

Case Study: Marcatus QED

A Community-Based Approach to Building Equitable Value Chains

Company Overview¹

Marcatus QED (MQED), a global agri-food solutions company, partners with top food companies to create bespoke sustainable sourcing and value chain strategies. It works to drive economic, social, and environmental sustainability across its service offering which includes product development, global sourcing, co-packing, supply chain, food safety and quality, and responsible farming. Its Responsible Farming Program aligns with several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) including No Poverty, No Hunger, Good Health, Quality Education, Gender Equality, Decent Work and Economic Growth, Climate Action, Life on Land, and Partnerships for the Goals.

As **sustainability and responsible farming have always been ingrained into the company's business model**, the organization does not view this work as a corporate social responsibility silo or an add-on to its business. Instead, MQED works to deeply embed social equity and climate action across its value chain and partnerships. With over 30 partner factories and 50,000 farmers across its value chain, MQED takes a highly collaborative approach to its work. As part of a larger ecosystem, it strives to create on-the-ground partnerships with clients, suppliers, farmers, and local organizations to foster solutions that are adapted to local needs and challenges.

Solutions

¹ <https://www.marcatusqed.com/>; <https://unglobalcompact.ca/sdg-leadership-awards-2018/marcatus-qed/>

Women in Agriculture²

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on the rising contribution of women in farming as more women are entering the sector and are shaping the agricultural landscape. In Canada, the proportion of female farm operators has increased from 25.3% in 1996 to 28.7%, and subsequently rising to 30.4% in 2021. The rise of a new generation of farmers has led to an surge in young, resourceful, increasingly educated women farm operators.

Studies have found that women producers attach greater importance to ecological values, prioritizing soil and environmental conservation, promoting food sovereignty, and protecting biodiversity. Women are also disproportionately impacted by the ongoing effects of climate change, as climate change is a “threat multiplier” deepening existing social, political, and economic inequalities within regions.

These values align with a feminist perspective on the ethics of care, which is characterized by one’s ability to be more in tune with social and climate concerns and the impact of one’s actions on the environment. Many women farmers are championing sustainable agriculture, with women-led operations often characterized as small-scale, biodiverse, and relying on natural, organic, or regenerative methods.

However, women face many gendered obstacles within agriculture, including:

- Land rights: In developing countries, only 10-20% of landowners are women, and in some parts of the world, women cannot legally own or control land.
- Gender roles and expectations: Entrenched gender bias can prevent women from holding decision-making power on farms, taking on leadership roles, and even conducting farm-related tasks on their own such as bringing crops to market. In many communities, women also carry a disproportionate share of household tasks which adds to their workload.
- Access to credit and financing: Smallholder women farmers often face barriers in accessing credit due to lack of collateral, as many are unable to own land or other assets, or cultural norms.
- Higher risk of gender-based violence (GBV): Women in agriculture are often at heightened risk of GBV, including sexual harassment, assault, and exploitation.

Marcatus Mobile Education Platform (MMEP)³

Launched in 2015, the Marcatus Mobile Education Platform (MMEP) is a video-based training program aimed at educating smallholder farmers to adopt sustainable farming techniques. MMEP has been rolled out to rural gherkin farmers in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, India. The program includes training and equipping field officers with the knowledge and technology to create videos with local farmers on sustainable agricultural practices, and conducting training sessions with farmers.

While the program was initially designed with the goal of improving crop yield and quality, as the MQED team began to understand the local landscape, they realized strong gendered implications were present. In rural India, men own the family plots of land and are often the field supervisors, while women are the labourers and workers. As such, it was not typical for women farmers to participate in educational or training opportunities or take initiative to learn new agricultural practices as they traditionally deferred to the men in their family, with 80% of agricultural training being delivered solely to men. However, ¾ of field officers surveyed by MQED reported that women do half or more of on-farm work. As women have been playing an integral role within the family and on the farm, it was a natural alignment to have a gendered focus embedded within the MMEP. With the aim of empowering women to take on more active roles within their communities, the MMEP training videos introduced and showcased women as decision makers, teachers, and leaders on the farm.

Embedding a gendered lens in the MMEP was an evolving process, as the MQED team worked to adapt materials and programming to the local cultural and social context. MQED noticed that women farmers tended to be more interested in participating if their role as caregivers within their households were highlighted. Consequently, a nutrition and sanitation educational program was incorporated in order to attract more women and increase attendance. As the program progressed, it became clear that many field officers did not have a thorough understanding of how to represent women as leaders in the training videos. As a result, a gender expert was brought in to deliver in-depth gender-awareness training sessions to team leaders, as well as review existing training materials for gender sensitivity.

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220511/dq220511a-eng.htm>;
[https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/partner-content-empowering-female-farmers#:~:text=Gender%2Dspecific%2Obstacles%E2%80%94such%20as,field%20or%20sow%20a%20seed](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/partner-content-empowering-female-farmers#:~:text=Gender%2Dspecific%2Obstacles%E2%80%94such%20as,field%20or%20sow%20a%20seed;);
<https://unfccc.int/news/five-reasons-why-climate-action-needs-women#:~:text=Particularly%20in%20developing%20countries%2C%20the,risk%20to%20their%20personal%20safety>;
<https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/women-in-shadow-climate-change>;
<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/explainer/2022/02/explainer-how-gender-inequality-and-climate-change-are-interconnected>

³ <https://vimeo.com/202419883/2f7fd1b5db>; <https://vimeo.com/254555483/4eb67b2259>;
<https://app.luminpdf.com/viewer/64da3c99467c255e52902638>

“You have to be working within the context of what already exists. We are trying to empower women to make decisions within the context of the culture.”⁴

- Sona Kalra, Marcatus QED’s Sustainability and Communications Global Lead

Local Challenge	Equity-Focused, Collaborative, and Community-Based Approach
Limited access to culturally relevant and accessible information	All training videos were recorded in the local language (Tamil or Kannada). The audio and visual component of the video format increases accessibility of information as there is a high illiteracy rate within local communities. Videos can also help break down cultural barriers through seeing another individual from your community modeling new practices.
Limited access to resources	Communities were provided with the necessary technology and equipment to access the trainings. Video cameras were provided to field officers in order to create the training videos with local farmers. Tablets were provided for farmers to view the material on the field, and handheld projectors and speakers were provided in order to screen the videos to large groups of farmers.
Lack of adequate training and capacity building	Field officers were trained on how to produce and record videos and engage with local farmers to create educational content, and they were responsible for presenting these videos to groups of local farmers. This collaborative approach allowed for community-created content and increased the communities’ abilities in media, technology, communication, teaching, and leadership skills.
Lack of decision-making power and leadership role for women in agricultural communities	In order to encourage more conversations about gender equality and work towards shifting gender roles and norms, there was increased representation of women in the training videos, specifically in decision-making and leadership roles on the farm. During the training sessions, there was focus on facilitating increased women's participation and a gender expert was brought in to conduct gender awareness training with farmers.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2016/may/27/tackling-sexism-india-film-empower-women-farming-communities-oxfam-unilever-marcatus-qed>

Women in Agriculture Scholarship

MQED runs a Women in Agriculture scholarship with the aim of empowering and equipping women with the education to develop a career and become a leader in the agriculture field. Thus far, MQED has supported two women scholars in India and in Mexico covering full tuition fees. The most recent scholar, Jacqueline Echevarria Arciniega from Mexico, has graduated as an Arborist.

Jacqueline's Statement:

The scholarship I received from the Marcatus QED Women in Agriculture Scholarship helped me on a day-to-day basis during my university career, and it had a positive impact on me being able to study and finish it. Over the three years of support, the Marcatus QED Women in Agriculture Scholarship not only helped me financially, but also encouraged me to develop my skills in agricultural research and practice my English through the research work that was carried out every 6 months. I have since graduated from the University of Guadalajara (2022), and I am currently working in a public organization here in Guadalajara in the field of urban trees, a field in which I specialized in the final semester of my degree. I am very grateful for the trust and support you have given me.

Sincerely, Jacqueline Echeverria Arciniega

Unilever + Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN) + MQED Partnership⁵

In partnership with Unilever and the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), MQED has implemented a health education program, Seeds of Prosperity, that educates farming families on dietary diversity and improved hygiene practices and provides families with resources to grow their own "kitchen gardens". The program has a specific focus on improving the health and wellbeing of women farmers, pregnant women, and young children, as they often bear the highest health burden in rural communities.

Key Success Factors

Key success factors that led to the success of MQED's ability to integrate equity into its value chain:

- Having a deep understanding of the communities in which you are operating to **tailor your solutions towards local challenges, needs, and opportunities**.
- **Working collaboratively** with community members and local organizations to ensure participatory learning and capacity building.
- Being **adaptable to changing landscapes** and having the ability to adjust programs accordingly to optimize participation and impact.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfzXz8kjM7Y>; <https://www.unilever.com/news/news-search/2015/creating-a-bright-future-for-farmers-in-india-an-ambassadors-experience/>

- Having **strong internal champions for impact-focused programs**, which is particularly important in smaller organizations where there can be challenges progressing initiatives forward given time and resource constraints and employee turnover.

Impact

The MMEP, alongside MQED's other women-focused agricultural initiatives, have produced many positive gender-focused outcomes such as increasing equitable access to culturally-sensitive resources and improving gender representation and shifting gender norms, as well as climate-focused outcomes such as increasing sustainable methods of production on farms.

Outputs

- Over 60 videos created by field officers covering nearly 30 topics, featuring local farmers and women in decision-making and leadership roles.
- Over 10,500 farm families attended a training session or received training through the platform; over half of all attendees were women.
- Nearly 400 men field officers received training on the platform, with exposure to training on gender sensitivity.
- 150 field officers attended workshops with a gender component.
- 67 team leaders and decision-makers took part in a session with a gender expert.

Outcomes

- An estimated 65% of the families who received the training later adopted one of the sustainable agricultural practices they learned about.
- A randomized control trial found that gherkin yields were on average 20% higher compared to previous years and incomes rose by approximately 22%, although this could not be confidently solely attributed to the impact of MMEP.

Impacts

- **Building resilience:** Equipped farmers with the skills and knowledge required to adapt to changing needs and respond to emerging issues within their communities.
- **Gendered impacts:** Opened up the conversation on gender equality by confronting resistant attitudes and previously accepted norms and roles within communities, educating and listening to local women's perspectives, and ultimately shifting attitudes and influencing new empowering behaviours.

Key Takeaways

- **Shifting societal and cultural gendered norms takes time:** While MQED was able to adapt its programming to increase participation and representation of women in agriculture, a level of uncertainty remains on the long-standing impacts on the women farmers. However, creating behavioural changes takes time and incremental improvements and wins should be celebrated throughout the journey.
- **Do not remain complacent:** MQED is continuously working to develop its programs and increase the scale of impact, while ensuring its solutions are community-based and

Company size: 500-700 | Location: Toronto (HQ) | Type: Private | Industry: Agri-food solutions

adapted to local needs. Currently, it is working on translating the MMEP into Malagasy in order to reach farmers in Madagascar. It also has plans to adopt the MMEP practices to new crops within its value chain such as vanilla and cacao. Finally, it is working towards introducing the Women in Agriculture Scholarship for future years.