystem Action Network (MAAN) internet platform is limited by poor access to internet; I hope the application will make it easier. The project length was too short: we have started good things but need continued technical support, backup, motivation; really to have full impact it should last 5-7 years.

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