

GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

Striking out hunger

To help eliminate food insecurity, a community in India turns to ancient farming techniques, pumped up with a few modern twists.

WE STORIES

BY WANDA O'BRIEN

Against the mountainous backdrop of the Aravalli range in Rajasthan, India, a woman's purple saree billows through the field. Across from her, a man's brightly coloured turban pops on the green landscape. It's planting season, but there are no combines, large equipment or motorized machines running these farms—only people and oxen.

Looking out at the scene, there's almost a danger of romanticizing this strenuous manual labour. The man guides his oxen forward to the end of his plot, turns, goes back in the opposite direction, turns, and repeats.

While seemingly a throwback to traditional farming techniques, there are differences. Over the past few years, "modern" upgrades have, in fact, helped transform the way families farm and work to combat local hunger. You just have to know how to spot the shift in agricultural methods. Hint:



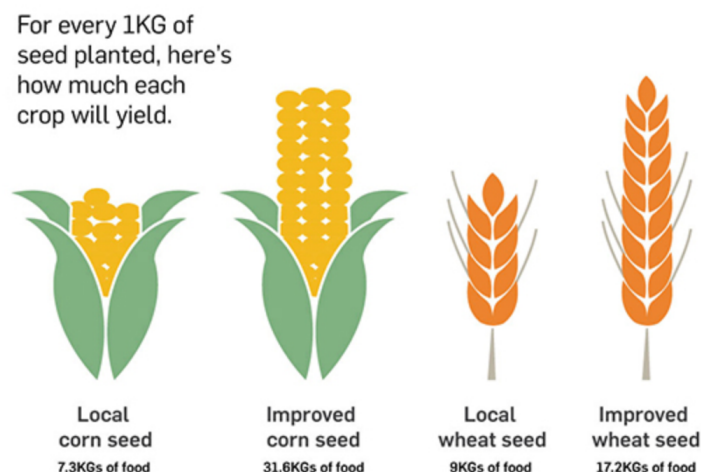
The type of plow. The curve of the blade. The instrument used to lay the seeds in their beds.

The seeds themselves.

These changes have taken families from a core diet of chapattis and chili paste to one which includes protein-rich beans, goat milk, plus enough surplus crops to sell at the market. To the layperson, this might sound like mundane food jargon, but to men in the Rajsamand District of rural India, it's changed how they farm.

For a farmer like Noja Ram and his family, this evolution in know-how means no more hunger and better health.

Improved food security for families like this couldn't come at a more needed time. As news headlines trumpet drought, famine and crisis, rural communities in India are quietly becoming food secure.



As for how this change came about, that's tied to the introduction of a new focus area—food—to WE Villages' sustainable development model, back in 2012. With this addition, came interventions including improved seed varieties, farming equipment and farming techniques.

Upon launching in India, the program caught the imagination of local farmers, who, although cautious, were interested in discussing their common livelihoods. The communities WE works with in India are made up of people from different castes, individuals with different views towards education, people with different professions. Still, there is one unifying component among all: farming.



Take Noja Ram. A father with five children, he is a man with a Grade 6 education, who heard about the farming program from his friend, the local school headmaster. “I was skeptical of whether or not they would grow,” he admits to thinking when he was told he could plant green gram—a crop he had never planted before. (One that happens to be high in protein.)

Farmers plant in cycles, and in this area of Rajasthan, focus is on wheat for one part of the year and corn for the another. But, there’s also a window in between, where you could plant a third crop, if you have the right resources and water access.

“It is a risk for farmers, because if, for example, they use our seeds and the crop fails, then there goes that entire crop for the year,” says Lloyd Hanoman, India’s Country Director. “It’s a huge leap of faith that they’ve taken in us, and that speaks to the level of trust that they have in us.”

As with everything, trust must be earned. One of the reasons Noja Ram says he agreed to the farming project is because of the school WE Villages built in his community, Bhilo ki Barind. His children go to the school, and he’s supported his eldest daughter through to Grade 8. He always wanted his kids to go to school, and the quality of the building spoke to WE’s commitment to the area.

The same investment in quality has gone into creating a food security program that meets farmers with interventions that are doable, while taking into account regional challenges. This means working with local agronomist experts to ensure the interventions are tried and true.

Noja Ram and his neighbours decided the opportunity was worth the perceived risk. “We said to each other, ‘Let’s try and see,’” he shares. “It’s like when a child goes to school. You don’t know how they will do, they need to learn, but they have to try.”

After starting the program, they still planted wheat and corn, they just used a different seed—notably, one known for being resistant to changes in weather, while also containing a higher protein percentage. The ground is still tilled by an oxen and a plough, but now the plough used has a curve on the end, which flips the soil more thoroughly and makes the land more fertile. And, instead of leaving fields empty, farmers now use a process of irrigation that enabled them to plant that once illusive third crop.

Five years after WE committed to a food program, the harvests speak for themselves. The WE Villages field team conducted extensive studies at the household level pre- and post- food intervention. The results: yields of corn and wheat have doubled; the improved seed has increased protein in the diet; small family-plot veg gardens are thriving; and for the first time, farmers have planted a third crop of green gram—a protein-rich bean that directly fights the high rates of malnutrition in villages.



“Now, we are very much convinced,” says Noja Ram, reflecting on his initial trepidation. Noja Ram is an example of more than 80 farming families who have moved from subsistence farming (just enough to feed their families) to generating a small income from their crops. There’s a cliché saying in international development circles that the goal of development is to see communities move “from surviving to thriving.” Cliché or not, here in Rajasthan, India, it’s true.

The next phase of the program is a “train the trainer.” The goal is for farmers currently involved to train other farmers on the new farming practices. By sharing lessons and the seeds WE has given them, more farmers will be added to the fold, thereby creating a food secure home.

Today, farmers involved with the program are proof that it doesn’t take fancy equipment or shiny interventions to solve hunger. It takes a lot of careful planning, trust building and understanding. You don’t need to replace the ox; you just need to upgrade the cart.

As WE’s Country Director in India says, “it’s bridging that gap between emergency and long-term sustainable development, which is really important.” This enables Noja Ram to have enough food for his five kids and generate income from the surplus. This combats a global food crisis with effective local solutions. This is one step closer to thriving.