



FACE-TO-FACE



“Heifer’s mission is clear: to end hunger and poverty while caring for the Earth. We aim to create long-lasting change by supporting smallholder farmers—especially women—through sustainable and regenerative agricultural practices”.

*Surita Sandosham,
President and CEO
Heifer International*

How to End Hunger and Empower Lives: The Heifer's Way

Surita Sandosham, President and CEO of [Heifer International](#), was recently on a visit to India and Nepal (September 2024) to celebrate Heifer International’s 80th anniversary. During her visit, Dr. Mahesh Chander interviewed her, asking her to reflect on the organization’s impact on the lives and livelihoods of farmers in South Asia. Here, she shares her vision, mission, initiatives, and the future direction for Heifer International.

Founded in 1944 by Dan West, Heifer International works to end hunger and poverty by partnering with the communities it serves. The organization's programs support entrepreneurs worldwide, fostering lasting change from the ground up. Heifer collaborates with smallholder farmers—especially women farmers—to enhance food security and increase incomes. The process begins with a seed investment of livestock or agriculture, followed by mentorship that helps participants build businesses and connect to supply chains and markets. This allows families to earn a sustainable living and lift their communities, training the next generation of leaders. By supporting and training farmers, ranchers, and female business owners globally, Heifer International is creating a new model for success. Today, Heifer operates in 19 countries across four continents, including Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, Ethiopia, India, Kenya, Nepal, and Zambia.

Welcome to India, Surita, and congratulations to Heifer International on reaching this remarkable 80-year milestone! When you look back, what are the three most significant achievements of Heifer International during these eight decades?

Thank you! Over the years, we’ve seen tremendous growth and progress, but three key achievements stand out:

First, we’ve worked with over 52 million farming households globally. What makes this number truly significant is the long-lasting impact on these families. Our signature programs provide seed investments for regenerative agriculture, followed by mentorship, to help smallholder farmers build sustainable businesses. We also support them in connecting with supply chains and markets. As a result, these farmers achieve food security, earn a sustainable income, and lift their communities, training the next generation of agricultural leaders.

Second, we've developed a highly successful model for community development, called the Values-Based Holistic Community Development (VBHCD). This model emphasizes building social capital through our cornerstone training programs and the formation of self-help groups. It also strengthens farmer-led cooperatives, enabling smallholder farmers to access loans, secure fair market prices, and connect to markets. By fostering cooperation, trust, and shared responsibility within farming communities, the VBHCD model strengthens the social fabric, driving lasting change.

Lastly, we take great pride in the hundreds of partnerships we've built. Over the years, we've collaborated with governments, businesses, civil society organizations, academia, and women's groups. These partnerships amplify our efforts and allow us to reach more families, deepening our impact. Our shared vision for sustainable development and women's empowerment drives these partnerships forward.

These three pillars—empowering millions of households, creating a successful development model, and building powerful partnerships—have been key to our success, and we're committed to continuing this work for decades to come.

As I understand, this is your second visit to India. What is the specific agenda for this visit, and what do you hope to achieve?

Yes, this is my second visit to India, a key hub for Heifer International's operations in Asia. The primary focus of this trip is to review two of our key projects—the goat value chain project in Bihar and the innovative backyard poultry model in Odisha. Both initiatives are critical to our mission of improving livelihoods for smallholder farmers and hold great potential for scaling up across the region.



Beyond reviewing these specific projects, I will be participating in several government-engaged events to discuss aligning our work with existing schemes, aiming to maximize benefits for marginalized farmers, converge efforts, and increase our impact to include more smallholders in national development plans. And the broader goal of my visit is to assess how Heifer can deepen its impact in

Asia, particularly given the region's vulnerability to climate-induced disasters and persistent poverty. India, with its diverse and dynamic agricultural landscape, offers significant opportunities for resource mobilization and for piloting innovative, locally led projects. These initiatives can be replicated and scaled not just within India but across the region. As we focus on locally led development, I love connecting with my local teams and inspiring them to move forward with even greater passion and vigour.

What are Heifer's focus areas in Asia, and India in particular?

Heifer International's focus in Asia, including India, is centred on empowering smallholder farmers—especially women—to drive inclusive economic growth, promote sustainable agricultural practices, and build resilient communities. Our mission is to end hunger and poverty while caring for the Earth. Our approach is anchored in several key areas such as economic growth and livelihoods, which focus on helping farmers develop sustainable business models and access new markets; food systems, aimed at strengthening agricultural value chains to ensure farmers' integral role in robust food systems; environmental sustainability, promoting regenerative agriculture and climate-smart practices to adapt to environmental changes; gender equity, which involves mobilizing women into self-help groups and unlocking their entrepreneurial potential; and the One Health approach, addressing the interconnectedness of human, animal, and environmental health.

In India, our initiatives are specifically focused on value chains in goat farming, backyard poultry, and horticulture. We support Farmer Producer Organizations with training and resources to improve product aggregation and market access. Additionally, we train Community Agro-Veterinary Entrepreneurs (CAVEs) to provide essential veterinary services at nominal costs. Our efforts, including specialized training for women farmers, are designed to boost productivity, enhance market opportunities, and strengthen community support, ensuring long-term sustainability and impact.

How are Heifer International's programs contributing to ending hunger and poverty in the region?

Heifer's mission is clear: to end hunger and poverty while caring for the Earth. We aim to create long-lasting change by supporting smallholder farmers—especially women—through sustainable, regenerative agricultural practices.

As of 2023, we've reached over 580,000 farming households in Asia. Of these, 100,000 households have achieved a sustainable living income. We've helped form over 400 cooperatives, with 350 of them led by women, and 28,000 women's self-help groups. We've also trained more than 1,300 Community Agro-Vet Entrepreneurs (CAVEs), who provide essential animal health services to farmers.

Our work in Asia is driven by our 'Signature Programs,' which are designed for large-scale, sustainable impact. These programs focus on building strategic partnerships and delivering time-bound projects that increase household income, ultimately addressing hunger and poverty.

We begin by building social capital, supporting the mobilization of women's self-help groups and farmer collectives.

We also focus on developing technical capacities in agriculture and livestock management and building technical service delivery systems in rural areas to increase productivity.

In terms of access to finance, we've built strong partnerships with banks, financial institutions, and investors, making it easier for farmers to secure the resources they need to grow their operations. We also connect farmers to markets, ensuring they can sell their products at fair prices and become integrated into food systems for long-term sustainability.

Through these efforts, Heifer is making significant strides toward ending hunger and poverty by equipping smallholder farmers with the tools, knowledge, and resources they need to thrive.

What are the main challenges livestock farmers currently face in the region?

Livestock farmers encounter various challenges across the value chain, from production to market access and consumer levels.

At the production stage, [many farmers lack access to affordable, high-quality feed](#) and veterinary care, leading to low productivity and higher mortality rates. Limited financial resources hinder investment in proper housing and equipment. Additionally, a shortage of trained veterinarians in rural areas complicates access to timely animal health services.

In terms of market access, smallholder farmers often struggle to reach stable markets, resulting in fluctuating incomes and limited price negotiation power. Underdeveloped value chains mean they do not receive fair prices for their livestock products.

Capacity building is another issue, as many farmers lack essential skills in animal health, husbandry, and business management, restricting their growth and profitability.

At the consumer level, challenges include meeting increasing demands for high-quality meat and milk due to inadequate processing and food safety protocols. Climate change and natural disasters further disrupt production and income stability, making long-term planning difficult.

Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach, including improved access to resources, better infrastructure, and stronger value chain linkages to ensure livestock farmers can thrive and grow sustainably.

Beyond direct support to livestock keepers, what interventions do you make at the program and policy level in the region?

Beyond direct support, Heifer International employs a holistic approach to community transformation through its Values-Based Holistic Community Development (VBHCD) model, which fosters social capital and collective action for sustainable progress. A key initiative is the "Passing on the Gift" program, where families share livestock offspring and knowledge, ensuring that community-wide benefits continue to expand.

We advocate for policy reforms that promote sustainable agriculture and gender equality, collaborating with governments and development organizations to drive systemic change. Heifer also strengthens agricultural value chains by connecting farmers to larger markets and enhancing their skills throughout the production process using the 4P model (Public-Private-Producers Partnerships). This helps create sustainable businesses that uplift entire regions.

To boost productivity and market access, we assist farmers in adopting digital tools and improve animal healthcare services through the Community Agro Veterinary Entrepreneurs (CAVEs) initiative, enhancing infrastructure for animal management and disease prevention.



Heifer’s ‘Bank Sathi’ program in Nepal empowers women smallholders by facilitating access to loans and financial services, ensuring that farmers can secure capital to invest in and grow their businesses. Through these integrated efforts, Heifer fosters long-term sustainable development across the region.

What types of partnerships has Heifer International forged in the region, and how are these partnerships contributing to your mission?

Our strategic partnerships, alongside contributions from individual donors, have helped us scale our programs across Asia, with a total leveraged resource of \$151 million from FY22 to FY24.

Our collaborations span key development organizations like USAID, KOICA, AGCO Agriculture Foundation, CIAT, J-PAL, GIZ, DAI, IFAD, the International Livestock Research Institute, the UN Development Program, FAO, and the European Commission, among others. These partnerships provide technical expertise and strategic insights that strengthen our programs in sustainable livestock and agriculture.

We work closely with national and local governments to promote sustainable agriculture, strengthen value chains, and create inclusive policies that benefit smallholder farmers. We also partner with academic and technical organizations like ILRI, Harvest Plus, ICAR-Central Institute for Research on Goats, Society for Eradication of Rural Poverty (SERP) Andhra Pradesh, and Krishi Vigyan Kendras.

Our partnerships with private sector companies, including Cargill, Mastercard, Walmart, GAP Foundation, Godrej, and Bank Asia, enhance supply chain engagement, advance ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) goals, and provide tailored technical assistance, ensuring long-term sustainability for farming communities. We also collaborate with banking and financial institutions to increase access to finance for smallholder farmers and leverage impact investments through Heifer Impact Capital.

Through these partnerships, we continue to create impactful and scalable solutions that benefit both communities and businesses.



Can you mention any specific success stories from the region?

Certainly! There are several inspiring success stories from our work in the region.

Since 2012, Heifer International has supported sustainable livestock practices among goat farming cooperatives in Nepal, positively impacting 300,000 smallholder farmers—95% of whom are women. A key achievement is the shift from natural grazing to cultivating fodder on 16,000 hectares, which reduces environmental pressure and contributes to Nepal's greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction goals. Improved livestock sheds and animal health practices have cut GHG emissions and boosted productivity by 40%, doubling offtake rates and increasing incomes by 14%.

In India, our "Bihar Sustainable Livelihood Development" program aims to enhance the nutrition and incomes of 70,000 smallholder families in six districts. Through self-help groups, farmers gain technical and business training and access to financial services, improving goat, poultry, and crop production. Seema Kumari's success story exemplifies this; after learning about organic fertilizers at a Farmer Field School, she eliminated chemical inputs and reinvested her savings into other small businesses, boosting her economic resilience.

Our "Odisha Goat Value Chain Signature Program" uplifts 40,000 women farmers by enhancing goat production and market access through partnerships and specialized training with 38 women-led Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs).

These stories reflect the transformative impact Heifer International is having in the region and our commitment to empowering farmers, promoting sustainability, and improving livelihoods.

How do you relate your work at Heifer International with women's empowerment in developing countries, especially in Nepal and India?

We focus heavily on women's economic empowerment by helping women farmers access the resources, training, and markets they need to increase their incomes and independence. For instance, in Nepal, our ["Milky Way" program](#) is transforming the dairy sector by improving the livelihoods of over 500,000 smallholder dairy farmers—primarily women—and doubling milk production by 2030. This project involves collaboration with government bodies, development banks, private sector actors, and South Korean partners to address barriers across the dairy value chain, ensuring sustainable impact.

Similarly, our [Hatching Hope](#) program, in partnership with Cargill in India, is empowering women farmers in Odisha by helping them engage in the poultry value chain, improving their incomes while enhancing household nutrition through backyard poultry production.

At Heifer, we believe that when women have control over their assets and incomes, they reinvest in their families, providing better education, healthcare, and opportunities for the next generation. Through education, leadership training, and access to financial resources, we support women's critical role in achieving food security and sustainable livelihoods.

What bottlenecks do you face while implementing various interventions with smallholder farmers, especially in areas like community mobilization, training, and linking to markets?

When engaging with smallholder farmers in community mobilization, training, and market linkages, we encounter several challenges.

In community mobilization, a major obstacle is addressing deeply ingrained societal norms. Many are reluctant to abandon traditional farming practices or embrace new leadership roles. To tackle this, we engage the community continuously, educating them on the benefits of our proposed changes. By focusing on building social capital and catalysing personal transformation through our 12 Cornerstones values, we help participants develop the skills and attitudes needed for sustainable change, laying a foundation for lasting collective action.

Training faces hurdles, especially the limited availability of trainers in remote areas, which delays the sharing of crucial knowledge. We combat this by fostering local self-help groups, empowering communities to train each other and share best practices, thereby building internal capacity.

Market linkages are often hindered by inadequate infrastructure and transportation, making it difficult for farmers to access profitable markets. We collaborate with local cooperatives to improve market access, pool resources, and devise innovative solutions, ensuring farmers can sell their products competitively. We also introduce appropriate technologies to help smallholder farmers increase production and meet market demand with high-quality products.

Although these challenges are significant, we see them as opportunities for deeper engagement, innovation, and learning, ensuring our interventions are sustainable and impactful.

Do you think the lack of capacity among livestock advisors (few advisors with limited expertise) a challenge?

Yes, it is. one of the critical challenges in livestock development. At Heifer International, we address this by implementing innovative solutions such as creating a cadre of trained animal health technicians in countries like India, Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Nepal. These technicians work at the grassroots

level to raise awareness about the interconnectedness of human, animal, and environmental health, aligning with the government's One Health initiative.

A standout model we've developed is the Community Agro-Veterinarian Entrepreneur (CAVE) model, which ensures that farmers have access to sustainable, community-based animal health services. This model predominantly trains women to become agro-veterinarian entrepreneurs, empowering them to deliver preventive animal healthcare and mobilize communities.

In Nepal, for example, CAVEs trained by Heifer receive official training certificates upon completion and are registered with the municipality's livestock service office, gaining formal recognition from the Government of Nepal. This not only strengthens their credibility but also integrates them into the broader veterinary service ecosystem.

What are your future plans for South Asia?

Our future plans for South Asia are ambitious yet grounded in our mission to empower smallholder farmers. In 2023, Heifer International engaged with over 580,000 farming households across Asia, but we aim to reach 5 million smallholder farmers by 2030. We will accomplish this through various signature programs targeting livestock, crop, and vegetable value chains, guiding farmers toward sustainable livelihoods.

Heifer's strategic priorities include building inclusive communities and developing market systems. Strong cooperatives will be central to these initiatives, allowing us to scale our efforts to reach millions more farmers.

A key focus is ensuring lasting impact. We aim to strengthen the capacities of farmers and their farmer-owned agribusinesses (FOABs), making them integral to the entire value chain. This involves adopting the 4P model, where communities and FOABs handle collection, bulking, processing, packaging, branding, and transporting products to consumers.

We are also connecting smallholder farmers to essential infrastructure, such as collection centres, abattoirs, transport vehicles, and market outlets, enhancing their competitiveness in larger markets and increasing their profits.

By concentrating on these areas, we seek to create sustainable improvements that benefit farming communities for years to come, while expanding partnerships to amplify our impact across South Asia.

Thanks for sharing Heifer International's inspiring journey. AESA wishes you many more milestones ahead!



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