



Enhancing Livelihoods Fund

Video training at scale for smallholder farmers – learnings and success factors

Oxfam case study

The Enhancing Livelihoods Fund (ELF), a joint initiative between Oxfam, Unilever and the Ford Foundation, supported a project in India that developed and rolled out a video-based training manual to more than 10,000 smallholder farmers in the gherkin value chain. This document describes lessons learned from the project. As the coronavirus pandemic makes it necessary for companies and NGOs to find new ways of reaching out to smallholder farmers at scale, the experiences of the project may be of particular relevance in this new context.

INTRODUCTION

Reaching smallholders at scale to share knowledge and teach new skills is difficult at the best of times. As the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are felt all over the world, including in global supply chains, this is truer than ever. Given the importance of preventing the transmission of coronavirus, especially among the most vulnerable people, the need for social distancing is preventing most workshops and face-to-face trainings from taking place at present. However, it is important to continue to engage with smallholders, to share information and to support them to adapt to the changing circumstances.

This document summarizes lessons from a project in India by the Enhancing Livelihoods Fund (ELF), which aimed to roll out video training at scale to more than 10,000 smallholder gherkin farmers. While the model that was used in the project might not be suitable in the current conditions, it provides relevant insights for companies and NGOs wishing to reach farmers in the midst of the challenges presented by the coronavirus.

Box 1: The Enhancing Livelihoods Fund

The Enhancing Livelihoods Fund (ELF) is a joint initiative between Oxfam, Unilever and the Ford Foundation that explores and tests the best ways to strengthen smallholder livelihoods. By providing a blend of finance and technical expertise for partners in Unilever's supply chains, the ELF invests in innovative projects to minimize risk for smallholders, empower women and improve working conditions



THE PROJECT AT A GLANCE

The challenge: Accessing up-to-date information on good agricultural practices is an ongoing challenge for smallholder farmers in rural communities. Although this is important in order to improve yields, quality and income, it is difficult to reach large numbers of often illiterate smallholder farmers and encourage them to adopt new practices.

The trial: Thousands of smallholder farmers in Southern India supply Marcatus QED, a global agri-foods supplier headquartered in Toronto, with gherkins via local partner companies. Marcatus, which supplies gherkins from India to Unilever, developed the Marcatus Mobile Education Platform (MMEP) as a novel approach to training smallholder farmers in rural regions. Combining the know-how of industry experts and local field officers, the platform used simple technology to create videos showcasing and sharing knowledge with local farmers. The goal of MMEP was to educate everyone in farming families (including women) and to enable supplier partners to self-produce videos when new issues that warranted communicating with large numbers of smallholders arose. Over a two-year project period between 2016 and 2018, nearly 400 field officers from nine gherkin supply companies trained over 10,000 farming families using MMEP.

Box 2: The project's achievements

Despite challenges, including drought in gherkin-growing areas, farmers involved in this project produced gherkin yields that were about **30% above industry standards**.

After receiving MMEP training, **81% of farmers** reported making at least one improvement to their farming techniques.

Over half of participants reported earning more than they expected from gherkins, thanks partly to the training on improved practices. The average household net income from gherkins in one of the project areas increased by about 56% (not adjusted for inflation), enabling families to repay loans, pay for education, reinvest in agriculture and build houses.

Companies' relationships with farmers improved as a result of the project. Some managers at supplier companies stated that, because of MMEP, farmers were very appreciative of the efforts that their companies put into training and into supporting increases in yields.

How was MMEP developed? At the outset of the project, a 'gherkin curriculum' was developed with partner companies, bringing together their local knowledge and agricultural expertise. The curriculum covered topics such as proper application of farmyard manure, fertilizer and pesticide usage and drip irrigation. Working with the NGO Digital Green, supplier production teams were trained and equipped with video cameras and equipment to edit the videos they would make. Local

field officers were taught how to create simple videos in the local languages, featuring local farmers (including women) using local tools. They learned how to develop storyboards, handle the camera, and shoot and edit the videos. More than 60 videos were created. Supplier companies received pico (portable mini) projectors and tablets to show the videos to farmers, either in small groups or individually. Overall, the key components of MMEP included locally made videos about sustainable practices; a master digital textbook on the A–Z of growing gherkins; pico projectors for showing videos in group settings and tablets for showing them in the field; training of trainer (ToT) sessions on video production and dissemination; and gender integration sessions.

INSIGHTS AND LEARNINGS

- 1. A mobile education platform can be an effective tool for improving farmers' agricultural practices.** Using videos – which convey a consistent message in a quick and visual manner, featuring local people from the community – can be very effective, particularly when literacy rates are low and when large numbers of people need to be reached. Field officers gave MMEP a score of 7 out of 10 for effectiveness in changing farmers' cultivation practices. More than 70% of farmers themselves were 'extremely satisfied' with the training videos.
- 2. Quality videos make learning better.** Farmers enjoyed the videos and learned from them; they also made suggestions for improving them, such as integrating animations into videos, improving sound quality and having stronger storylines.
- 3. Video screenings should be adapted to farmers' needs and preferences.** The videos were shown either to individuals on tablets or to small groups using pico projectors. In this project, each screening option had its pros and cons. Using a tablet gives flexibility: field officers can integrate videos with their daily routines and take them to farmers at times and locations that suit them, even if showing them on tablets in bright sunlight was occasionally difficult. Some field officers also decided to show the videos on their mobile phones. Projecting the videos to groups of farmers makes training more time-efficient and brings other advantages like peer-to-peer learning. Both methods would need to be adapted to suit social distancing measures.
- 4. Using digital training can be an important gateway to independent learning.** While it was not part of the project itself, extension staff involved in it suggested that videos could be provided to farmers on memory cards so that they could watch them in their own time on phones. Assuming that accessibility could be provided, this would have clear benefits in the current situation. However, rolling out too many new digital solutions in a short period of time might lead to challenges in uptake.
- 5. Videos can free up time for extension staff.** While the production of videos can be time-intensive, once they were produced field staff commented on how they helped them to be more efficient. Furthermore, the project improved relationships between farmers and extension staff. Because the staff training included a strong gender element, staff were able to better understand the important role of women in gherkin cultivation, and relationships with women farmers improved significantly.
- 6. It is vital to incorporate a gender lens in any form of digital training for farmers.** Pandemics often have a disproportionate impact on women because of their vital roles as caregivers. Yet because they are often less visible in farming value chains, and because they are less likely than men to be decision makers, their needs go largely unmet. Now more than ever, therefore, any interventions with smallholder farmers need to ensure that women's needs are taken into account. Everyone involved in the MMEP project took part in some form of gender training, and screening sessions were organized to maximize women's attendance and participation.
- 7. Digital training is more likely to be effective if other needs are also considered.** The project found farmers to be more receptive to adopting new practices if (a) they understood why they were being shown a video about a specific practice, and did not feel that they were being lectured on something irrelevant; (b) they had good, trusting relationships with field officers and supplier companies; and (c) their overall well-being was good, and they were not distracted by issues at home. This final point, of course, is particularly relevant in the current climate. Additional stress has a huge impact on farmers' appetite for risk: if companies want farmers to change their methods and adopt new practices, they should have a good understanding of the context in which the training is delivered and should support farmers in other areas where possible. In this project, some farmers with smaller plot sizes were less likely to take up new practices as they were less able to absorb any risk.

CONCLUSION

The potential of programmes like MMEP to improve supply chain and business sustainability is far-reaching. This project strengthened collaboration between key actors in the supply chain, and increased positive outcomes for smallholder farmers.

As the coronavirus crisis progresses and unfolds around the world, it is clear that there will be immediate, short-term impacts and also far-reaching, long-term impacts on global supply chains, and in particular on smallholders. Agricultural systems are changing and innovative, brave interventions will be needed to ensure sustainable livelihoods for small-scale producers and enterprises.

Oxfam is working in more than 25 countries to respond to the challenges and threats of the coronavirus. Its priority is to support the most vulnerable people, providing emergency relief as well as hygiene awareness and access to food, cash and other essentials, and helping communities to build long-term resilience in the face of the outbreak. We are keen to collaborate with companies and organizations working in the same areas. For more information, or to discuss partnership opportunities, please get in touch.

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Cover photo: Filming a video for training purposes. Credit: Marcatus QED.

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