

Lead Farmers begin to Lead others: Cases from the first year of CARLEP – IFAD Interventions

Lhap Dorji¹, Tashi Phunstho², Dorjee³ and Pema Khandu⁴

Introduction

Lead farmer model is implemented by the Agriculture Research and Development Centre Wengkhār as an extension approach with supports from the Commercial Agriculture and Resilient Livelihoods Enhancement Program (CARLEP-IFAD) implemented in six eastern Dzongkhags. A total of 26 lead farmers from the first year of CARLEP implementation have now reached their final session of training program coordinated by the centre. Another implementing partner in lead farmers approach, Samdrupjongkhar Initiative (SJI) have identified 8 Potential Lead Farmers (PLF) so far and Another 24 potential lead farmers selected from past training programs under JICA TCP supports have been identified, retrained and are sent back to their villages whose services are now made available for the Dzongkhag and geogs to begin expanding their services in the Dzongkhag and geog led Lead Farmer Programs .

The lead farmer model begins with a training program of a packaged course in farming provided for a selected group of farmers with potentials to disseminate skills acquired from the training program to others. These lead farmers are selected based on some selection criteria such as willingness to expand their skills to neighbors, have good experience in farming, leading a group or have potentials to form a group, youth or women engaged in farming. In order for the lead farmers to demonstrate to others, a demonstration farm of integrated vegetables, fruits and cereal crops are established for them as a part of the training program with inputs supported from the program.

The Dzongkhags and geog extension centres have started to use the services of lead farmers. However, only few cases are reported and thus will be revisited at a later stage during the second year of implementation. In order to reinforce the promotion of lead farmer model, ARDC based on the progress in use of this extension approach in its first year of implementation presents the following cases where lead farmers are deployed more effectively and could be used as an example in the subsequent years.

SJI takes up Lead farmers Approach in creating Potential Lead Farmers in Samdrupjongkhar

Samdrupjongkhar Initiative (SJI), an NGO in Samdrupjongkhar who also promotes similar concepts in extension services began a collaborative program with ARDC Wengkhār starting from 2016-17. One such lead farmer SJI picked up is Mr. MC Gurung, trained by ARDC Wengkhār in the past programs prior to CARLEP inception. Mr. MC Gurung's demonstration farm at Dengzor, Orong is

¹ ARDC Wengkhār, PB 132 Mongar, DoA MoAF

² ARDC Wengkhār, PB 132 Mongar, DoA MoAF

³ Dzongkhag Agriculture Sector, Lhuentse Dzongkhag

⁴ Geog Agriculture Extension Centre, Minjey Lhuentse

used as a demonstration farm from where SJI trains others. In the first year of CARLEP IFAD intervention, SJI and the lead farmer began training other farmers in Samdrupjongkhar and strengthen them towards making additional lead farmers also known as Potential Lead Farmers (PLF).

SJI in the first year of CARLEP implementation with fund supports from the program has successfully identified 8 PLFs (2 women and 6 men) for whom the initial lead farmers trained them for a week on his farm facilitated by SJI facilitators in April 2017. This training is further reinforced with exposure programs in which the PLFs visited other demonstration farms developed by ARDC in Orong geog followed up by an exposure trip to the research stations at Wengkhar, Lingmethang and Khangma earlier this year.

The PLFs have also started to make field visits to other farmers in their locality in which they have so far visited 8 other farms to advise and share their lessons. A social forestry day in June this year was also organized by the PLFs in promoting and creating awareness on conservation. More than 100 other farmers benefitted from their services.

The deployment of lead farmers in extension services delivery not only empowers the lead and potential lead farmers but is also found to be useful for agencies in effective delivery of extension services such as ARDC, Dzonghags, Geogs and NGOs . SJI found the use of lead farmer and dissemination of skills by them to other farmers in simplifying technical information and messages. Openness to raise doubts, ask questions and interaction levels are also observed to be increasing.



Potential Lead Farmers from Samdrupjongkar Initiative on a field visit to ARDC Wengkhar

SJI plans to develop as many lead farmers as possible in collaboration with other technical agencies such as geog extension and ARDC Wengkhar. This partnership will also be able to deploy other trained lead farmers in the Dzongkhag which SJI, ARDC Wengkhar and the Dzongkhag, Geog extension will explore in subsequent years of CARLEP – IFAD implementation.

Multiple Support enables A Youth lead farmer to form a Youth group: The establishment of first Youth in farming initiative in Lhuentse

Guendhen Jamtsho aged 21, who left high School is one of the beneficiaries of the on going lead farmer program (2016-17). He has started to play his role even before completing his course by becoming a field coordinator of a youth group of 22 youth who left schools and staying at home in Minji geog. The group composed of 18 women and 4 men formed earlier this year began farming on 15 acres of land under the User Right System (URS) at Gulibi under Minji geog for commercial vegetable cultivation targeting the lean winter season.

Guendhen and his colleagues with multiple supports from the Dzongkhag, URS program of the government and ARDC Wengkhar CARLEP Support have started the largest commercial farming initiative in the Dzongkhag. Lhuenste Dzongkhag and ARDC Wengkhar has identified this site as one of the commercial vegetable production sites. A production plan was also developed prior to starting the farming.



Chilly fields of the Youth engagement in farming, Gulibi Lhuenste

While other supports in developing the land, fencing and other structures, famr machinery are provided under the URS program from RGoB, the production supports from the CARLEP supports to the Dzongkhag and ARDC Wengkhar was provided to begin farming and will continue in the second year of implementation.

While their main commercial program on vegetables will only begin some times in July onwards to target vegetable production in December to March, they with technical assistance of ARDC, Dzongkhag and geog extension centre began cultivation much earlier with several other crops such as chilly (1.5 acres), upland rice (3.5 acres), soyabean (1 acre), passion fruits and cardamom (0.5 acre). Asparagus cultivation is the latest inclusion with transplanting completed in June this year for about 1.5 acres. About 8 acres of the 15 acres of land are now cropped by June this year.



Soya bean cultivation at Youth engagement in farming, Gulibi Lhuenste

With Guendhen Jamtsho having some exposures through attending training programs at Wengkhaz, the geog extension centre and ARDC benefitted from having our farmer agent in coordinating the field programs planned with the Youth group. Whatever skills he acquired can also be of help to the geog extension in implementing the field programs and for the group, who are mostly in experienced and young farmers, having a trained colleague gives them a reference point to rely.

Having seen various crops at Wengkhaz, the lead farmer encouraged his colleagues and towards the end of May this year requested the Dzongkhag and ARDC for an exposure trip to the research stations and commercial farms in Mongar. A study trip was organized for the group to gain some exposure to crops of commercial potentials.

Technically assisted by the Regional Agriculture Marketing and Cooperative Office at Mongar, a group operational mechanisms was developed with clear roles and responsibilities. Group leader – popularly referred as “Captain” among themselves and a secretary was unanimously appointed by the group and are currently coordinating the farm operations such as land preparation,

transplanting, nursery raising, crop guarding and various other farm operations. As an educated group of farmers, the group uses social media channels to organize and coordinate these activities.

The group expects their first harvest of chilly later this month and preparations are underway for the vegetable nurseries with technical assistance of ARDC Wengkhar, the geog and Dzongkhag extension.

Conclusion

The promotion of lead farmer model and expansion of the model has started to gain its momentum in the implementation of CARELP – IFAD. While new lead farmer models establishment do not face much difficulty, its expansion or replication of the models takes a longer time to take off as such replication demands consistent efforts, focused interventions and adequate investment supports especially in the initial stages. And thus, a conversion of multiple support is felt necessary.

No single agency or programs has adequate investment supports in a complete package especially in the initial stages for such initiatives in commercializing farming. While the investments are limited, areas on investments are many such as reversion of fallow lands, fencing over a large area, machineries of both heavy and small and production inputs. Faced with this situation, the Dzongkhag and ARDC resorted to multiple sources to help them see through their difficult initial stages in starting commercial farming.

Although only two cases over the past one year, it is perhaps bit too early to call it successful as these have not reached its appropriate stage of sustainability. However, from the perspectives of CARLEP – IFAD interventions in view of enhancing extension services, commercialization, gender and youth engagement in farming, it is indeed a good start and a model to look at.

About 17 acres of land are put into proper use with a total direct beneficiary of some 20 women and 10 men farmers in these two cases. Interventions in the subsequent years in these sites and replication into similar sites elsewhere could bring about desired changes. Similar cases of lead farmer promotion with SJI and with the upcoming URS programs in all geogs in the region, it is an important entry point for all Dzongkhags to explore CARLEPs production support in commercialization to partner in these programs and result in effective implementation and impact generation.

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Note:

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