

# Strengthening women's economic empowerment: The post-COVID re-opening of the weekly market through participatory action research and deliberative forums in western Nepal

Sushant Acharya<sup>1\*</sup>, Mani Ram Banjade<sup>1</sup>, Anushiya Shrestha<sup>1</sup> and Meeta Sainju Pradhan<sup>1</sup>

---

## Key Highlights

1. Rural agricultural markets are central to boosting local economy and providing social and economic space for small and women farmers.
  2. Local traders and intermediaries often resist in the operation of such markets driven by their economic interests.
  3. Building collective agency and through strengthened institutions, small and women farmers can counter those resistances.
  4. Adopting a co-production approach helps identify and address barriers faced by small and women farmers.
- 

## Abstract

The *haat*, an open-air traditional marketplace, provides small farmers with access to markets where they can sell their products. These economic spaces are particularly important for women farmers, whose access to distant markets is limited amidst persisting gender-based constraints including mobility restrictions and security concerns. Beyond direct economic benefits, *haats* also serve as social spaces for women to connect with other farmers and exchange information. However, one such market (*haat*), operating twice a week in Sandhikharka, Arghakhanchi district for the past four decades, was closed during the COVID-19 pandemic and remained closed even after other restrictions were lifted. This prompted our participatory action research team to investigate the causes and consequences of its prolonged closure and to facilitate efforts to reopen it. In collaboration with the local government, the research institution organised deliberative forums where relevant stakeholders collectively identified the key constraints to reopening the *haat* and developed strategies for its revival. Ongoing efforts are focused on institutionalising the *haat* and ensuring its sustainable operation. In this paper, we outline the process followed and share insights generated from the research and engagement conducted during the reopening effort. Women smallholder farmers have expressed their appreciation for the reopening, noting that the *haat* is

---

<sup>1</sup> Southasia Institute of Advanced Studies

\*Corresponding Email: [sushant@sias-southasia.org](mailto:sushant@sias-southasia.org)

crucial not only for securing better prices for their produce but also for significantly reducing the challenges of selling their products elsewhere, while encouraging further economic activities and contributing to their economic empowerment.

**Keywords:** economic empowerment, gender constraints, market access, women farmers

## 1. Challenges of making fresh vegetable markets inclusive and equitable

Large farmers, middlemen and traders dominate the market ecosystem of fresh vegetables, which is predominantly occupied by men (UKAID, 2020). Small farmers, especially women, have limited space in higher nodes of the agriculture value chain largely due to the persisting gender-based constraints such as mobility restrictions imposed by their families and social norms, a male dominated transportation system posing security threats (SIAS, 2023), and a perceived sense of inferiority among women farmers (Bergman-Lodin et al., 2019). Overcoming such constraints and increasing women's space in the agriculture marketplace is a formidable task. However, numerous initiatives have been undertaken to help small farmers, particularly women, to benefit from their increased presence in the marketplace. One such initiative is the establishment and operation of weekly markets (locally known as *haat bazaar* or *haat*) throughout Nepal. In the *haat*, farmers and traders bring their home-grown fresh vegetables and other products and sell them, often at higher prices than they are forced to sell to the middlepersons or other traders.

In Sandhikharka municipality of Arghakhanchi, a western hill district of Nepal, *haats* were organised every Tuesday and Friday, until restrictions were imposed during COVID-19 pandemic. However, the *haat* could not operate in the post-COVID-19 pandemic context, even though restrictions were lifted and other public spaces had reopened. Several attempts to reopen the *haat* had failed due to tacit but strong opposition from existing fruit and vegetable traders and retailers. In the absence of the *haat*, the small and women vegetable farmers had limited access to the market for their products and had been forced to sell them at lower prices. The existing initiatives of the "Vegetable Promotion and Marketing Group" (primarily composed of larger vegetable farmers) and the local government failed to find an amicable solution to reopen the *haat*.

A participatory action research (PAR) project, aimed at better understanding how to support the engagement of women in higher nodes of the vegetable value chain, provided an opportunity for collective learning about the underlying marketing constraints of small women farmers. This paper documents the significance of the *haat* for small vegetable growers and traders, the key challenges they faced during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the process of collective learning and dialogue with multiple stakeholders and the ultimate decision-making processes to reopen and institutionalise the local *haat*, leading towards more inclusive and equitable economic conditions.

## 2. COVID, closure of the *haat* and its implications

The local agricultural market, commonly referred to as the *haat*, is an open-air traditional marketplace where farmers have the opportunity to directly sell their farm produce to consumers (Bhusal, Acharya and Banjade, 2024), which often serves as their main source of cash income.

These *haats* provide economic spaces that are especially important for women farmers who face additional challenges in accessing distant markets, among others due to persisting gender-based constraints such as mobility restrictions, insecurity and household care works. Apart from providing direct economic benefits, *haats* also provide social spaces to women farmers to meet, establish rapport with other farmers and exchange information. In Sandhikharka Municipality of Arghakhanchi district, Nepal, the *haat* remained closed even after the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were lifted and all other market activities resumed as they were prior to the pandemic. There were few failed attempts by lead vegetable growers to reopen the *haat*.

Our exploratory research revealed that the closure of *haat* had negatively impacted small farmers, particularly women who relied on these local markets for selling their produce and generating cash income. To cope with the closure of the *haat*, many farmers reduced their production, while others opted to sell vegetables for almost half the price to the intermediaries and local vendors. Local farmers believed that powerful intermediaries and local traders, who were benefiting from the prolonged closure of the *haat*, were behind the resistance to re-opening it. The small women farmers who used to sell their vegetables in the *haat* asserted that the reopening of *haat* would help them get higher prices for their vegetables and allow them to sell from a single location rather than vending vegetables door-to-door.

### **3. Co-production approach to participatory action research**

We applied a “co-production approach” while facilitating women’s economic empowerment through the strengthening of the market system for fresh vegetables. The co-production approach in this process involved primarily two key methodological approaches: PAR and Deliberative Forums.

PAR is an approach of integrating inquiry while seeking to make meaningful transformations in the existing policies, institutions, and practices and thus co-producing knowledge jointly with relevant stakeholders. PAR acts as a cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, with an emphasis on iterative learning and refinement (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005). The researchers or actors also collaborated with the stakeholders throughout the co-production process. This way, the participants were also involved as co-researchers, as the main essence in PAR is to recognise their knowledge, experiences, and agency throughout the research process. PAR seeks to democratise knowledge production by involving the participants in identifying problems, data collection, analysis and action planning (Reason and Bradbury, 2008).

While applying a PAR approach in the reopening of the *haat*, we challenged the traditional researcher subject hierarchy, promoted equality, mutual learning and respect, and shared decision-making, as suggested by Borda (2006). To achieve our common goal of PAR, we co-conducted activities that empowered smallholder and women farmers and enabled them to act together in the re-opening of the *haat*. In the PAR process, we reflected and adapted our actions to the local context and was finally able to lend support to the reopening of the *haat*. This process helped deliver justice to small and women farmers and contributed to the economic empowerment of women, as also suggested by Baum, MacDougall and Smith (2006).

We used “Deliberative Forums” as a tool to foster meaningful interactions and exchange of

information, perspectives and knowledge among the small and women farmers and stakeholders. The deliberations among multiple stakeholders helped inform and influence governance decisions made by stakeholders and ultimately enabled the revival of the *haat*. The deliberative forums facilitated a collective understanding of the problems and of common concerns (vegetable marketing) and stimulated inclusive and reflective discussions oriented towards concrete actions for solving the problems (i.e., the resumption of the *haat*) (Dryzek, 2010; Mansbridge et al., 2012), where gender-based issues were our focus. Mutual respect and recognition of multiple, plural voices, interests, and concerns, including subjugated knowledge and experiences, were taken as central to such a deliberative process (Mansbridge et al., 2012). We attempted to follow what Dryzek has stressed: “in a truly deliberative process, those subject to decisions should be involved in the design and analysis with substantial influence on the content of the decision” (Dryzek, 2010, p. 8). These dialectical processes facilitate deliberative legitimacy<sup>2</sup> of consequent collective decision outcomes which can be binding formal decisions or informal societal discussions, and decisions accrued to addressing the problems (Dryzek, 2010, p. 8; Mansbridge et al., 2012). The section below provides a detailed account of co-production steps and processes taking the case of the local agricultural market, the *haat*, in Sandhikharka.

## 4. Reviving the *Haat*: Key steps and processes

### 4.1. Encounter with the *haat* issue and search for local collaborators

Shortly after the inception of the PAR, the research team visited Arghakhanchi to explore the vegetables marketing issue. The team met with many farmers, both men and women, different agriculture cooperatives, municipality and stakeholders related to vegetables production and marketing. These meetings revealed that despite the high potential for vegetable production, marketing of vegetables was a main challenge, specifically for small and women farmers. Meanwhile, the prolonged closure of the *haat* after the COVID-19 pandemic had added economic setbacks to them. One woman farmer from Sandhikharka said:

*We do not get a fair price for our vegetables. We have no option except to sell our vegetables to intermediaries or the traders who buy at half the market price or sometimes even less. Sometimes, we end up throwing them away because returning unsold vegetables is deemed ominous.*

From the interaction, it was also revealed that they were not consulted, and their concerns were overlooked when the municipality together with the district-level authorities made the decision about the closure of the *haat* which severely impacted their household income and livelihood options. Another woman farmer shared: “My fellow farmers and I reduced the production of vegetables by more than half because of the closure of the *haat*.”

Recognising this pressing concern, the research team approached two all-women agricultural cooperatives to share the findings and encourage them to take leadership on marketing of fresh vegetables, with the belief that these cooperatives would better understand the women farmers’

<sup>2</sup> “Legitimacy does not just mean acceptance, it also refers to moral rightness, as well as freedom, transparency, and competence in the process of acceptance. [...] In addition, legitimacy in a democracy [...] require some notion of public authorization of decision makers actually to make decisions, and accountability of decision makers to the public” (Dryzek, 2010, p. 21).

issues and are mandated to promote agriculture. They were strong rural institutions in terms of financial transactions, proper digital accounting systems, regular employees, and impressive institutional performance. They had been taking leadership in the distribution of chemical fertilisers and had also been applying for grants or other forms of support to their members. However, due to their lack of expertise in vegetable marketing, they were reluctant to be engaged and lead on it. Rather, they showed keen interest to work together on other dimensions of women's empowerment.

The research team shared the findings with another cooperative as well as the district-level federation of cooperatives. While the former lacked both human and financial resources, the latter was being besieged by bad governance issues. After consultative meetings with the leaders of different cooperatives, lead farmers of Sandhikharka, and the local municipality, the research team approached the Vegetable Promotion and Marketing Group (hereafter referred as the 'Marketing Group'). The primary objective of this group was to help farmers connect with local consumers as well as increase access to regional markets. The marketing group included large farmers who had strong linkages with the traders from the regional marketing hubs such as Butwal, Krishnanagar, Taulihawa, and other market centres of the region. After sharing research findings with them and jointly exploring key issues and opportunities around marketing of fresh vegetables, the marketing group demonstrated the willingness to coordinate with other stakeholders for the re-opening of the *haat*. With the research team, they jointly traced the trajectory of the *haat* and analysed the causes for its prolonged closure.

#### **4.2. The history of the *Haat* and cause for prolonged closure**

While the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic were severe in most of the sectors, the impacts were disproportionate among different cohorts of farmers, with smallholder vegetable growers being impacted the most. Over time, the COVID-19 pandemic-induced mobility and other trade restrictions were lifted, but the *haat* remained closed. The municipality, which was the authority in making decisions regarding its reopening, claimed that the *haat* was closed for safety reasons and the few attempts made to reopen it had failed. However, the small farmers believed that parties who were benefiting from the closure of the *haat* (e.g., fruit and vegetable retailers, traders, and intermediaries) had, to a greater extent, influenced the municipal officials for the prolonged closure. With higher socio-political connections and capacity to influence municipal decisions, they were able to sustain the closure of the *haat*.

Prior to this, in almost four decades of the *haat's* history, it had experienced closure from 1998 to 2005 because of the Maoist insurgency (1996-2006). At that time, farmers asserted that the closure and reopening of the *haat* were not linked to the conflict because the *haat* was closed two years after the start of the conflict, and when the *haat* was resumed, the conflict was at its peak. During the period when the *haat* was operating, it was forcefully moved from one place to another. At the beginning in 1988, farmers were selling vegetables from the *Khula Manch* (open public space). However, in 1990, the *haat* was shifted to *Bagaincha* (a mango orchard, another public space). It was then moved to a location near the bus station in 2011. A few leading farmers who led the *haat* movement after this relocation were even taken into custody by the then chief of the district administration. Some individuals even destroyed the stalls (temporary sheds). Farmers complained about this to the municipality office, but the municipality failed to punish the people

who destroyed the stalls at the *haat*. They suspected that the same group was influencing the municipality's reluctance in reopening *haat*.

Given the contentious history of the *haat*, the small and women farmers, along with the marketing group, also realised the need to create a forum to discuss the *haat* issues among the actors and stakeholders of the vegetable value chain in order to build better consensus, collective decision-making, and accountability towards sustaining it.

### 4.3. Preparing for and organising deliberative forums

The researchers and the marketing group held a series of meetings regarding how to act together to revive the *haat*. The research team proposed a specific process for having strategic discussions, strengthening the understanding of related policies and their applications, building consensus, identifying roles, making decisions together, and ultimately working towards institutionalisation of the *haat* – through “Deliberative Forums”, as discussed earlier in this article. With this understanding among the key stakeholders, preparations began to convene the deliberative forum. Firstly, the marketing group and the researchers agreed on the expected outcomes of the deliberative forum and then consulted with key stakeholders. These stakeholders included woman farmers and other smallholder vegetable growers, the Mayor, Deputy Mayor, the head of Agriculture Section of the municipality, District Coordination Committee, government offices working in the agriculture sector, the district level cooperative federation, district chamber of commerce and industries, agro-vet representatives, and vegetables and fruits traders. The consultation was critical in understanding their perspective as well as gaining their support for reopening the *haat*.

At the same time, women farmers via their institutions (co-operatives) were in regular interaction. They also participated in capacity enhancement events, for example, trainings, exposure visits, formal and informal interactions with the research team. Similarly, in the meeting with the municipal team, after hearing the consequences of the closure of *haat* to the small and women farmers, the Mayor agreed to host the deliberative forum and take up necessary decisions that were agreed upon during the forum. All the institutions interacted by the researchers prior to the deliberative forum were also in the same vein with the farmers that *haat* should resume. These institutions include government organisations, cooperatives, agro-vets and the local financial institutions. Just before the deliberative forum, these actors were informed about the agenda providing them ample time to prepare their perspectives and suggestions. Likewise, the research team encouraged the women farmers to prepare their position and put their voices strongly during the deliberative forum.

The first deliberative forum was organised in August 2022 with the primary objective to collectively discuss, suggest, and devise ways for reopening the *haat*. This event was jointly organised by the Municipality and the research institution and chaired by the Mayor. During the forum, the research team shared research findings on the prospects of *haat* and the impacts of its closure, a review of *haats* in other parts of the country, and an analysis of relevant policy provisions. The representative of small and women farmers shared their stories and experiences and urged for reopening the *haat*. They highlighted the significance of the *haat* not only for their income and livelihood but also as a social space for them to meet, network, exchange information and share. The other stakeholders who were participating also had a common voice towards the reopening. The intermediaries

and local trader representatives, who were likely the major resistors in the reopening of *haat*, did not express any negative perspectives. In his remarks, the Mayor expressed a commitment to step forward with the reopening of the *haat*. Thus, these regular dialogues and well-established rapport with stakeholders, pre-event preparations, skillful facilitation and moderation of reflective discussions during the deliberative forum became instrumental in bringing everyone towards a common consensus on reopening the *haat*.

#### **4.4. Reopening of the *Haat*: Initial setbacks and the amazing pickup**

Soon after the deliberative forum, the municipality seriously took up the issue of resuming the *haat* and invited concerned government officials (from Agriculture Knowledge Centre, Prime Minister Agriculture Modernization Project, and other relevant stakeholders) and representatives of the marketing group for a meeting to formally decide to reopen the *haat*. During the meeting, it was decided to reformulate the marketing group committee by adding one woman farmer and one social activist. Following these changes, the number of women in the reformed marketing group committee increased from 22% to 33%.

However, everything was not yet on track. Despite the municipality announcing the reopening of the *haat* and the inclusive nature of the reformed marketing group, it was not materialised. Aware of the gridlock, the researchers and marketing group met a couple of times and reflected on what did not work well. During this reflection, the team learned how the communication gap between the farmers and the consumers had marred the reopening. Farmers would come with vegetables but found no buyers. Likewise, by the time buyers would come after hearing about the sales, tired and desperate producers would have left. Delving into the causes, it was clear that even the farmers were skeptical that the *haat*, which had been closed for almost three years, would reoperate. This had led to a widespread notion that the *haat* would neither function properly nor benefit the farmers. This reflection concluded in unpacking the barriers of implementation and ways to support the reopening.

The researchers and marketing group then jointly began developing a comprehensive tailored plan. After carefully considering the local context, a consensus was reached on a few ideas: staging a grand re-opening of the *haat* to attract local attention, supporting the transportation of vegetables for the first four weeks to generate enthusiasm and motivation among small and women farmers and promoting advertisements/ communication throughout the re-opening period.

The grand re-opening was planned as a high-level event locally. Influential personalities of the district - the coordinator of the District Coordination Committee, the chief administrator of the district, the Mayor, the head of the police department and other key authorities representing government, non-government organisations and the private sector - were invited. Journalists were also invited and requested for widespread information dissemination. Additionally, announcements about the event were made through local radio and television channels, giving the reopening of the *haat* a much-needed buzz that would resonate in the community. The most important part was to convince farmers. The team conducted door-to-door visits, informing farmers about the reopening of the *haat* and highlighting the temporary transportation service that would be available during an interim period.

The research project provided small financial support for arranging transportation services for four weeks as well as for social media campaign. Finally, the meticulously planned grand opening of the *haat* materialised in January 2023 as a momentous ceremony, which also catalysed the regular operation of the *haat*. This was perceived as a great achievement not only for the small and women farmers but also for the low-income consumers and marketing group. A content woman farmer shared: "I sold all my vegetables within two hours. I got 70 rupees per kg for cauliflower. If there was no *haat bazaar*, I would have to sell it to local vegetable traders for less than 40 rupees per kg."

The role of marketing group, who lobbied in gaining support for the decision on reopening of *haat* was instrumental. Soon after the resumption of the *haat*, new issues started to emerge. This led the marketing group and research team to engage to resolve those issues and take steps towards its institutionalisation.

#### **4.5. Emerging issues and strengthening institutionalisation**

After months of continuous and proactive effort, the *haat* started operating regularly- twice a week at two designated locations. Its revival brought rays of hope among the women and small farmers. However, soon after its revival, several issues surfaced, such as women farmers not receiving appropriate stalls and issues regarding collection of rent for the stalls used at *haat*, problems with waste disposal, and conflicts regarding the use of land area for *haat* operations.

As the *haat* was booming, non-local large traders began arriving very early to occupy prime spots. Local farmers, particularly the women farmers, were pushed towards the corners. This caused tensions between small and women farmers and larger traders. Additionally, the municipality, through the *haat* operation committee (the marketing group was assigned this responsibility) started collecting rent from non-local farmers and vendors, while exempting local small farmers. The intention was to make the *haat* financially independent and sustainable.

Another issue arose with the site for the Friday *haat*, which currently operates at the bus station, was a contested area, and even the Mayor was not convinced about the long-term use of the bus station area as the *haat*, citing sanitation issues. While expenses of the waste collection were covered from the rental income of *haat*, managing the collected wastes emerged as a major challenge. Mechanisms for proper waste management were perceived as crucial to ensure cleanliness and prevent health hazards and environmental pollution. The Mayor suggested leasing land for managing the *haat* as a better option, but identifying an alternative site was difficult and contentious. Small and women farmers strongly opposed relocating the *haat* due to its proximity. These issues also triggered the concerns about who should be responsible for addressing the issues and sustaining *haat* operations in the longer term. This led to the debate of institutionalisation and creation of a legal institutional space and Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for the *haat*.

To foster the institutionalisation process of the *haat*, the marketing group started to consult with the Mayor and other stakeholders. This involved a joint observation visit with the coordinator of the District Coordination Committee to the existing *haat* venue -the bus station- to assess the possibility of relocating it nearby. But there was no adequate land area to expand the *haat*. The Mayor stuck to his idea of leasing land, while farmers and the marketing group were not accepting the Mayor's proposal. Meanwhile, the Mayor discovered that there could be legal issues while



renting private land and building permanent structures from government funding. Hence the Mayor proposed to organise another deliberative forum to discuss the issues among stakeholders to find appropriate solutions. Once again, the municipality took the leadership of organising it, while the marketing group took charge of the overall coordination and facilitation, with the research team providing technical support.

Following a similar process of the previous deliberative forums, the team met with the Mayor and other key officials prior to the forum to discuss the agenda and to ensure their presence and to be prepared for their active participation. The deliberative forum held in August 2023, again brought together representatives of local government, farmers, and other related stakeholders to collectively seek solutions to the *haat* issues and their future management.

In the forum, the research team presented different modalities of *haat* operation, citing examples from different parts of the country. This aimed to inform the participants about different approaches to the operation and management of *haat* and stimulate discussions on its sustainable management. The marketing group emphasised the need to identify suitable spaces with proper stalls, especially for local farmers and demanded a storage facility. Other participants, along with the farmers and the marketing group, stressed on the management of the existing *haats*. Following intensive discussions on the significance of management of the *haat*, the Mayor took the ownership and gave assurances to provide financial support for constructing permanent structures. He said:

*The initial municipal plan of leasing land for managing the haat has been canceled as government agencies are not allowed to invest in private land. Instead, the municipal government is currently seeking ways to avail land on the hillock near the bus station area for the Friday haat.*

The Mayor made a commitment that the municipality would support the relocation of one family who had settled in the Tuesday *haat* area, expand land in the bus station for the Friday *haat*, and formulate a policy guideline for the operation and management of the *haat*. The forum ended with a commitment from stakeholders to provide support in the municipal initiative. The Mayor translated his commitment on *haat* institutionalisation by putting this in the municipal plan and budget for the fiscal year 2024/2025. As per the plan, the municipality and the marketing group have organised consultation meetings with vegetable traders, farmers, local vegetable traders, small restaurant owners and small traders. These interactions provided valuable insights to be incorporated in the guidelines and bringing them in the process also means to building local ownership. More importantly, it helped to secure special provisions for small and women farmers. The proposed draft of the *haat* guideline will be shared in the third deliberative forum in January 2025, followed by endorsement of the municipal council later in the same month.

## **5. Key lessons and insights**

The long practiced weekly agricultural markets in Sandhikharka Municipality of Arghakhanchi district and other parts of the country are playing a vital role in boosting the local economy as well as creating an economic and social space for small and women farmers. The intermediaries and local traders are likely to experience some loss in their business as these agricultural markets operate effectively. As a result, they may exert inert pressure to discontinue the *haat* from the area. This

could have direct negative effects on the income and daily lives of small and women farmers. While earlier they were unable to speak out and have their voices heard, their experiences of engaging with multiple stakeholders and participating in deliberative forums with adequate preparations have brought changes in their situations. Based on the results of the participatory action research, we argue that small and women farmers can and should continue to exert collective pressure on the respective authorities, including the municipality and marketing group, by creating an environment that enhances their capabilities and through strengthened institutions.

The co-production approach we employed helped develop a shared, collective understanding of the causes and impacts of livelihood issues faced by low-income households. It also facilitated the process of building an environment for multi-stakeholder communications to jointly figure out and execute necessary interventions. It provided the space to get the main actors and stakeholders onboard and to discuss the challenges of marketing of agriculture product especially for small and women farmers. The formal and informal interactions helped clarify the issues, and provided space for the stakeholders to share their own perspectives, as well as the marginalised producers to voice their concerns. The deliberative forums, which is usually held after a series of interactions, helped to bring actors and stakeholders to a conversant point to take the required actions. For example, the first deliberative forum was able to take the decision of resuming the *haat* after two-and-half years of closure; the second forum took decision on taking actions towards institutionalisation of the *haat*; and the third forum (planned to be held in January 2025) will finalise the guidelines for operating and managing the *haat bazaar*, which is then expected to be formally endorsed by the municipal council shortly thereafter.

Continuous dialogue with diverse stakeholders, analysis of the different options focusing on how best they would benefit small and women farmers, and ultimately co-creating an operational procedure was possible through the adoption of a co-production approach. This entire process can be time-consuming but rewarding, as it provides space and a voice for diverse interests and perspectives (inclusion), gain wider consensus and ownership among diverse groups of stakeholders (legitimacy), and provide opportunities for women farmers to voice their concerns and exercise their agency (citizenship). Thus, we argue that exercising a co-production approach is an important means to better understand and overcome the barriers of small and women farmers, ensuring they are not left behind. Implementing this approach in program execution is also likely to lead to a better understanding of the root causes of multiple issues, foster collective dialogue and decision-making and ensuring greater ownership and inclusion of marginalised groups to lend them recognition and support their well-being.

## Acknowledgement

The authors acknowledge the research and funding support provided to Southasia Institute of Advanced Studies (SIAS) by International Development Research Centre (IDRC Project Number-Component Number: 109774-001) funded project 'Co-producing a Shock Resilient Business Ecosystem for Women-led Enterprises in Nepal' (CREW). We also acknowledge the research support provided by CREW researchers - Dil Khatri, Gyanu Maskey, Salu Basnet, Umesh Paudel, Sagar Bhusal as well as the local communities and stakeholders of the study sites.

## References

- Baum, F., MacDougall, C. and Smith, D. (2006) 'Participatory action research', *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 60(10), p. 854.
- Bergman, L.J. et al. (2019) 'Gendered mobilities and immobilities: Women's and men's capacities for agricultural innovation in Kenya and Nigeria', *Gender, Place & Culture*, 26(12), pp. 1759-1783.
- Bhusal, S., Acharya, S. and Banjade, M.R. (2024) *Women defend their rights and incomes: Lessons from Nepali farmers*, 7<sup>th</sup> March. Climate and Development Knowledge Network. Available at: <https://glowprogramme.org/news-blogs/women-defend-their-rights-and-incomes-lessons-nepali-farmers>
- Borda, O.F. (2006) 'Participatory (action) research in social theory: Origins and challenges', in Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (eds.) *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*. SAGE Publications, pp. 27-37.
- Bovaird, T. and Loeffler, E. (2016) 'What has co-production ever done for interactive governance?', in Jurian, E. and Ingmar van, M. (eds.) *Critical reflections on interactive governance*. Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 254-277.
- Chevalier, J.M. and Buckles, D.J. (2019) *Participatory action research: Theory and methods for engaged inquiry*. Second edition. London: Routledge.
- Dryzek, J.S. (2010) *Foundations and frontiers of deliberative governance*. New York : Oxford University Press Inc.
- Kemmis, S. and McTaggart, R. (2005) 'Participatory action research: Communicative action and the public sphere', in N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (eds.) *Handbook of qualitative research*. Third edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp. 559–604.
- Mansbridge, J. et al. (2012) 'A systemic approach to deliberative democracy', in Parkinson J. and Mansbridge J. (eds.) *Deliberative systems: Deliberative democracy at the large scale*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-26.
- Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (2008) *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry & practice*. 2nd edn. London: SAGE.
- Sorrentino, M., Sicilia, M. and Howlett, M. (2018) 'Understanding co-production as a new public governance tool', *Policy and Society*, 37(3), pp. 277–293.  
doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14494035.2018.1521676>
- Southasia Institute of Advanced Studies [SIAS] (2023). *Third technical report of the project Co-producing a Shock-resilient Business Ecosystem for Women-led Enterprises in Nepal*. Kathmandu: SIAS.
- UKAID (2020). *Vegetable Sector Strategy – Nepal*. Commercial Agriculture for Smallholders and Agribusiness Nepal Country Team.

