

S.16 Food Processing Initiative of the Informal Women Workers

1. What, in brief, is the solution?

Designing and delivering a women-led business of Smart Food (*) products by integrating small, marginal farmers and landless rural women labourers into an innovative food chain system - right from procuring the “Smart” ingredients (whole food grains, millet, sorghum) directly from the marginal farmers, to processing these into traditional, nutritious delicacies for self-consumption and marketing to consumers. The landless women laborers become the owners, planners, managers and marketers of their Smart Food Processing enterprise.

() Smart Food is defined as food that is good for self, good for the planet and good for the farmer.*

2. What was/were the source(s) from which this solution emerged?

Kamla – a unique and innovative Food Processing social enterprise was conceptualized by SEWA to address the problems faced the small, marginal farmers and the landless laborers. It is a for-profit agri-business company, fully owned and operated by landless rural women laborers who have come together to form SEWA Gram Mahila Haat. Through its innovative approach, the marginal farmers get fair returns for their “Smart” produce and the landless laborers get employment opportunities. It encourages the cultivation and processing of Smart Food and enables the small farmers and landless laborers to earn their livelihood from their farming and business ventures respectively. The project also focuses on bringing appropriate visibility and identity to them as valuable producers, distributors, processors, and gives them the right share in the profits generated. It aims to preserve the tradition and skills of growing indigenous and nutritious food crops.

3. What problem is it trying to address within food systems?

Over the last several decades India has witnessed a vital boost in agricultural productivity. However, it is only the farmers with large land holdings, excellent irrigation facilities, multiple cultivation seasons and access to latest agricultural technologies who have prospered.

The small and marginal farmers and landless agricultural laborers with little or no land have been pushed further into poverty, due to their lack of bargaining power, distress sale of their small, marketable produce, vulnerability to the exploitative middlemen, damage to their crops by pests and natural calamities and losses due to lack of storage facilities. Further, with the cost of cultivating food grains and millets becoming unsustainable, the farmers are shifting their cropping pattern to cash crops, leading to a shift in their dietary habits. On the other side, the landless women laborers, despite being a part of food production, processing, marketing and distribution system, barely eke out a living as they lack visibility due to the informal structure of their operations.

Kamla is designed as a unique and innovative Smart Food Processing business enterprise to address the above issues by :

- Building a value chain encompassing most of the stakeholders
- Enabling marginal farmers market their “Smart” produce at a fair price directly to the landless women laborers

- Eliminating the exploitative middlemen and their malpractices
- Providing employment opportunities to the landless laborers and enabling them to earn their livelihood through processing and marketing of “Smart” Food products
- Building the capacity of women laborers and organizing them into planning, owning, managing and marketing the products of their “Smart” Food Processing enterprise
- Encouraging the production of “Smart” crops and preserving the knowledge of cultivating indigenous crops

Kamla also addresses the unhealthy consumption habits of today’s youth. The new generation is attracted to and indulges in consuming convenient but unhealthy packaged food lacking in nutrition. *Kamla* provides an ideal, healthy alternative of good taste, nutrition and convenience with its traditional snacks processed using whole and coarse food grains and millets.

4. Why is addressing that problem important for achieving the goal of your working group?

The most common challenges faced by the small rural farmers are non-marketability of their modest produce of food crops and the lack of employment opportunities for the landless women laborers. By addressing these key issues together, *Kamala* aims to bring maximum benefit to the small farmers and the landless laborers by :

- Generating livelihood and employment opportunities at each stage of production
- Ensuring fair returns to the marginal farmers for their modest produce
- Establishing an enterprise led, owned, and managed by landless women laborers
- Building an integrated value chain which enhances the efficiency of agricultural activities
- Reducing hardships of the producers and creating multiple employment opportunities for the processors
- Strengthening local production and distribution of Smart Food
- Ensuring food security for rural households and providing an ideal, healthy alternative of good taste, nutrition and convenience with its traditional snacks processed using whole and coarse food grains and millets

The project fulfils SEWA’s overall goals of generating employment for its members and making them self-reliant and financially independent.

5. How can this solution address that problem (theory of change)?

Kamla addresses the problem at the core and supports the theory of change. Its gender-inclusive approach focuses on establishing an enterprise led, owned, and managed by landless women laborers. The model on which *Kamla* is based is in sync with Action Track 4 of the UN Food Summit and provides multiple opportunities for equitable livelihoods. It contributes to the elimination of poverty by promoting full and productive employment and decent work for all actors along the food value chain. It enables entrepreneurship and addresses the issue of inequitable access to resources and distribution of value. The model reduces inequalities between the rich and poor agriculturists and helps in bridging the gender and technology gaps. Additionally, *Kamla* facilitates a shift in the dietary habits of children and youth from unhealthy packaged food to nutritious “Smart” Food. By producing and processing food locally, the model also supports the environment and reduces the carbon footprint.

Thus, Kamla is a game-changing solution and achieves the triple goals of building gender equality, sustainability and healthy food systems. It provides healthy, nutritious food locally and generates multiple employment and livelihood opportunities for rural people at each stage of production and processing.

6. Why does this solution align to the definition and criteria for a ‘game changing solution’ developed by the Summit?

The guiding principle of this Social Enterprise’s business model is meeting the four bottom lines - Livelihood, Sustainability, Empowerment and Environment. Therefore, it aligns to the criteria of a “Game-Changing Solution” .

The model enables women workers to acquire new skills and technology, eliminates the exploitative middlemen and increases the earnings, skills and visibility of the small farmers and landless laborers. It encourages the cultivation of “Smart” and indigenous food crops, preserves traditional and nutritious food habits, and generates employment opportunities for landless laborers in the entire food processing system i.e. from the farm to the table.

7. Existing evidence supporting the argument that this solution will work, or at least achieve the initial outcomes

Kamla started its operations in 2015. Since its inception, around 500 women have been trained in processing “Smart” Food in Ahmedabad city and 9 districts in Gujarat. Annually, *Kamla* procures agri-produce from around 700 small and marginal farmers across 200 villages of Gujarat and processes it into “Smart” Food products. These products are redistributed from *Kamla* outlets housed in SEWA’s district offices as well as in Ahmedabad city.

The members of *Kamala* have the ability to adapt, change, innovate and align with the changing times. This was evidenced during the current pandemic when the members of *Kamla* re-purposed their supply chain swiftly and started processing and marketing their products directly from the villages. During the 74-day lockdown period, *Kamla* had a turnover over Rs 500,000 and was successful in protecting the livelihood of the small farmers and the laborers even during the unprecedented crisis period.

Kamla has started tapping the urban market by promoting door-step delivery of its products to the niche urban market through social media, which has helped in promoting the brand in newer territories and generating higher volumes of sales. With an annual turnover of INR 68 lakhs, *Kamala* has created employment opportunities for over 267 rural women, who earn an average monthly income of INR 12,000 per month.

The current *Kamla* model is established and operational in Gujarat, India and its success in this limited geography has shown that organizing small women producers and food processors together, building on their technical and soft skills, promoting on-farm and off-farm processing and giving value-additions empowers them to capture greater ownership of the food chain system and market for their products.

Scaling of the enterprise to other states of the country and thereafter nationally will enable direct market access to more women producers and generate many more employment opportunities for poor, rural women.

8. What is the current and/or likely political support for this idea?

Kamla's business model is based on integrating the poor and the marginalized into food supply chains, enabling them to escape poverty, improving their nutrition and reducing economic inequalities amongst the rich and poor. At each stage of production and processing, *Kamala* is generating multiple employment opportunities and enabling the small, marginal farmers and the landless laborers earn their own livelihood, become self-reliant and financially independent. It encourages production and processing of indigenous Indian food crops. The model is also contributing in bridging the gender and technology gaps. Along its journey, *Kamla* is making each producer and processor in its system “*Atmanirbhar*” i.e Self-Reliant.

All the activities of *Kamla* are perfectly in sync with the Government of India's ideology of making each Indian “*Atmanirbhar*”. Its model is also in line with the Government of India's commitment to reducing the inequitable distribution of the country's resources, tackling gender injustice, strengthening & boosting local production and value chains, improving nutrition and making available affordable, healthy and safe food products to the people. Additionally, it supports the “*Make in India*” vision of the government with each step of production and processing being done locally, with locally sourced ingredients.

Hence, *Kamla* will get political support in its business endeavors.

9. Are there certain contexts for which this solution is particularly well suited, or, not well-suited.

The project is most suited for women in the informal sector. It does not require a huge capital investment and focuses on using the inherent capabilities of the people to empower them and make them self-reliant. Its success in Gujarat has shown that organizing women producers together into micro-enterprises and building on their technical and soft skills, empowers women farmers to capture greater ownership of the value chain and market for their products, while ensuring food and nutrition security to the poor producers, their families and the rural households.

Based on the experience during the COVID crisis, there is proof for upscaling of the value chain to urban markets as well. The model has a huge potential for transforming the grave agriculture situation of smallholder farmers and landless laborers into favorable and “*Smart*” food enterprise, providing sustainable food and nutrition security to the rural and urban households alike.