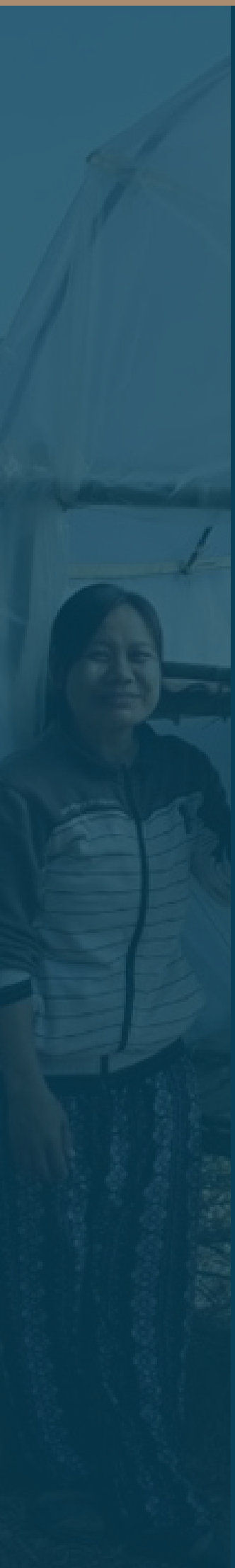

2 Experience Sharing from the Region and Beyond

Date: December 9, 2021
Moderator: Mr. Pierre Ferrand, FAO-RAP
Overview of Day 2:

The parallel sessions provided insights on the ARIs' experiences in supporting rural transformation, mainstreaming of agroecology, and family farmers' organizations. The different topics are related to building back greener and more resilient food systems in the regions. The organized parallel sessions were divided into four major topics: enhancing rural communities' initiatives and transfer of technologies; regional/local policies and strategies to support family farmers and sustainability of rural livelihoods and communities; multi-stakeholder networks and platforms enabling co-creation of knowledge and participatory research; and innovation in higher education institutions (HEIs) curriculum to better address agroecology and family farming.

Session 2.1A Enhancing rural communities' initiatives and development, and transfer of technologies

Session Leads: Ms. Sasireka Rajendran (APAARI) and Ms. Myline Macabuhay (AFA)

A. Home gardens for resilient local food systems – Dr. Pepijn Schreinemachers (World Vegetable Center/Thailand)

The COVID-19 pandemic has made healthy food items such as fruit and vegetables less affordable and sometimes inaccessible for poor households in rural and urban areas, especially to those that lost sources of income. This is unfortunate and counterproductive as fresh fruit and vegetables are vital to good health and strengthening people's immune response.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people, in urban and rural areas alike, have taken up vegetable gardening to supply some of their own vegetable needs. Gardening is an important strategy to improve the resilience of households to maintain healthy diets under the COVID-19 pandemic or any other crises, be it poverty, armed conflict, or natural disaster.

Gardening in urban areas, on balconies, rooftops, vertically against walls, or in community gardens on vacant land contributes to the greening of urban environments, social interaction, environmental awareness in addition to being a source of personal joy and fresh food to eat.

Home gardens are an incredibly important source of fruit and vegetables that are often overlooked. Good statistics on the contribution of home gardens to food security are usually not available. In Indonesia, it has been estimated that about 20 percent of fruit and vegetables consumed come from home gardens.

Home gardens are often small-scale, have a high diversity of vegetables, fruits, herbs, spices (and sometimes ornamentals), and mostly managed by women. Home gardens are also suitable to build people's understanding about agroecological production practices. The high diversity of plants grown in a home garden can be used to showcase the benefits of plant diversity and how it promotes beneficial organisms including pollinators.

The small scale of home gardens enables experimentation and learning, which can inform farmers about new practices. For instance, the use of compost can show relatively quick effects on plant performance, thereby demonstrating the importance of soil health to plant performance. Yet not all home gardens are terribly productive. Home gardeners face a range of constraints such as poor soils, water, pests and diseases, or generally poor plant performance.

Many of these challenges can be addressed through training. Home garden interventions are often targeted at women and typically combine training in nutrition to raise people's interest in eating more vegetables with training in agronomy to increase people's confidence and capacity in gardening.

The promotion or improvement of home gardens is a relatively complex type of intervention as it deals with many crops and many different constraints, and has agronomic, nutritional, educational, and institutional aspects, including an important gender dimension.

Interventions described in the literature range from simple seed kit distributions to intensive training programs spread over several years. Careful design and implementation of a home garden program is often overlooked, but is critical to the success and sustainability of the program. Not many organizations publicly share their training materials online.

The World Vegetable Center (WorldVeg) has been implementing home garden programs for nearly 40 years, but we did not have a particular strategy or a standard training approach. As a result, we found ourselves reinventing the wheel in each new home garden project.

The initiative of home gardens aims to develop high quality home garden training materials and share these publicly so that many organizations can incorporate these in their own intervention designs.

The guides are developed by Lauren Pincus with the help of Evan Clayburg, Elin Duby, Sheena Shah, and Archie Jarman from November 2020 to April 2021. The review of existing home garden materials of WorldVeg and other organizations was conducted, and each draft was reviewed by WorldVeg staff for accuracy and feasibility. The drafts were finalized and formatted with pictures representing diversity of people and landscapes served by WorldVeg.

The toolbox has eight facilitator guides and 10 crop guides. It also has training aids such as posters and instructional videos. Each facilitator guide has one or several modules. There are 21 separate modules in total, each requiring a time allocation of about 3–3.5 hours. Going through the whole training would therefore take about 21 days, but program designers can mix-and-match modules or elements within the modules to serve their own needs and fit their available time. The toolbox can be accessed here: https://toolbox.avrdc.org/.

The approach emphasizes participatory learning. Participatory training requires participants to work together with a facilitator toward a learning goal. Rather than a traditional lecture, where a teacher stands in front and presents new information, a participatory training constantly requires inputs from the participants themselves. As such, gardeners are asked to share their own knowledge, ask questions, and have frequent discussions about why certain things happen and what can be done about it.

Figure 9. Example lesson topics in the home garden toolbox

(Source: World Vegetable Center)

Gardeners first learn how to carefully observe the landscape around them to pick a gardening site. They progress through the seasons and learn the skills they need to build healthy soil, plant a garden bed, control pests and diseases, manage water, and save seeds. Each lesson builds gardeners' confidence and enthusiasm for using their home gardens to improve their household's access to healthy vegetables and fruits.

Each training session starts with an introduction and warm-up to engage participants. Learning objectives, materials required, and the estimate length of the training are defined upfront. The learning involves interactive discussion, experimentation, and exercises. The approach was developed with an adult audience in mind and is based on the understanding that adults learn best when they feel that the content of the training is relevant to their lives and they can see an immediate benefit of it. Gender is an important aspect of implementing the toolbox and the facilitator guide on participant engagement is meant to help facilitators consider gender dynamics.

For the future plans, since the guides are currently in English, some are being translated into French language. There are rendered home garden videos as IEC materials. The organization is testing the guides in ongoing projects and we want to encourage other organizations to use the toolbox.

In conclusion, the importance of home gardens for fruit and vegetable supplies has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Home gardens contribute to food system resilience but also have many other benefits, including agroecology. The promotion of home gardening requires a carefully designed approach that is participatory in nature. The WorldVeg Home Garden Toolbox can benefit organizations operating in this area.

B. Investing in food safety, nutrition, and women empowerment can play a key role to accelerate agro-ecological transitions – Ms. Marie -Aude Even (IFAD), Ms. Shila Gnyawali (ASHA Project/Nepal), and Ms. Doina Popusoi (IFAD)

For this discussion, the topics were divided into three parts: an overview of the research paper and some IFAD examples, a discussion on Nepal Adaptation for Smallholders in Hilly Areas (ASHA) experience on gender in community driven adaptation, and a learning from agroecological stock take and Brazil experience on seed and agroecological logbook.

Food safety and nutrition closely links the practices of agroecology and gender, specifically women empowerment. The four pillars of food security demonstrate some key components in linking agroecology practices and women empowerment together. Food safety refers to the chemical use (i.e., effects of chemical use in women's reproduction) and women-led post-harvest practice. For nutrition diversity, women receive education on diverse farm systems and tending of home gardens. The capacity of women to access livelihoods and sustainable food productions lies on the availability and accessibility of food. Resilient farms and strengthened women livelihood-asset ensure food stability. Food safety, nutrition, and health awareness played a key role to convince households to adopt such agroecological practices based on the field survey in India and Bangladesh.

In terms of women empowerment and adoption of agroecology, addressing gender gap is key to enable women influence household decisions and get engaged in agroecological value