

## Visiting the Largest Women's Organisation in India - SEWA

I recently had the great pleasure of visiting SEWA (the Self-Employed Women's Association of India) in Gujarat. Their main office is in Ahmedabad, Gujarat – though they work across several states in India. SEWA was formed the same year as ICRISAT – in 1972. What started with a small group of dedicated women working together in Gujarat has now become a vibrant co-operative with two million members across the country.

Both ICRISAT and SEWA have grown up in India and, whilst both are serving different purposes in society, what really struck me was how by joining hands with an organisation such as SEWA we can really achieve impact at scale in a short period of time. This in turn will ensure that our science is relevant and that it meets the needs of women farmers to create economic opportunity and sustainable development ... not only in India but in Sub-Saharan Africa as well.

During my tour in Gujarat with the Director of SEWA, Ms Reemaben Nanavaty we spent the day going out to one of their early projects in Ganeshpura village in the Mehsana District, where in 1984 fifty five women came together and asked the government for some reclaimed land. This area – some 10 acres - had been used in the past to recycle garbage but it had been lying unused for some time. These women wanted to rehabilitate the land and transform it into an agricultural enterprise as a co-operative.

By 1987 the women had managed to put in a bore well, start the cultivation of fruit trees, set up a lemon orchard, and they also started to grow vegetables, and today it's like an 'oasis'. They have drip irrigation to support tomato production and a range of other vegetable crops, they have another part of the garden for fruit orchards, and they have greenhouses – though these have recently fallen into disrepair because the monkeys destroyed them – but that's one of the challenges of agriculture! And they also provide contracted services to the outside community.

Members of SEWA even run a radio station – channel FM 90.8 - where they are broadcasting agricultural information to the local community and to local farmers – so its woman farmers broadcasting to other farmers.

Since its small beginnings SEWA now has a wide range of activities and one of the areas they have developed has been on the value addition of agricultural products which are marketed through their retail outlet RUDI (the Rural Distribution Network) . I think this is an area where there is a real opportunity for partnering with ICRISAT's Agribusiness Innovation Platform in helping them to provide a larger offering of value addition products – that will improve nutrition in the villages.

Our own VDSA research has shown that today villagers across India are increasingly buying low cost snack foods that are convenient but basically only provide carbohydrates and are not really offering broad nutritional value to the consumer.

What we see as an opportunity for partnership with SEWA is using our 'Smart Food' – sorghum, millets, pulses and other nutritious crops – to prepare snack foods that are produced locally and sold locally to improve economic opportunity for women whilst at the same time improving nutrition for rural India.

What is also interesting is that they are now starting to use mobile phones to aggregate the orders. They use to sell these products door to door – but now they are using SMS to aggregate the orders and to streamline the whole operation to provide greater convenience and cost efficiency. And so in their own way they are real pioneers in the use of ICT to offer an "Amazon – like" service for packaged food to rural India!

It was a fantastic exchange and experience, I learned a lot from them, and they're very keen to work with ICRISAT – including harnessing our seed production of hybrid pigeonpea and our other crops. In cases like this - where there is a real need for increased pulse production - women's associations are a very powerful channel for producing and distributing seed to farmers.

So it's a win-win partnership: we started our journey around the same time, its taken us to different places and we really see an opportunity now of coming together to maximise our impact; from ICRISAT'S perspective: in getting innovation into the hands of farmers and from SEWA's perspective: empowering women within their organisation to be commercially successful.