

Farmers In Maharashtra Deliver Direct To Consumer, Transform a Crisis into an Opportunity

Since the last few days, families observing Ramzaan in Maharashtra's Satara city are breaking their daily fast, while remaining strictly inside their homes. In this ritual, watermelon is a prized fruit - hydrating, palate-cleansing and delicious. Thousands buy it every year from their local markets. However, this year, for some families, this simple fruit has come with an added layer of novelty. And the reason isn't limited to this being a 'social distancing special Ramzaan'. For the first time ever, instead of standing in line and haggling at markets, families have purchased the fruit from the source itself - the farmer.

This is not just a first for the consumers. While farmers in the area grow melons and watermelons each year, this is the very first time they have also marketed and sold the fruit themselves, as part of an innovative farm-to-home model. This initiative has been so successful that without any distributors or 'middlemen', farmers in the area are managing to sell over 4 ton of produce (over 4,000 kg), almost every day.



Fresh produce from Dayanand Nikam's farm, village Nhavi Budruk resident and Production Associate with Paani Foundation

While farmers are overjoyed at these results today, the situation was starkly different towards the end of March. An unforeseen crisis had gripped the area, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The worry ran so deep that some farmers were forced to think about whether they would have to "leave agriculture".

The Problem

Despite agricultural services being essential in the lockdown, farmers faced a disruption of supply chains and increased market uncertainty. Truck owners were not as accessible as earlier to ferry produce, middlemen offered unfair prices, and migrant labourers working on farms were forced to return home. As a result, several farmers were left with the clock ticking on perishable produce. Many also had excess grains or pulses, or were anxious about the upcoming harvest.

The Ingenious Solution

As word reached Paani Foundation's Chief Advisor, Dr. Avinash Pol, this unprecedented challenge began to transform into an unprecedented opportunity. Under Dr. Pol's guidance, farmers in Koregaon taluka (Satara district), started executing a farmer-to-consumer delivery model. First, they created a database of excess or perishable produce. Armed with this information, work began on two fronts: (1) Collaboration with local government and (2) Finding assured customers in Satara city.

With the support of the local government, Paani Foundation's team secured necessary transit permissions in just two days. Wards in Satara were allocated for selling produce, and vehicles were rented. Next, donning the role of salespersons, farmers contacted families in the city, promised delivery of fresh produce, and listed down their requirements.

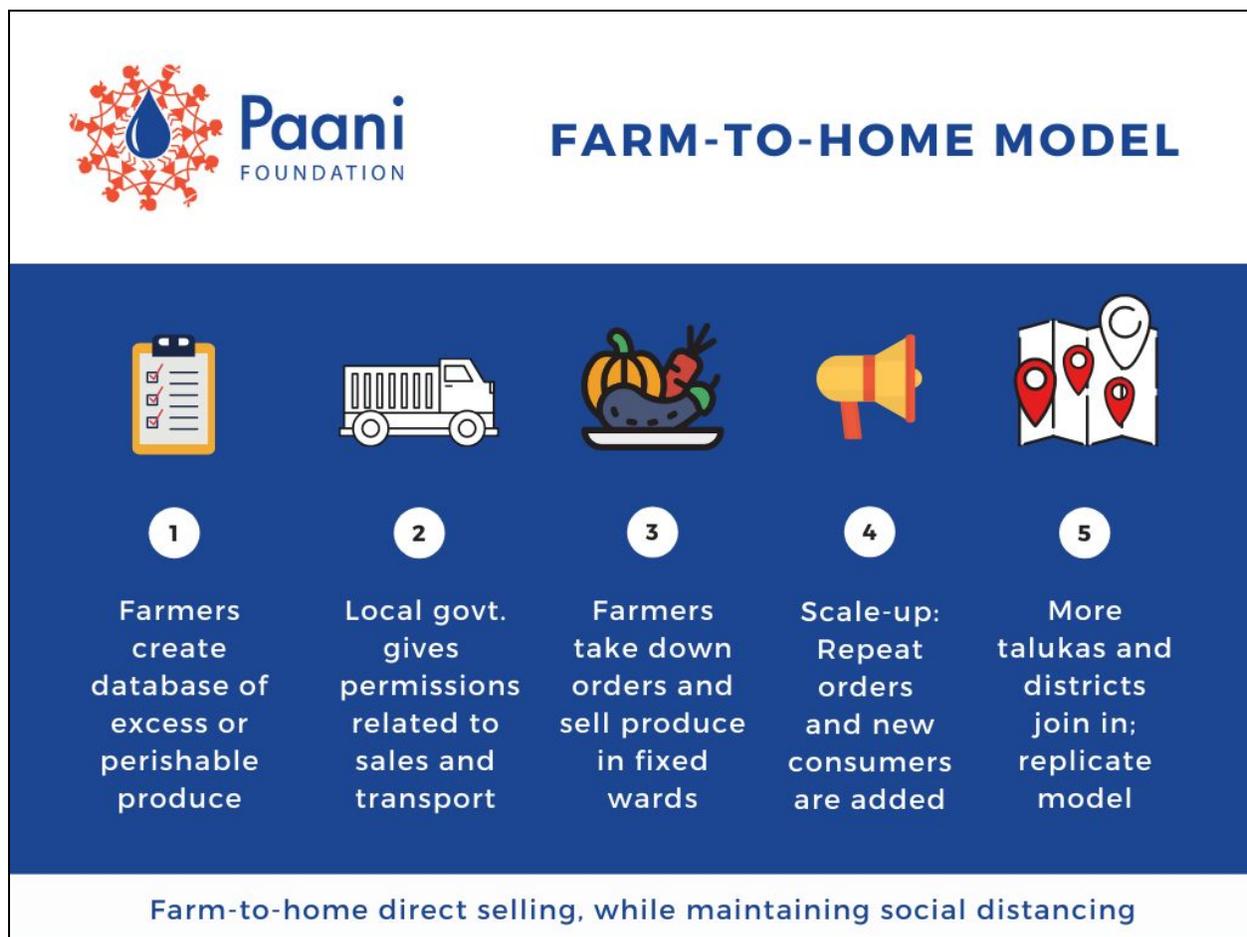
On day 1, farmers in four vehicles drove down from Nhavi Budruk village (Water Cup 2018, Koregaon taluka 2nd prize winner), and flagged off this innovative model. As days passed, sales picked up with the customers' growing trust.



Farmers load trucks with produce, and use a mic to publicise their initiative in Satara district

As an added bonus, farmers are helping each other harvest, load and sell produce, and finding confidence in this shared success. The removal of middlemen has ensured a win-win scenario economically. Farmers are getting more of their hard-earned due, while customers are getting more reasonable rates. In the month of April alone, farmers in Nhavi Budruk village, from where this model started in Satara, have earned a total of Rs. 11,91,580.

Along with watermelon, farmers are also selling high-quality onion, tomato, carrot, cauliflower, bhindi, beans, methi, and more. As of today, 170 vehicles from different villages in Satara are plying each day during the lockdown.



Ripple Effect: Model Replicated in other Talukas

The success of this experiment has inspired farmers in other districts. In Barshitakli taluka (Akola district), a farmer's market has been set up, and is gaining popularity every day. Paani Foundation's team has worked with the agriculture department, police department, ATMA society, and revenue department, to make this possible.



Farmer's market in Barshitakli taluka practises social distancing norms, and helps ease local government's worry of crowding at markets

In Atpadi taluka (Sangli district), farmers have started creating baskets of produce and delivering them to residential societies in cities, based on pre-orders from customers. A few deliveries have been successfully executed in areas such as Girgaon in Mumbai, amounting to a total of over Rs. 30,000 per order. Bigger deliveries have been planned in Mahalaxmi for the coming week. This setup has been organised in co-ordination with Paani Foundation's team and other groups.



182 kits of vegetables (such as drumstick, green chillies, brinjal, bitter gourd, okra, tomato, onion, etc.) were sold in two residential societies in Pune, by farmers from Jambhulani village, Atpadi taluka. Jambhulani is a village participating in the Samruddha Gaon Spardha.

The process for initiating this model has also started in some other blocks participating in the Samruddha Gaon Spardha. These include Khultabad and Phulambri blocks in Aurangabad; Ahmednagar, Parner, Sangamner blocks in Ahmednagar district; Sinnar block in Nashik; North Solapur block in Solapur; Barshitakli block in Akola; and Atpadi block in Sangli.

Samruddha Gaon and Water Cup Principles in Action

At the heart of Paani Foundation's work in Maharashtra, is fostering social unity and empowering citizens to solve their own problems with entrepreneurial zeal. The work done as part of the Water Cup has created a culture that re-inforces the power of co-operation over competition. This farm-to-home model has been fuelled by the same principles, combined with the effective use of technology.

In the coming months, Paani Foundation will work on striking partnerships with retail platforms, corporates, government agencies, FPOs etc., and scale this model, to create assured markets as part of the Samruddha Gaon Spardha.

UPDATE AS OF JUNE 2020

During the Satyamev Jayate Water Cup competitions, thousands of villages in Maharashtra experienced the astounding power of unity, ownership and entrepreneurial action to change their status quo. In several villages, the harsh reality of political factionalism, social barriers and water scarcity was upturned by joy, unity and water abundance.

Keeping up with this spirit of self-driven, solution-oriented work, in the last few months, several villages associated with Paani Foundation have attempted to subvert yet another status quo. For years, most farmers have had little option but to sell their produce through the well-known middlemen-to-mandi model. This model has rarely promoted and centred their well-being and interests.

But since the lockdown in India, farmers have come together to build their own supply chains to nearby semi-urban and urban areas. With this impressive farm-to-home model, they are also sharpening their skills of salesmanship, packaging and delivery.

Here are some key updates since our last report on the execution of this model:

A Successful Mini Farmers' Market in Mumbai's Girgaon

Since the last two months, farmers from Karjule Harya village in Parner taluka (Ahmadnagar district), have been setting up a small market for a housing society in Mumbai's Girgaon area. Set up within the society itself, it has been a novel and successful initiative. "In each visit, produce worth Rs. 40,000 is sold in less than a day. Each time, farmers get 18-22 types of vegetables and 5-6 types of fresh fruits such as watermelon and grapes," says Sagar Kunsavlikar, Data Manager with Paani Foundation, who has been coordinating this initiative along with our team on ground.

One or two farmers collect all the produce at the village level and sell this in Mumbai. The earnings are distributed according to the sales of the day. In just a few trips to Mumbai, farmers have collectively earned over Rs. 5 lakh in a month! Karjule Harya village was also the third rank holder at the taluka level in the Water Cup 2019 competition. Its story proves how farmers are achieving success as a result of meticulous planning, trust and collective decision making.

Encouraged by the success of this entrepreneurial initiative, women from an SHG in neighbouring village Bhalwani have also joined the efforts. Delicious snacks and pickles made by them are now also being sold in the market. "We have just started experimenting with the produce from the SHG," says Sagar. "Products worth a minimum of Rs. 5,000 are being sold, over and above the fruits and vegetables." In the last trip, dry bhel made by the SHG members was a sleeper hit. Almost 40 kg of just this bhel (amounting to Rs. 6,400 in earnings) was sold in a few hours.

In addition to Parner taluka, farmers from Sinnar taluka in Nashik district have also made two trips to Koliwadi in Girgaon and sold their produce. With bulk requirements in the lockdown, over 1,700 kg of produce was sold in just one trip. Customers had a high demand for fresh vegetables such as coriander, cabbage, drumstick, carrot, bitter gourd, chillies and okra. They also bought curry leaves and grapes.



*Top: Produce from Karjule Harya and Bhalwani being sold in Girgaon
Below: Produce from Sinnar taluka being offloaded in Girgaon*



Confidence-Inspiring Initiatives in Satara, Aurangabad, Sangli and Akola districts

In the region of Marathwada, farmers from nine villages in Khultabad and Phulambri talukas kick-started the farm-to-home initiative less than two months ago. Some of these (for e.g., Khandi Pimpalgaon and Wanegaon) have also been taluka-level rank holders in previous editions of the Water Cup. Paani Foundation's team co-ordinated with the ATMA department to secure necessary permissions and a list of housing societies in Aurangabad city, where fresh produce could be sold twice a week. Within this short span of time, this confidence-inspiring initiative led to farmers collectively achieving earnings of Rs. 11 lakh 80 thousand!



In Atpadi taluka, Sangli district, five villages have been engaged in farm-to-home initiatives. From these, farmers from Jambhulani village have found customers in Mumbai, Navi Mumbai, Chinchwad and Pune. In just eight trips, they sold Rs. 6,37,650 worth of produce.

Residents in Jambhulani had also started fish farming as an experiment in February 2020. As of June 2020, they have reared different types of freshwater fish and have had to find their own markets.

In the last few days, they have successfully found customers in nearby villages and sold 600 kg of fish, thereby saving on the cost of pickup rentals and reducing distance to market.

In Barshitakli taluka, Akola district, 17 villages participating in the Samruddha Gaon Spardha have been engaged in this initiative. In the first month of the lockdown, they sold 652 quintals (65,200 kg) of produce in the district area, as per data shared by the ATMA department. This included vegetables such as potato, onion, brinjal, spinach, okra, tomato, ridge gourd. One village, Lohagad Tanda, successfully sold 200 quintals (2,000 kg) of watermelon in just one day.

In Rui village, Satara district, a Farmer Producer Company has been hard at work to strengthen their supply chain. Between April 15 and May 31, they bought vegetables, fruits and grocery items at the village level (at a better price than the local mandi), and found loyal customers in Mumbai and Pune. In this period, they collected orders from 810 families (20 housing societies) in Pune and 150 families (3 housing societies) in Mumbai, and sold over 5,000 kg of fruits and vegetables, and 2,000 kg of grocery items!

To execute this model seamlessly, their added cost in packing material, crates, etc. was Rs. 40,000 and their total turnover was Rs. 4,80,000. Customers gave positive feedback about the produce quality on WhatsApp, adding that it was a very “stress-free experience” with “social distancing properly maintained”. Rui village was also the first prize winner at the Koregaon taluka level in Water Cup 2018.



Produce from Rui village being segregated and sold in cities

The ripple effect of many such initiatives is being felt across the 40 talukas from which villages are participating in the Samruddha Gaon Spardha. Paani Foundation is in the process of working on a plan to scale these initiatives with (i) tie-ups with organisations and platforms and (ii) streamlining access to a database of potential customers. Farmers are also enthusiastic about the potential of building fairer and faster supply chains, and have proven once again how the solution to age-old barriers lies in our own hands.

Relief for Migrant Labourers in Melghat: Watershed Management Amid Lockdown

“In the last two years, in April and May, I have seen such desolate villages... where homes are either locked or occupied by just an elderly person or someone to care for children and animals,” narrates Vaibhav Nayse, Chikhaldara taluka co-ordinator, with Paani Foundation. Vaibhav’s experience draws attention to the harsh reality of mass migration in Maharashtra’s Melghat region (comprising Dharni and Chikhaldara talukas), in Amravati district. The region is home to the Korku Adivasi community, many of whom work as migrant labourers in the summer months, and are either small land holders or landless.

As India went under lockdown, several stranded residents of Melghat were forced to undertake arduous journeys back home - via multiple means of transport, and on foot. Moreover, residents needing to find work in cities, found themselves stuck at home, with no means of employment.

With the aim to ease the situation to the extent possible, Paani Foundation’s on-ground team took this matter to the BDO, tehsildar and officers in-charge of MGNREGA in the region. Within a few days, with the paperwork in place, several labourers found work in their own villages.

Today, in Chikhaldara and Dharni, under the MGNREGA scheme, over 2,300 workers are engaged in several watershed management and environment restoration efforts - such as watering saplings, building CCTs, loose boulder structures, compartment bunding, etc.





Daily wage labourers in Mehriam, Chikhaldara taluka (also the village which won Water Cup 2018). All workers ensure they wear masks, practise social distancing and sanitise their hands.

“Adivasi communities are routinely stereotyped as ‘ignorant’. However, in this lockdown, we have seen ‘educated’ people flouting rules, while daily wage workers here are abiding by the rules and helping spread awareness,” says Vaibhav, respecting this discipline.

Beyond Chikhaldara and Dharni, Paani Foundation’s co-ordinators in all the 40 talukas eligible for the Samruddha Gaon Spardha are liaising with the local government to ensure that daily-wage labourers in participating villages gain access to work under MGNREGA. In 22 out of 40 talukas, either the work, or the process for starting the work has been initiated, as per the local situation and opportunities in every area.