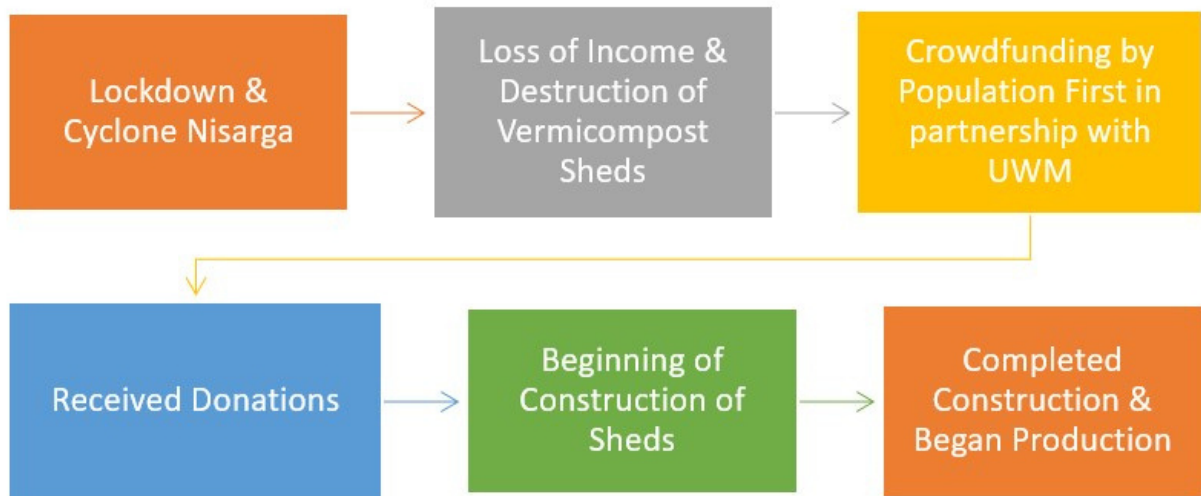




# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



# WHO ARE WE AND WHAT DO WE DO?



*Participatory Rural Appraisal in one of our villages*

Population First (PF) is a social impact organization that focuses on women's empowerment, gender equality and community mobilisation to achieve India's social and demographic goals. Of our two flagship programmes, *Laadli* and Action for Mobilization of Community Health Initiatives (AMCHI), the prior focuses on advocacy for gender equality, sensitivity and inclusion in media, advertisement and journalism, thus *influencing the influencers*; whereas the latter address gender inequities through *field-based* health, nutrition, livelihood and rural development interventions.

Shahapur, our field area, is an interesting amalgamation of growing industrial city and rooted agrarian community. The largest tehsil of Thane district with an average literacy rate of 66% has 77% population living in urban areas and 22% living in rural areas. Despite rapid industrialization in and around Shahapur, agriculture continues to be the major occupation of the people in Shahapur with 65% people practicing farming among which 45% have small land holdings.

PF began its work in Shahapur because of the evident lack of quality services in health, education, sanitation and hygiene; absence of accountability from the service providers; lack of information and knowledge among local leaders/Panchayat Raj Institutes regarding their own roles and responsibilities towards these major components; the absence of community involvement in the well-being of their villages; all of which led to appalling health, hygiene and development indicators.

The main aim of AMCHI programme is to strengthen the existing systems of health and governance by encouraging people's participation and community mobilization. Monitoring by people ensures availability of quality government services to the community.

As a result, our focus areas have been Maternal and Child Care (MCH), School-in-Development (SID), Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health (ARSH), strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI), and Livelihood Intervention.

Till date we have worked across more than 200 villages in Shahapur since the inception of our programme in 2007. We have helped address the gaps in maternal and childcare by working with approximately 2,500 pregnant and lactating mothers and addressing malnutrition

among children between the ages of 0-6 years. We have trained close to 2,500 school children on Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WaSH) social behavioural changes and taught 3000 adolescent girls on adolescent reproductive and sexual health issues. We have also worked with approximately 500 women aiding them in becoming financially independent through agriculture related livelihood opportunities such as vermicomposting. We are also expanding our livelihood interventions to include poultry farming since early 2020.

(From left to to right): Mobilization of women for Mahila Gram Sabha, Health camp under MCH intervention, house visits conducted by student Vikasdoots under School-in-Development intervention.



# HOW DID THE VERMICOMPOST LIVELIHOOD INTERVENTION BEGIN?

Women in rural areas of Shahapur work at home as well as in their fields like millions of other women farmers and farm labourers across our country. However, despite participating in agricultural work with men, they have no income of their own and hence have no control over financial matters in their families.

During the microplanning exercises conducted by Population First's AMCHI team in the intervention villages, in one of our previous projects, one of the needs expressed by the women was to be engaged in some form of income generation activity. It was realized that financial independence enables women to become decision-makers at home and in their community, thus becoming a crucial element of their empowerment.

AMCHI began exploring income generating options for women which complements their existing agriculture related skills, are easy to learn, less time consuming and easily accommodated around their field work and household chores. Thus, we initiated the vermicomposting intervention first in 2011 which has been successfully implemented in close to 50 village over the years. The rural women continue to use the vermicompost (VC) that they have produced on their own land and are continuing to sell it in the surrounding areas as well as in major markets in Shahapur.

Population First through the intervention builds capacities of 7-10 women in each village to run one vermicompost unit. Each unit consisting of four-five pits covered by a shed, is used for production and storage of the vermicompost. The group produces vermicompost – the manure produced with the help of earthworms – and vermivash – a plant tonic and biopesticide, manages the operations, plans marketing visits and sells the products to the nearby farmers and farmhouse owners.

They also participate in exhibitions and fairs to sell their products with the help of PF team. These women members enter this intervention with zero personal income but earn significant income depending on the season and the farming activities. For instance, under our recent project in five villages of Ambarpada, Ambiwali, Nadgaon, Sogaoan and Kalgaon, the first quarter of 2020 saw the groups earning an average Rs. 32,000/- per group.

Over the course of the intervention the women are empowered in two ways – economically and socially. From an economic standpoint, the women became financially independent, and have started participating actively in decision making at an individual, family and community level. The income earned from this intervention primarily gives the women the freedom of mobility. The money is also utilized for their personal expenses, medical expenses, children's education and for household expenses.

From a social standpoint the livelihood opportunity compels the women to interact with different people every day, pushing them out of their comfort zone, thus inculcating self-confidence, improving their communication negotiation skills and increasing their mobility.

Therefore, the vermicomposting livelihood intervention has become an essential secondary source of income for all the women's families; and the women's only source of income. Secondly, the women are also the frontrunners in motivating Shahapur farmers – big and small, to turn to organic and natural ways of farming by using vermi-products to improve the quality of the soil and the produce.



Background image: Vermicompost (VC) exhibition at Kasara farmer melava

# WHAT LED TO CROWDFUNDING?

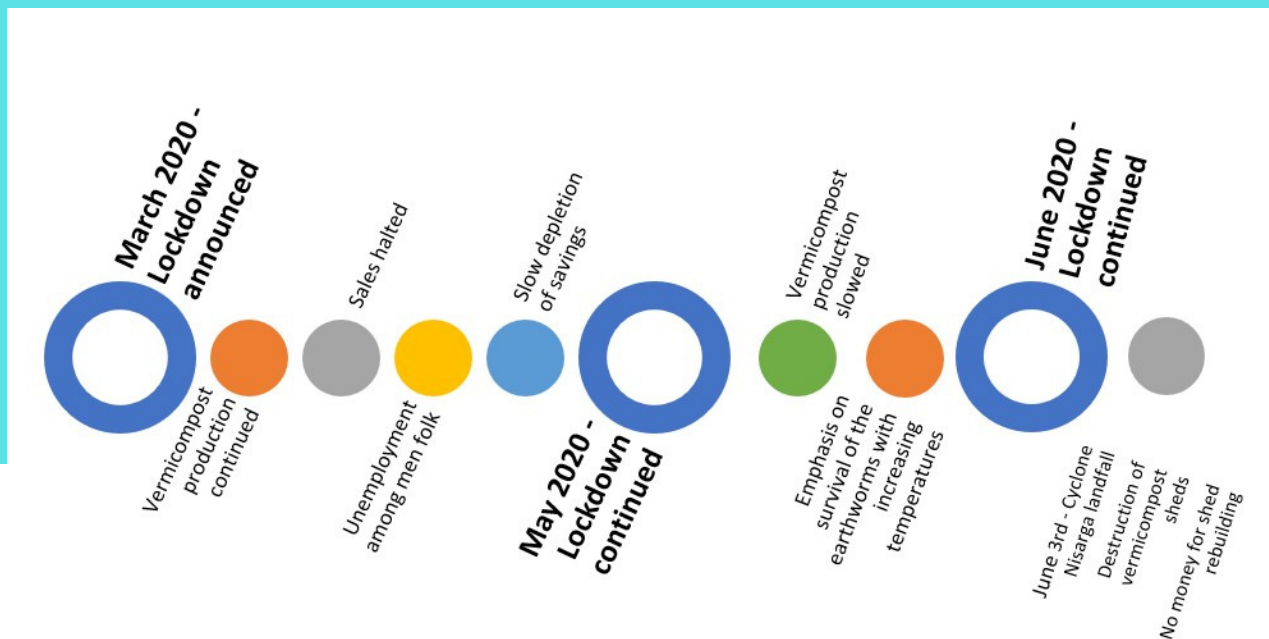


Figure 1 Timeline

Vermicompost production and sale closely syncs with the seasonal agricultural activities. With the Jan-March months being important months for Rabi/winter crops, vermicompost is produced and sold consistently. The production and sale continue well into the months of April and May. However, with increase in temperatures in peak summer season, the production of the vermicompost slows down slightly and the groups' main aim is to aid the survival of the earthworms through the summer months till the monsoon arrives. It is also during the end of summer that the women start to prepare for the monsoon carrying out minor repairs of their tanks and sheds all the

while continuing with the production and sale of vermicompost. With the arrival of the rains the temperatures reduce creating a viable environment for the earthworms to increase their vermicompost production.

However, as shown in *fig 1*, this year with the lockdown announced in mid-March, the sale gradually halted while the production continued. This resulted in limited to no income from the months of April. Additionally, the lockdown also led to unemployment among the men in the villages with many of them migrating back to their villages. This further worsened the financial situation of the women members' families as their

savings slowly depleted over the next few months. This affected the families' ability to address any of their health, food, education or household needs.

Further adding to the troubles, cyclone Nisaraga hit Mumbai on June 3rd, 2020. This cyclone, the strongest to hit since 2009, made its way to Shahapur causing destruction in its wake. The sheds of our vermicompost units were ripped, bamboo structures collapsed, the earthworms that had survived the summer heat escaped or died in the cyclone and consequent heavy rains. With no income in the months prior to the cyclone it was impossible for the women to re-build their vermicompost unit sheds.

# HOW DID WE CROWDFUND?

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Population First like several NGOs in Mumbai had been raising money through TATA Mumbai Marathon's philanthropic partner United Way Mumbai (UWM) for several years. UWM had launched a COVID-19 special fundraising platform to aid the NGOs and their beneficiaries affected by the pandemic.

Therefore, PF approached UWM team and presented the vermicompost livelihood women's group's situation and requirements post the lockdown and in the wake of the cyclone Nisarga, and set out to draft an appeal.

After internal discussions, we narrowed down on 15 vermicompost groups from among our 55 villages where vermicomposting livelihood intervention had been introduced. An appeal for INR 1,80,000/- (INR 12,000/- per village) funds for rebuilding of the sheds of the vermicompost groups/units was developed.

The selection of the villages was done on the basis of damage sustained by a particular group as a result of the lockdown and the cyclone, their accessibility to PF team under the lockdown scenario for monitoring of the construction, as well as the interest and need of the women members especially keeping the mobility restriction in mind.

The villages selected were as follows:

- Kosla
- Katkarwadi
- Bandhanpada
- Shivner
- Dehna
- Toranpada
- Masavane
- Khariwali
- Khoste
- Tembhurli
- Khutali
- Arjunali\*
- Ubhrai
- Chandrichapada
- Bhabade





*Bhabade vermicompost (VC) shed*



*Chandrichapada VC shed*



*Dehna VC shed*



*Toranpada VC shed*



*Khoste VC shed*



*Khutali VC shed*

# REBUILDING THEIR LIVELIHOODS

The fundraising began in the month of July 2020 and we raised 2,10,217/- (Rupees Two Lakh Ten Thousand Two Hundred and Seventeen only) till the month of December 2020.

The construction of the vermicompost sheds across 15 villages began gradually depending on disbursement of the funds from the UWM platform, further allocation by our Head Office to the field team, the lockdown restrictions and transportation availability for the women members to purchase the material and begin with the construction.

The funds were disbursed to our field team in tranches which allowed the team to cover minimum three to four groups at a time. This tranche-wise disbursement allowed our team to manage the funds appropriately and give enough time to the women members to buy the material for the construction and plan the construction in accordance with their winter/Rabi season farming activities.

The sheds are constructed using steel pipes and bamboo sticks. This combination of the raw materials ensures that the sheds built have structural integrity and at the same time is cost effective.

*(From top to bottom): Katkarwadi (Savroli), Kosla and Bandhanpada shed reconstruction in progress*



The roof is covered with green net most commonly used for farming and green house activities that allows for proper ventilation and easy temperature regulation during the summer months. The women members, their family members along with their respective village masons rebuilt the vermicompost sheds.

Apart from the destruction of the sheds the constant heavy rains in the months of July and August had also led to damage of vermicompost production pits/tanks in some of the villages. Secondly, heavy rains with no shed to cover the pits led to escape of earthworms and therefore, loss of earthworms. Therefore, the women further crowd sourced funds from among themselves to repair these pits and buy earthworms from nearby vermicompost groups to help them restart their vermicomposting process as well as production of earthworms.

As a result, the rebuilding of all the 15 groups is now complete and the women have now gradually started producing vermicompost in their sheds.

*(From top to bottom): Bhabade, Khutali, Kosla, Arjunali and Ubhrai sheds completed*



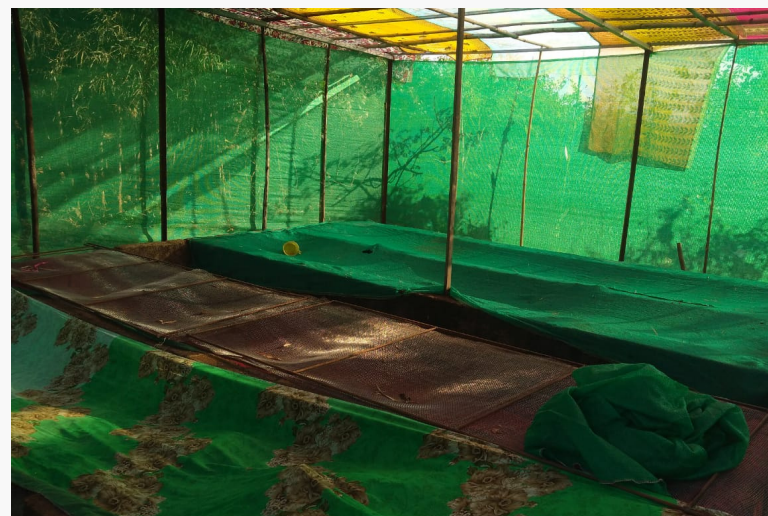
However, with the mobility restriction due to lack of transport facilities because of the on-going pandemic it will still take time for the women members to start earning substantial income enough to start supporting their families.

Once, the production begins in earnest PF is also looking at significantly increasing the sale of the vermicompost through online marketing on platforms like Amazon in the coming year.

Nonetheless, this is a good beginning and they have you all to thank for!



(From top to bottom): Katkarwadi (Savroli), Dehna, Shivner, Khoste and Temburli sheds completed



# A BIG THANK YOU!

*"The vermicompost intervention is very important for me and my group members because it gave us our 'identity' and we are considered important in our own families. However, all that changed with the lockdown and the cyclone. With no sale of manure, we did not have the money for travelling, visiting hospital, purchasing of rations for the family. I felt helpless.*

*But your donation, helped us cover most of the cost for the construction and we have started the production and sale of the vermicompost as well. We think, we will be able to market our vermi products to the farmers and farm house owners for the second farming season which starts in the month of December!"*

*- Bharti Walte, Unnati Mahila Gandulkhat Prakalp  
Khutali*



*"With the lockdown and the cyclone, we lost close to Rs. 65,000/- income missing two seasons of sale – summer and monsoons. And the destruction of our shed caused further distress for us. However, with your donations and a friendly neighbour in our own village, who was ready to make our shed with his own materials, we were able to build our shed back without any trouble whatsoever. We were fortunately able to save our earthworms during the monsoon season, which has helped us in quickly restarting our production!"*

*- Sharda Nipurte, Aadhar Mahila Gandulkhat Prakalp  
Katkarwadi (Savroli)*

*"These last few months have been particularly difficult for us. We struggled a lot to place an order for the construction material which drove up the cost of construction. Therefore, we had to also raise 4,000/- to 5,000/- for construction of the shade to supplement the monetary help we received from you all. Due to the heavy rains our construction work also halted and we were able to save only few earthworms from our pits. Therefore, we will be focusing on reproduction of the earthworms for time being and we hope to start the sale of the vermicompost in earnest by March next year.*

*All these years, the income we earned from the vermicompost livelihood intervention changed our role in our families from ordinary women to super women who can take decisions! But we lost that and much more – our hope and confidence, with the lockdown and the cyclone this year. And your help was utmost useful for us in bringing back that hope."*

*- Sadhana Sable, Krushi Sanjivani Mahila Gandulkhat  
Bandhanpada*



*"Tembhurli village is known for its vermicompost production and empowered rural women who have as a result of this livelihood intervention improved their economic conditions and also became active community members contributing to solving many of the village's issues. But this changed rapidly this year; the lockdown and the cyclone totally destroyed our livelihood, our vermicompost unit and also led to the loss of all our earthworms. We had difficult time placing order for our construction material but we persevered!*

*Now our shed has been reconstructed with your help and we are determined to get our vermicompost livelihood intervention back on track and once again become financially independent women who can go back to contributing to our families and communities."*

*- Sadhana Chaudhari, Swapnapurti Mahila Gandulkhat  
Tembhurli*

# MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

"We were sad and devastated to see the state of the vermi-compost sheds after cyclone Nisarga. Combined with the challenges of the pandemic, we saw our women almost on the verge of giving up.

They just needed a helping hand, some compassion and a little support. We reached out to you for funding and we motivated our field team to lend a hand in rebuilding the sheds. Then the smiles were back, their enthusiasm was palpable and the women were back on track.

Your instant support reminds me of Mother Teresa's words:

*"None of us, including me, ever do great things.  
But we can all do small things, with great love, and  
together  
we can do something wonderful."*

A big thank you from the depths of my heart for your support, compassion and trust in the women and us.

We look forward to updating you about our initiative. Let us be part of the journey of these amazing role models."

- Dr. A. L. Sharada,  
Director, Population First

