



MAKING PUBLIC SERVICES REACH THE LAST MILE

Lessons for Scaling Up and Mainstreaming





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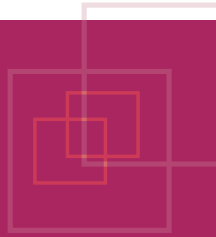
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FOREWORD



The right to information is a fundamental right of all persons to access information held by public bodies. The importance is also reflected in the 2030 Development Agenda and in particular with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) which calls for ensuring public access to information and protection of fundamental freedoms.

Both the European Union and India, being two largest democracies, are not only strongly committed to this principle but have also taken substantial and tangible initiatives to make the information available publically.

The European Union has embraced this principle as a fundamental right of all people in its own jurisdictions. The right of public access to official documents of the European Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission is explicitly recognised in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. Further, nearly all EU Member States have now enacted their own national freedom of information laws, requiring them to provide public access to government documents and other official information. This shared experience makes the EU and its diplomatic Delegations uniquely placed to offer assistance in the adoption and implementation of these laws.

In the context of India, the passing of the Right to Information Act in 2005 by the Indian Parliament was a landmark. More than a decade since its passing, its implementation has shown the commitment of Government of India to democratic governance and its determination to promote a more informed citizenry.

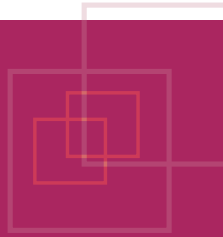
Despite great strides in transparency and accountability, making the Act comprehensible to those living in remote and rural India remains essential to its successful implementation. Supporting India's efforts, the Delegation of European Union to India had launched a civil society programme called "Improving Access to Information of Public Schemes in Backward Districts in India". It aimed at facilitating equitable access to public schemes and services by increasing awareness of people about their entitlements. A total of 14 projects were supported between 2014 and 2018, involving nearly 70 Civil Society Organisations across 20 states. The project partners engaged closely with local government in all the target districts and have facilitated poor and marginalised people's access to entitlements.

Those projects have positively impacted a million households, with improved access to entitlements by the poor and marginalised evidenced in education, health, social security, financial inclusion and livelihood promotion schemes of the Government of India.

The EU support not only delivered substantial results but also provided key insights and learnings. I welcome the initiative of our partner UNNATI - Organisation for Development Education - in putting together this publication, with the technical support from Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA). Such endeavour will help replication and scaling up, in India or in other countries, further promoting access to information for the people.

Tomasz Kozlowski
Ambassador of
the European Union to India

CONTENTS



vii

Acronyms



1

Enabling Access to Public Programmes and Services:
Lessons from CSO-Led Projects in India



19

Case Studies

- 21 ▶ Improving Access to Information and Delivery of Public Schemes in Remote and Backward Districts of Northeast India
- 30 ▶ Increasing Access to Information on Government Schemes and Entitlements in Six Backward Districts of Northern India
- 40 ▶ Addressing Nutritional and Income Insecurity of Underprivileged Communities by Improving Access to Relevant Government Schemes
- 50 ▶ Strengthening Participation in Local Governance to Enhance Access to Entitlements and Basic Services by Marginalised Tribal Communities
- 60 ▶ Empowering People in Five Backward Districts of Karnataka to Access Public Schemes
- 70 ▶ Fighting Poverty by Improving Access and Governance of Public Schemes and Services in Two Backward Districts of Odisha
- 79 ▶ Soochna Seva: Facilitating Information Flow and Management of Public Schemes for Citizen Empowerment and Good Governance in Backward Districts in India
- 88 ▶ Empowering Tribal Communities to Address their Poverty through Improved Access to Indian Public Services



CONTENTS

- 98 ▶ Sammalit Vikas Jankari: Improving Access of People Living with Disability to Information on Public Schemes in Backward Districts of India
- 107 ▶ Action to Improve Public Scheme Access and Delivery in Bihar, India
- 119 ▶ Community Centred Approach to Enhancing Access to Public Services in Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh
- 130 ▶ SVAVRITTI
- 141 ▶ Inclusive Civic Leadership for Social Accountability and Effective Service Delivery of Public Programmes in Rajasthan and Gujarat
- 151 ▶ Initiative for Transparent and Accountable Governance Systems in Jharkhand

ACRONYMS



AAT	Ayo Aidari Trust	CBO	Community Based Organisation
AAY	Antyodaya Anna Yojana	CCA	Capacity and Constraints Assessment
AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome	CDMO	Chief District Medical Officer
AIPAD	Action to Improve Public Scheme Access and Delivery	CDPO	Child Development Project Officer
ANC	Antenatal Care	CIC	Chronic Illness Certificate
ANM	Auxiliary Nurse Midwifery	CIF	Community Investment Fund
APPI	Azim Premji Philanthropic Initiatives	CL	Citizen Leaders
ART	Anti Retroviral Therapy	CMP	Common Minimum Package
ASHA	Accredited Social Health Activist	CR	Community Radio
AWC	Anganwadi Centre	CRC	Citizen Report Card
AWW	Anganwadi Worker	CRP	Community Resource Persons
AYUSH	Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy	CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
BCC	Behaviour Change Communication	CSC	Common Service Centre
BF	Badlao Foundation	CSC	Community Score Card
BIC/BLIC	Block Level Information Centre	CSO	Civil Society Organisation
BKKY	Biju Krusak Kalyan Yojana	DAM	Dalit Adhikar Morcha
BNP+	Bengal Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS	DAP	District Action Plan
BO	Block Office	DAPCU	District AIDS Prevention Control Unit
BPGY	Biju Pakka Ghar Yojana	DCA	DanChurchAid
BPL	Below Poverty Line	DEF	Digital Empowerment Foundation
BRGF	Backward Regions Grant Fund	DEO	District Education Officer
BRSSG	Backward Region Scheme Support Group	DGM	Demand Generation Meeting
BRSSS	Backward Region Scheme Support Sanghas	DLSA	District Legal Service Authority
BSKY	Biju Swasthya Kalyan Yojana	DM	District Magistrate
CAC	Citizen Assistance Centre	DoIT	Department of Information Technology
CAF	Citizen's Action Forum	DPF	Disabled Peoples' Federation
CAG	Citizens Action Group	DPG	Disabled People's Group
CBM	Community Based Monitoring	DPO	Disabled People's Organisation
		DSSS	Disha Samaj Sevi Sanstha
		DWCD	Department of Women and Child Development

EU	European Union	IWD	International Women's Day
EWR	Elected Women Representatives	JC	Janch Committee
FAPNW	Financial Assistance for Poor Needy Widow	JEPC	Jharkhand Education Project Council
FCA	Family Comprehensive Approach	JDY	Jan Dhan Yojana
FRA	Forest Right Act	JIS	Janta Information System
FRC	Forest Right Committee	JSK	Jana Seva Kendra
FSW	Female Sex Worker	JSSK	Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram
G2C	Government to Citizen	JSY	Janani Suraksha Yojana
GDP	Gross Domestic Product	JVP	Jharkhand Vikas Parishad
GEYKS	Gram Vikas Evam Yuva Kalyan Sansthan	KBK	Kalahandi, Bolangir and Koraput
GICC	Gender Identity Change Certificate	KNP+	Kalinga Network for People Living with HIV/AIDS
GKS	Gram Kalyan Samitis	KYC	Know Your Customer
GMS	Grameen Mazdoor Sangathan	LSS	Lokshakti Samajsevi Sanstha
GMSSS	Gram Mitra Samaj Sevi Sanstha	MAP	Mass Awareness Programmes
GO	Government Orders	MARP	Most At Risk Population
GP	Gram Panchayat	MBPY/S	Madhu Babu Pension Yojana/ Scheme
GPDP	Gram Panchayat Development Plan	MC	Matru Committee
GPEC	Gram Panchayat Executive Committee	MCH	Maternal and Child Health
GPSC	Gram Panchayat Standing Committee	MCHN	Mother and Child Health and Nutrition
GRS	Gram Rojgar Sevak	MCP	Mass Contact Programmes
HC	Health Cubes	MDM	Mid Day Meal
HDI	Human Development Index	MfM	Mobile for Mothers
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus	MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
HWA	Human Welfare Association	MGNREGS	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme
IAY	Indira Awaas Yojana	MIS	Management Information System
IC	Information Clinics	MKSS	Majdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Services	MMK	Mobile Mahiti Karyakram
ICT	Information and Communication Technology	MMR	Maternal Mortality Rate
ICTC	Integrated Counselling and Testing Centres	MNP+	Manipur Network of Positive People
IEC	Information, Education and Communication	MoPR	Ministry of Panchayati Raj
IMR	Infant Mortality Rate	MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
IPPE	Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise	MSCC	Most Significant Change Committee
IRC	Information Resource Centre	MSM	Men who have Sex with Men
IT	Information Technology	MVC	Monitoring and Verification Committee
ITPA	Immoral Traffic Prevention Act	NABARD	National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development
IVRS	Interactive Voice Response System	NALSA	National Legal Service Authority

NCPI+	National Coalition of People Living with HIV in India	PMJDY	Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana
NDPSA	Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act	PMJJBY	Pradhan Mantri Jeeven Jyothi Bima Yojana
NEICORD	North East India Committee on Relief and Development	PMSBY	Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana
NFBS	National Family Benefit Scheme	PMSMY	Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matri Yojana
NFSA	National Food Security Act	PMUY	Pradhan Mantri Ujjawala Yojana
NMBS	National Maternity Benefit Scheme	PNC	Post Natal Care
NMP+	Network of Maharashtra by People Living with HIV/AIDS	PPTCT	Prevention of Parent to Child Transmission
NNP+	Network of Naga People Living with HIV/AIDS	PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
NRDWP	National Rural Drinking Water Programme	PRI	Panchayati Raj Institution
NRHM	National Rural Health Mission	PSC	Peoples Service Centre
NRLM	National Rural Livelihood Missions	PSU	Public Sector Undertaking
NRP	MGNREGA Resource persons	PTT	Panchayat Training Teams
NSAP	National Social Assistance Programme	PVTG	Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups
NSK	Nagrik Soochna Kendra	PWD	Persons with Disabilities
NSSK	Nagrik Samwad and Sahayata Kendra	PWDA	Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995
OBC	Other Backward Class	PWID	People Who Inject Drug
ODF	Open Defecation Free	RBSK	Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram
ORRISSA	Organisation for Rural Reconstruction and Integrated Social Service Activities	RCDS	Regional Centre for Development Cooperation
PAC	Public Affairs Centre	RCSSS	Roman Catholic Diocesan Social Service Society
PAN	Permanent Account Number	RGVY	Rajiv Gandhi Grameen Vidyutikaran Yojana
PDS	Public Distribution System	RGSK	Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendra
PDSA	Panchayat Digital Shashaktikaran Abhiyan	RKVY	Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana
PEO	Panchayat Extension Officer	RLHP	Rural Literacy and Health Programme
PESA	Panchayat (Extension of the Scheduled Areas) Act	RPWDA	Right to Persons with Disability Act, 2016
PHC	Primary Health Centre	RSBY	Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana
PIC	Public Information Centres	RTE	Right to Education
PIL	Public Interest Litigation	RTI	Right to Information
PK	Pragya Kendra	RTIA	Right to Information Act
PLA	Participatory Learning Appraisal	SAATHII	Solidarity and Action Against the HIV Infection in India
PLV	Para Legal Volunteers	SACS	State AIDS Control Society
PLWHA	Persons Living with HIV/AIDS	SASS	Social Assistance and Security Scheme
PMAY	Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana	SBM	Swachh Bharat Mission
		SBM-G	Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen

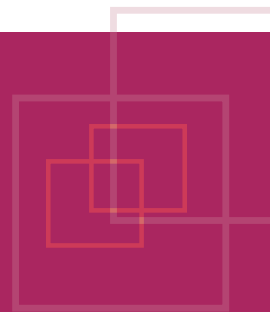
SC	Scheduled Caste	TG	Trans-Gender
SDP	School Development Plan	THDC	Tehri Hydro Development Corporation
SHG	Self Help Group	TO	Tehsil Office
SIC	State Information Commissioner	ToT	Training of Trainers
SLA	State Legal Authority	TRI	Tribal Rights Forums
SMC	School Management Committee	TSP	Tribal Sub-Plan
SMS	Short Message Service	U5MR	Under 5 Mortality Rate
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure	UNDP	United Nations Development Program
SPREAD	Society for Promoting Rural Education and Development	VDP	Village Development Plan
SRT	State Resource Team	VF	Vanavil Foundation
SSA	Sarva Sikhsha Abhiyan	VHC	Village Help Camps
SSEVK	Samajik Shodh Evam Vikas Kendra	VHSNC	Village Health, Sanitation, and Nutrition Committee
SSK	Soochna Seva Kendras	VHSND	Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Days
SSS	Samvad Samajik Sansthan	VLC	Village Level Committee
ST	Scheduled Tribe	VLE	Village Level Entrepreneur
SVJ	Sammalit Vikas Jankari	VO	Village Organisation
SWIH	Single Window Information Hubs	VSK	Vikas Sahyog Kendra
SWPS	Single Women Pension Scheme	VSS	Vidyalaya Shiksha Samiti
SWRC	Social Work and Research Centre	VVS	Vasudha Vikas Sansthan
SWWS	Society for the Welfare of Weaker Sections	WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

ENABLING ACCESS

TO PUBLIC PROGRAMMES AND SERVICES: LESSONS FROM CSO-LED PROJECTS IN INDIA



ENABLING ACCESS TO PUBLIC PROGRAMMES AND SERVICES: LESSONS FROM CSO-LED PROJECTS IN INDIA



BACKGROUND

India is the largest democracy, second largest populated country, and one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Economic reforms in the early '90s helped the Indian economy to grow faster in the following three decades. This spectacular economic growth, however, also coincided with growing inequality. Various official estimates on poverty suggest that nearly one-fifth of Indians are poor; however, when it is measured for multi-dimensional poverty, around one-third are considered to be poor.

A consistent higher economic growth in itself cannot address poverty and inequality. It requires redistribution of resources by an active State. The Indian Government along with various state governments have formulated numerous public programmes and schemes over the last 70 years to reduce poverty and increase the welfare of its citizens. Each successive government brought a renewed resolve to improve the delivery of public services and schemes for providing social and economic protection to the poor. Despite good intentions, most public programmes and schemes faced challenges in reaching out to the last person in the village, which has often been termed as a classic 'last mile connectivity problem'.

Inadequate institutional capacities across governance institutions, over centralisation of the governance of many such schemes, corruption and leakages, lack of transparency and accountability in decision making are some of the major bottlenecks in effective implementation of these schemes.

Moreover, dearth of information about available schemes, allocation of resources, and entitlements often lead to weak demand from the poor and marginalised people, who are the likely beneficiaries of these schemes.

The Indian government launched the Backward Regions Grant Fund Programme (BRGF) in February 2007, to redress the persistent regional imbalances in the development of 250 backward districts across 27 states. The programme emphasised a key role for the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).

Against this backdrop, the European Union (EU) launched the programme on "Improving Access to Information of Public Schemes in Backward Districts in India" for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) working in India. The specific objective of this programme was to help local authorities and service providers increase and improve access to information on public schemes and initiatives, in backward districts, down to the village level, throughout the planning, budgeting, implementation, control and evaluation continuum¹. It aimed to address poverty by improving governance of public schemes and services at the district level and below, so that the most vulnerable and marginalised sections could participate meaningfully and benefit from the overall decision-making process. It emphasised active and meaningful involvement of PRIs as institutions of local self-governance.

A total of 14 CSO-led projects were selected to implement the initiative during 2014-2018 with EU

¹ EU Call for Proposal.

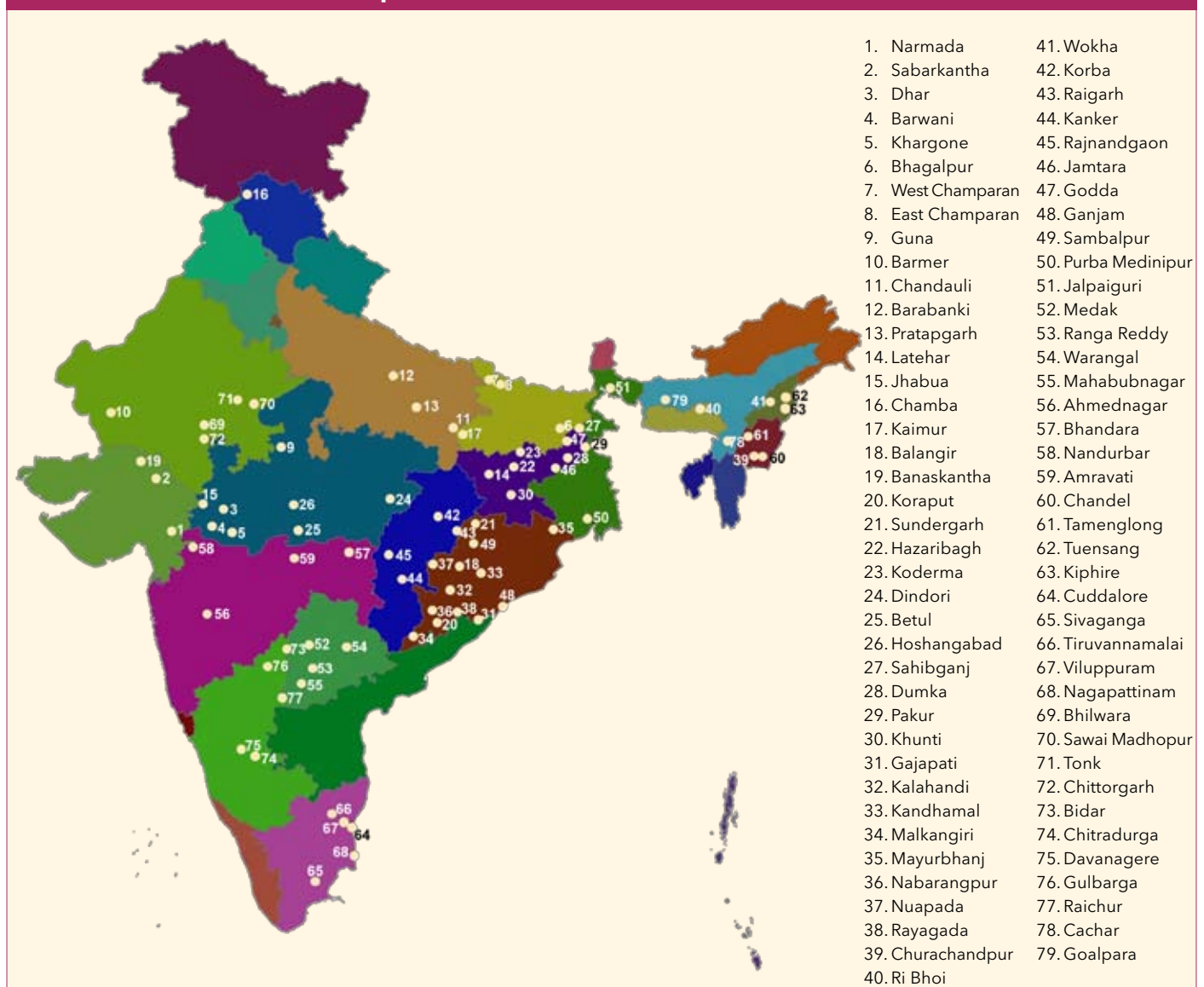
support. These 14 projects involved nearly 70 CSOs and reached out directly to people from 79 districts across 20 states. Indirectly, it might have reached out to impact four million households and 20 million people (see **Map 1**). These CSO-led projects sought to address health, education, social security and protection, livelihood promotion with participation of the beneficiaries, target groups and partners to improve governance, access and delivery, as well as transparency and accountability of the related government programmes and schemes.

In 2014, the successive new government launched a host of new programmes and schemes in addition to the earlier ones. Prominent among those were Swachh Bharat Mission - Grameen (SBM-G), Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana (PMAY), and Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana.

Some of the signature initiatives of the government included enhancing the scope of Common Service Centres, eGovernance and a unique identification number for all Indian citizens, popularly known as *Aadhaar*. It emphasised, *Jan Dhan* (bank account), *Aadhaar*, and *Mobile* (popularly known as JAM) as a mechanism for better targeting of government programme beneficiaries and direct benefit transfer (DBT) for reducing leakages.

This CSO-led initiative, as will be shown in the next section and through 14 case studies documented in this publication, is likely to leave a strong legacy in all 79 backward districts, where the projects were implemented. This programme covered 30 out of 115 Aspirational Districts, identified by the government in January 2018.

Map 1: Districts Covered Under the Initiative



The initiative to document these 14 projects came out of several deliberations among the 14 lead partners and EU officials. They felt that the strategies employed, best practices evolved, results achieved, and lessons learnt from these projects could have far reaching, positive implications for replication and scaling up. The knowledge could be used by other development practitioners, while related development policies and programmes could be enriched. One of the partners, UNNATI, took the lead and Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) was entrusted to analyse and document these case studies and distil out lessons for this purpose.

At the initiation of this documentation, a framework was developed in consultation with the EU officials and project partners focussing on contextual understanding, theory of change, and strategies that guided the project implementation. It analysed the results in terms of various outputs and major outcomes, and most importantly, the lessons learnt from each project. The case studies were documented primarily based on secondary documents such as project proposals, baseline study reports, project progress reports, research and study reports, and other publications prepared under these projects. A number of project sites were visited to interact with the local project implementation partners, beneficiaries, other stakeholders such as elected PRI representatives, district and sub-district officials, and frontline workers. The field visits provided additional insights into the programme strategies, results and impacts. In the next sections, we will discuss the programme strategies, outcomes, and lessons learnt from these interventions. Instead of drawing a definitive conclusion, we will present a few ways forward for further replication and scaling up.

STRATEGIES AND INTERVENTIONS

All 14 projects implemented under this initiative were designed on the premise that inadequate information about public programmes and schemes was responsible for the lack of demand from the most marginalised sections, which led to their lack of access to quality public services. Nonetheless, access to information was regarded as a necessary, but not sufficient condition to access public services. Along with information, the most vulnerable communities also needed their

own collectives to amplify voices and capacities to engage with governance and services—providing institutions for influencing decision making. As most projects identified accountability deficits of democratically-elected governance institutions to be one of the root causes of this scenario, efforts had to be taken to monitor the performance and conduct of the governance and service-providing institutions and their representatives. Despite elaborate institutional arrangements at the local government level, many such structures were either defunct or lacked capacities. Along with developing capacities of marginalised people and their organisations, it was imperative to sensitise and build capacities of the frontline government workers and elected representatives of PRIs. These projects acted as bridges between the marginalised communities and service providers by facilitating interface dialogues at the village, Gram Panchayat, block, district and state levels. Many such interface meetings created opportunities for learning by the officials and elected representatives to become aware of and sensitive to the bottlenecks plaguing the public service delivery. Equipped with this new knowledge and sensitivity, many of them became champions and the PRI-elected representatives enhanced their political will to address such bottlenecks. In this section, we will discuss, with examples, how multi-faceted strategies were employed by each project to improve information flow to the people and enhance access to public services for the most marginalised communities from the most backward districts in India.

1. Targeting the most marginalised and building their organisations for amplifying collective voices

Social and economic exclusion in the Indian context is often exacerbated and perpetuated by structural inequalities like castes, ethnicity, gender, and space. A large section of the Indian population experiences a double or triple burden of exclusion. A lot of them require assistance from the State and other external actors to overcome poverty and multiple deprivations to living a decent life.

In an ideal situation, public services should be available to individual citizens according to the entitlements set by the development policies, programmes, and guidelines. Failing so, an

individual citizen has the right to hold public agencies accountable for their non-performance or negligence. This is a general theory based on the 'social contract' established in a democratic governance system. However, this is far from the reality, as certain groups are often excluded from receiving public services because of their socio-demographic background or peculiar vulnerabilities arising out of stereotyped perceptions or prejudices. In such situations, collective voices of the poor and marginalised assume prominence to exact accountability.

The CSOs, for a long time, have been engaged in mobilisation and organisation building for the poor and marginalised. Multiple real-life instances suggest that when the poor and marginalised become organised, their ability to amplify voices, to demand for entitlements, and to negotiate with people and institutions in positions of power are also enhanced. Developing and nurturing local leadership to represent the voices of the people is crucial to strengthen CBOs.

These projects chose to intervene in the erstwhile BRGF districts and committed to confront the challenges of structural inequalities by working with the most excluded and vulnerable communities like Scheduled Tribes (STs), Scheduled Castes (SCs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and minorities. Several projects chose to emphasise the most vulnerable sections, such as women and children, among these excluded groups. A few projects under this initiative addressed the issues related to some "uniquely vulnerable" communities.

Most projects without exception have catalysed, strengthened, and facilitated a variety of CBOs at different levels. More often than not, these organisations have been formed at the village level with the participation of the specific target communities, such as women, children and adolescents, farmers and youth, etc. Many projects have further federated these village-level CBOs at the block or district level in order to effectively engage with the higher tier of development administration and local government institutions. Still others have federated the local groups at the state level, where intensive engagements were required with the state administrations. These CBOs were involved and eventually led a variety of project activities aimed to improve access to information and public services.

Action Aid India, in East Champaran district of Bihar, Formed the Dalit Adhikar Morcha (DAM). It extensively used the Right to Information (RTI) Act to Access relevant information and organised public hearings with government departments to act upon it. The active engagement of DAM led to electrification of hamlets inhabited by the Dalits. The social audits led by DAM member revealed discrepancies in the public distribution system (PDS), where often low-quality food was distributed to the Dalits (SCs). The DAM members raised this issues with the concerned official and actions were taken against the fair-price shop owners.

ACTED decided to work in the remote and backward districts of north-east India, which is culturally diverse and home to a large number of ethnic groups. For decades, the region's geographical isolation and lack of infrastructure adversely impacted its development outcomes. This is further compounded by the fragile security situation in the region, which prevents government services from being delivered. Many people in the region were unaware of public programmes and schemes, and the few who were aware, most often could not access them due to poor implementation.

Aragamee prioritised their interventions with landless and marginal farmers, migrant workers, and displaced communities in the remotest and most backward districts in Odisha. It formed Citizen Action Groups (CAGs) at the village and/or Gram Panchayat level. These groups coordinated community efforts for filing complaints about service deficiency and monitored responses to petitions. Regular events were organised to sensitise the CAG members and other participants on the government provisions and facilities, rules and regulations, roles and responsibilities of School Management Committees (SCMs) and Integrated Child Development Service (ICDS) committee members. At the block level, Citizen Action Forums (CAFs) were constituted as a platform of local people to demand for accountability, and engage with the existing institutional frameworks, including the Gram Sabhas and Palli Sabhas, grievance days, nutrition days, and employment guarantee day. Each CAF comprised trained youth, community leaders and one Sachetak as convener.

CESVI facilitated the formation of Backward Region Scheme Support Groups (BRSSGs) involving the existing CBOs (based on caste, gender, and occupation). Each member in the BRSSGs was chosen by the community using criteria such as their motivation and commitment towards the project aims. They were also chosen on the basis of their gender and caste to ensure that the voices of women and marginalised groups



were adequately represented. The BRSSG members were all trained on how to plan and monitor numerous schemes, as well as to strengthen relationships between the community and the concerned government officials for effective scheme implementation.

Dan-Church Aid (DCA) catalysed the formation of various citizen monitoring committees with inclusion of more than 5,000 members (around 48 per cent were women) from the excluded communities. They joined various committees like Most Significant Change Committee (MSCC), Gram Kalyan Samiti (Village Health, Nutrition, and Sanitation Committee), and MGNREGS Monitoring and Verification Committee (MVC).

Find Your Feet (FYF) formed Self Help Groups (SHGs) as the main platform for Adivasi (ST) women through the "Johar" project. It also created a network of village-level CBOs and representative platform called Tribal Rights Forums (TRFs), which would advocate Adivasi issues at various levels. These organisations enabled the local communities to access information on public services and schemes, monitor their availability and quality, and collectively engage with the government for more effective and equitable public delivery systems.

The German Leprosy & TB Relief Association India (GLRA) emphasised upholding the rights of persons with disability (PWDs) by disseminating information, generating awareness and promoting collective action to ensure that the provisions enlisted under various government schemes and programmes reached them. GLRA collectivised PWDs in the Disabled People's Group (DPG) at the village level and the Disabled People's Organisation (DPO) at the block and district level. These DPOs culminated to create five Disabled Peoples' Federations (DPFs), which were registered as independent NGOs as per their respective state laws.

The Nand & Jeet Khemka Foundation (NJKF) facilitated the formation of Village Advocacy Groups, which were then linked to Kshetriya Samitis at the block level. Through these organisations, the community members gained knowledge about various schemes and entitlements regarding education, health, and

social security and they raised their grievances to the Gram Panchayats. The Kshetriya Samitis addressed the unresolved issues and accelerated them to the block level. In addition, the District Federation was constituted to resolve cases, which required district-level intervention. In addition, it formed and trained a number of Youth Groups, which acted as bridges between the community and local administration.

Solidarity and Action against the HIV Infection in India (SAATHII) worked with the persons living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) particularly among rural populations, SCs, STs, women and children, and other socially marginalised groups. It also worked with gay, lesbian and transgender communities, and female sex workers. All these groups are terribly stigmatised in Indian society and, therefore, remain invisible. The marginality that these groups face forces them to withdraw from entitlements, which is rightfully theirs.

UNNATI has worked with Dalits, local indigenous communities and persons with disabilities in Gujarat and Rajasthan. In each project location, it has facilitated the formation of the Gram Vikas Samiti as an inclusive institution to represent the voices and demands of the most marginalised communities.

In addition to forming organisations of the marginalised, a number of projects trained and groomed individual community members, variously called as Citizen Leaders, Nagrik Mitras, Sachetaks, etc. For example, Agramee trained local youth to play a key role at Gram Panchayat and block levels. The young women and men who showed clear leadership abilities were identified as Sachetaks (change agents) to spread awareness, initiate and



through effective engagement. Citizens require information on government policies and processes, on the standards of service and governance they can expect, on budgets and annual expenditures, on targets for services being provided, and on the actual performance achieved. This information can be categorised into two sets: that which needs revision each year (e.g., performance) and that which is revised when it changes (e.g., policies).

One of the main strategies that the projects undertook was establishing an institutional mechanism, which could access, collate, simplify, and disseminate information related to public programmes, schemes, services, and entitlements of people in general and vulnerable individuals and groups, in particular. The projects together used four salient strategies to address the information deficits: (a.) setting up information resource centres using various names as appropriate to the context and locality; (b.) organising campaigns for information dissemination at a scale; (c.) using Information Communication Technology (ICT) appropriate to the rural communities; and (d.) use of the Right to Information (RTI) Act. In this section, we will discuss these strategies with examples.

(a) Information centres

Several projects established information centres to provide information and a host of other services to the communities. They have been known by various names such as Common Service Centres or CSCs (ACTED and CESVI), Information Resource Centres or IRCs (Action Aid India and UNNATI), Block Information Centres or BICs (Aragamee), Nagrik Soochna Kendra or NSK (AKRSP-I), Soochna Seva Kendras or SSKs (DEF), Community Information & Resource Centre or CIRC (PRADAN). DCA activated the defunct Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendras (RGSKs), which are renamed as Atal Seva Kendras.

These centres disseminated information to the local communities on various public programmes and schemes. It provided hands-on support to the community members to fill in various scheme application forms in hard copies as well as online forms. The centres kept service provider handbooks, application forms, brochures, leaflets, posters and government circulars related to various schemes for ready reference and dissemination.

In addition, most centres equipped with laptops/computers, internet, camera, projectors, etc., provided basic digital services such as photocopying, printing,

facilitate community actions. PRADAN identified and trained Community Resource Persons (CRPs) or *Sangh Sathis* to catalyse the formation of Village Level Committees (VLCs), which supported as well as monitored activities of the Gram Panchayats. The CRPs trained the VLC members on how to involve the community in planning and monitoring various government schemes, and beneficiary identification. Similarly, SAATHI trained CRPs to identify and support PLWHAs. The CRPs supported the PLWHAs in filing applications and followed up with or helped the concerned community members to follow up with the relevant departments for approval and access.

2. Accessing and disseminating information for generating awareness and demand

A pervasive lack of access to information among the poor and marginalised in rural India is one of the major obstacles to access public services and provisions. Development interventions were designed to enable accessing public services

scanning, stationary services, etc. Some of the centres provided additional services like facilitating applications for Permanent Account Number (PAN) cards, Aadhaar and passports. Some even had an internet café to facilitate personal communication through e-mails, social media, etc. Others provided opportunities for distance education, online skilling, and online entertainment. Some centres provided application forms for scholarships, various examinations and loan applications, etc.

The projects thought about the sustainability of these centres. For example, for the IRCs established by Action Aid India, the community themselves took the responsibility of running them through full-time volunteers. The NSKs established by AKRSP (I) at the block level are now extended as Gram Panchayat level information centres for their citizens. This ensured sustainability of the NSKs.

These centres were also an attempt to foster local entrepreneurship to encourage financial sustainability. The services were provided at subsidised cost to ensure the self-sustenance of the centres.

Some of these also became important centres for data collection for future use as well as meaningful analysis. For examples, UNNATI added Information Clinics (ICs) as a component of IRCs for providing information to people on a case-to-case basis and addressing specific bottlenecks. The ICs operated for two hours every morning and systematically collected names, contact information and individual problems when people visited the ICs. Each individual was provided advice on the next steps, including eligibility for specific schemes, provisions, application processes and any specific bottlenecks they might face. Simultaneously, the information put up on government websites or portals was checked for the person's eligibility, entitlement, application, or payment status. A printed copy is given to the person with instructions on how to use it. When the person needed to go to the e-mitra, bank, service provider or administrative personnel for the next steps, a self-explanatory application/ note of the requirement was provided. The person was asked to come back to the IC and report what happened, and bring the receipt of application so that follow-ups could be undertaken. The SSKs established by DEF made it a practice to keep a hard and soft copy of the forms and details of the community members with themselves. This was a very useful practice because the community members often lost/misplaced their government documents.

(b) Information campaigns

Each project extensively used a variety of Information Education and Communication (IEC) materials for

disseminating information. These included posters, pictorial booklets, handouts, newsletters, wall paintings and audio-visual documents. The mode of communication was deliberately kept simple and made to suit the regional context, culture, and language. Creative media such as *Nukkad Nataks/ Kala Jathas* (street plays), documentary films, puppet shows and other traditional media were used for better communication.

Some of the projects used weekly *haats* (local markets) for disseminating information to the public. Attracting people with bright tunes and folk songs on a megaphone, they broadcasted information on the different government programmes and schemes in the market place, frequented by people in large numbers. The response was immediate and significant. Hundreds of people wanted to know about the schemes and flocked to the makeshift tents for information. While their queries were answered, they were also advised to contact the programme personnel, or visit the information centres. Leaflets and pamphlets were distributed to those who were interested to know more. Some organised Right to Education (RTE) rallies to raise awareness about the Act, and the roles and responsibilities of School Management Committees (SMCs).

Innovative and traditional communication materials, usually in the form of India's oral tradition of giving information through songs, stories and theatre, were used and collated as case materials. For instance, in a particular *Gram Sabha*, the Gram Panchayat secretary read out all information about benefits of schemes, budgets, expenditure, MGNREGS works and payments, using folk lyrics, folk songs and even connections to various incidents in that Panchayat, as a medium of disseminating information. Explaining complicated issues through folk songs is a popular oral tradition among rural communities, especially among women.

Welthungerhilfe and its partners used Community Radio programmes with a localised name, Dahar Pahunche Khabar, for communicating relevant information. Community volunteers were trained on the Community Radio programme to work in their respective villages. It worked very well in interior villages to make the community aware of their rights and entitlements.

Social security camps, organised by NJKF, proved to be one of the most effective tools of disseminating information and reaching out to the community. Apart from generating awareness about the schemes

and identifying eligible beneficiaries, these camps helped people understand the documentation process and also helped them in case of any missing documents. These camps aided in solving many pending cases.

NJKF also used *Jan-Samwad Rath*, which has been a popular method of information dissemination. This was a simple mobile vehicle equipped with easy-to-read and useful IEC materials and audio messages on health, education, and social security, which went around villages. It acted as a useful starter for further discussions and deliberations among the community members. The remote and dense locations were covered through *Cycle pe Soochna* initiative, which made mobility, outreach and access more flexible. Similarly, DEF used *Soochna Vahan*, which was equipped with a laptop, sound system, LCD, projector, screen, power back-up, printer, tablet, scheme bank, phone sathi and *Soochna Sevaks* for community engagement. It provided services related to online and offline public entitlements and grievances.

(c) Use of ICT

A number of projects used Information Communication Technology (ICT) tools to disseminate information. These projects demonstrated how synergy between technology and governance process can ease access to information for the citizens. Mobile phone technology was used to promote awareness and disseminating information to the rural communities. These services provided information related to government schemes, plans and budget allocation in the project area. These included simple SMS, Interactive Voice Response System (IVRS), and tele-helplines.

The 'Haqdarshak App' developed by PRADAN and 'MeraApp' developed by DEF helped people to learn about their due entitlements while facilitating application through these android-based mobile apps. DEF recruited and trained 200 information entrepreneurs (Soochna Preneurs), of whom 100 were females, who provided information services and entitlement using MeraApp in project locations. DEF prepared a Yojana Bank and made it available through Mera App. The SSKs made Mera App available to the communities through a big-screen tablet on a podium. MeraApp provided easy access to various guidelines and forms related to state and Central government schemes. It regularly played scheme-related videos, songs and jingles.

(d) Use of RTI Act

Most projects used RTI extensively to access information about public programmes and schemes and their performances. Each project oriented a large number of people on the provisions under the RTI Act and provided hands-on support on how to write an application seeking specific information.

For example, AKRSP-I trained the elected Gram Panchayat members and supported them to implement the provisions under the RTI Act, especially the pro-active disclosure of information. Key provisions of the RTI Act were translated into the local languages and displayed at various public places like the Gram Panchayat offices, local schools and local health centres through IEC materials such as posters, wall writing and signboards.

UNNATI used pro-active disclosure of information systematically to make information available to the community. It is obligatory under Section 4.1 (b) of the RTI Act, 2005, for any public authority to pro-actively disclose information. Gram Panchayats were facilitated to improve information disclosures in terms of content, format and placement. These included details of services, category-wise list of beneficiaries, programme-level committees, enrolment and attendance of children, works and expenditure, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and Gram Panchayat plans, and list of private hospitals affiliated under the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY), etc. The community was encouraged to demand explanation and act on the basis of disclosed information.

3. Participatory planning for setting up development priorities

For decades, development planning has been top-down, expert-driven and an opaque exercise. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act - 73rd CAA (aka Part XI of the Indian Constitution) entrusted the PRIs to prepare development plans at the Gram Panchayat level with the participation of Gram Sabha members. It was envisaged that the plan prepared by the Gram Panchayat will be integrated at the Panchayat Samiti (or Block/Taluka Panchayat) level and the Panchayat Samiti level plans will be consolidated by the Zilla Parishad at the district level. These consolidated plans will form the basis for preparing District Perspective Plans and will be implemented on an annual

basis. The reality of bottom-up planning by the PRIs is far from the constitutional vision across the country, barring a few states and districts. Lack of capacities of PRI members, entrenched structural inequalities in the society, elite capture of decision making at the local level, and at times lack of political will to devolve authorities to PRIs by the Central and state governments, have weakened the local planning process. The participation of the most marginalised groups such as women, children, people with disabilities, SCs and STs in local planning and decisionmaking processes have remained dismal.

A number of projects, under this initiative, have made earnest efforts to strengthen the local planning process with participation from the marginalised communities. Many projects tried innovative methods and tools to nurture participation to both complement and supplement the Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, and Zilla Parishad level development planning. A significant departure in many such exercises was the acknowledgement and deeper understanding of power differences within rural society and devising strategies to transform the power relationships in favour of the hitherto excluded communities and social groups. The formation and strengthening of a variety of new and existing CBOs focussing on the most vulnerable people and nurturing their leadership became a new axis to challenge the established power structures. The participatory planning exercises, thus, transcended from a mere technical exercise to a deep societal transformation process.

Action Aid India, initiated Participatory Village Development Planning across its project sites. It used Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools, particularly Social and Resource Mapping, which helped the villagers to prepare Village Development Plans (VDPs) based on the existing resources. The well-being analysis helped the villagers to identify the physical and social infrastructures in the village and assess which communities' have access to and control over such resources and who have benefitted the most. This new awareness motivated the most marginalised people in the village to articulate their development needs and aspirations. Facilitating participatory VDPs has been a powerful exercise to ensure inclusion of the most marginalised in village-level decision making. The development priorities of these marginalised and vulnerable people were reflected in the formal



Gram Panchayat planning processes, which not only empowered them, but also held the elected PRI members and government functionaries accountable. The interfaces facilitated between citizens and Gram Panchayats as well as line department officials helped in unleashing public resources worth several crores to undertake development work in those villages.

Similarly, in AKRSP (I) project sites, the Gram Panchayat members were trained to develop micro-plans using various PRA tools with active participation of the villagers. The presence of at least 50 per cent women for the planning meetings was made mandatory. Trainings on financial management, resource mobilisation and other government norms and processes were organised to enhance the capacity of the PRI members to be able to anchor the process of village-level planning and implementation.

A number of projects worked with Vidyalaya Shiksha Samitis (VSSs) or School Management Committees (SMCs) to prepare School Development Plans (SDPs) in a timely manner. A precursor to preparing the SDPs was to train the school teachers as well as members of the VSSs/SMCs. For example, the NJKF-led project in Bhagalpur, Bihar, assisted the preparation of SDPs in 784 schools.



4. Use of social accountability for enhanced transparency and answerability

The traditional institutional accountability system has shown its limitations to hold the 'duty bearers' to be accountable to the 'rights holders'. Often the absence of answerability and a lack of enforcement jeopardises the existing accountability mechanism. As a result, well-intended public service delivery programmes and schemes often fail to reach the very people for whom they were designed. A lack of transparency in the decision making with regard to resource allocation, planning, delivery, and monitoring by the line department officials, PRI-elected representatives, and frontline functionaries

hinders access to public services and programmes by the poor and marginalised people.

In the last two decades, primarily through the efforts of CSOs and citizen associations, social accountability has emerged as a complementary accountability mechanism. At the core of social accountability is the ability of citizens to hold governance institutions accountable and improve their performance through a broad range of actions, including promoting access to information, monitoring the performance and conduct of public institutions, engaging public institutions through interface dialogues to improve their responsiveness, and promoting organised citizen participation in actual resource allocation decision-making. These actions help public institutions and citizens to recognise their mutual responsibility in promoting just and democratic governance.

An integral part of accountability mechanism is a functional Grievance Redressal System. Most service delivery mechanisms have systems for grievance redressal. However, a predominant share of the citizens are completely unaware of these provisions regarding where, when, and how to

Social Accountability Tools

The Citizen Report Card (CRC) is typically a participatory household level survey capturing user feedback on performance of public services, especially on coverage, quality and effectiveness. The feedback is shared with the service providers with the aim of improving various aspects of service delivery.

The Community Score Card (CSC) is a community-based monitoring tool in which the community is taken as unit of analysis. It focuses on monitoring at the local facility level (e.g. health centre or school) and links service providers to the community.

The Social Audit (SA) is a process of systematically collecting and reviewing official records and determining whether reported expenditures by a public agency reflect the actual monies spent on the ground. Typically, the findings are reviewed in a Public Hearing where the community and representatives of the public agency are present.

lodge grievances and, in case of non-action, which next level to approach. Little care is taken to analyse and ascertain the factors that first of all result in the grievances, and accordingly amend and rationalise processes to reduce the number and patterns of the grievances.

A number of projects under this initiative used a variety of social accountability methods and tools to exact accountability from the officials and elected representatives. These tools included Citizen Report Card, Community Score Card, social audit, community-based monitoring, and public hearing, among others. These accountability tools helped citizens, particularly the marginalised populace, to gather information on the performance of various institutions in terms of making public services and programmes accessible according to the standard of entitlements. Post information gathering, the citizens have engaged with the respective public institutions such as government departments, PRIs, and other service provisioning agencies by presenting the realities in service gaps as well as discussing the ways to improve access to services.

The project implemented by ACTED was premised on the assumption that the use of social accountability tools like CRC and CSC will elicit feedback on the performance of existing public schemes and assess the needs of the communities in a participatory manner. The information and insights generated through these participatory exercises would then be incorporated into the formulation of District Action Plans (DAPs) as the basis for improving the public service delivery.

UNNATI facilitated Community-Based Monitoring (CBM) using pictorial charts that provided information to people on available entitlements and recorded the

status of access. This provided the community with authentic data and evidences of the status of public services so that they could demand accountability. It facilitated local action for improvement and supported evidence-based advocacy for redressal of grievances. The members of the community, along with citizen leaders, undertook several thousand local actions for improving the delivery of the public programmes, promoting citizen participation in Gram Sabhas and popularising social accountability through public programme monitoring and information disclosure. Most issues were redressed at the local level, while some requiring administrative reforms needed to be taken up at the district or state level. It became evident that when the community begins monitoring public services, the frontline workers become vigilant, resulting in improved delivery.

The use of social audits and public hearings led to an improvement in the quality of work and enhanced enrolment of people and immediate release of due wages under MGNREGA across the project sites. Other positive outcomes included the release of pensions, public display of budgets and expenditures in PRIs, enhanced re-enrolment of drop-out students. These had greater impacts on education like recruitment of teachers, improvement in the quality of mid-day meals, provision of toilets and water facilities. It also led to more people getting access to ration cards, food security, disability pensions and old age pensions, among other benefits.

Along with using the social accountability tools, a good number of projects realised that information asymmetry as one of the main barriers to access public programmes and schemes. People were unaware of their entitlements under various flagship

development programmes of the Central and state governments. These projects used the RTI Act extensively to access information from government agencies. Despite the existence of the RTI Act since 2005, a large number of rural people were ignorant about how RTI could help them to bring transparency in local governance and public administration, and hold public officials accountable. The project highlighted the use of RTI as an effective strategy to access information from the government agencies regarding resource allocations to development programmes and holding them accountable for its appropriate utilisation. The discrepancies, if any, were brought to the notices of government officials and through dialogues relevant actions were demanded.

5. Capacity building of PRIs and service providers for effective responses

The PRIs as institutions of self-governance are in closest proximity to local communities. The PRIs are mandated to plan, implement, and oversee a number of public programmes and schemes for ensuring inclusive development. Over the years, many measures have been taken by both the government and CSOs to strengthen capacities of the democratically-elected PRI representatives, so that they can fulfil their mandated roles and responsibilities effectively. However, given the enormity of the demand and the dynamic nature of these institutions, more often than not, the supply of capacity building has fallen exceedingly low. Despite the fact that new public programmes and schemes have been launched by the Central as well as state governments and PRIs have been entrusted with implementing responsibilities, commensurate capacity building efforts have not been taken seriously.

Most projects under this initiative have identified this as a major gap in local capacities and made efforts to strengthen the capacities of the elected PRI representatives in planning, implementing and monitoring. Many projects prioritised the women-elected representatives and those from the SC and ST communities.

The AKRSP (I) project developed capacities of the Gram Panchayat-elected representatives, especially

the Elected Women Representatives (EWRs), on participatory planning and monitoring. The outcomes of the participatory processes led by the community leaders provided a firm ground for the Gram Sabha to have an informed discussion. Skills were built on conducting participatory social audits as mandated by several government programmes such as National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), MGNREGA, and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). The project also facilitated the formation of EWR forums at the block level. Collectivisation has been a core element of the initiative, and a forum at the block level helped in providing platform for the EWRs to organise themselves, share their learning and advocate for common causes. Considering that the block is the intermediary administrative level for convergence as part of the local governance function, it played a strategic role in consolidating EWRs to collectively represent themselves for advocacy and action.

Across the country, participation of women in *Gram Sabhas* remains abysmal. Many projects used special *Mahila Sabhas* as critical events in the community for raising women's issues. The projects ensured that the *Mahila Sabha* meet immediately before every *Gram Sabha* to identify and prioritise their needs and concerns regarding their entitlements and public services. For example, in AKRSP (I) sites, the women PRI members and the members of *Mahila Mandals* and SHGs participated in the *Mahila Sabhas*. The EWRs could use this forum for advocacy, awareness, and sensitisation of women in the community towards their entitlements. It created a platform for them to further take up these issues for advocacy with *Mahila Mandals*.

These 14 projects across locations have organised numerous training and capacity building programmes for PRI members and other frontline workers (such as ASHA workers, Auxiliary Nurse Midwifery or ANMs, *Anganwadi* workers, *Gram Sevaks*, *Rojgar Sevaks*, among others) on preparation of Gram Panchayat Development Plans, Economic Literacy and Budget Accountability, RTE, RTI, NRHM, MGNREGA, etc. In all these training programmes, their roles and responsibilities were clarified and skills were developed on community engagements. In Rajasthan, UNNATI collaborated with the Department of Information Technology (DoIT) to orient all Common Service Centre operators in Barmer district on the provisions of different public

programmes along with navigating their websites and portals to ensure entitlements to the people.

An interesting initiative under the NJKF led project was the celebration of *Protsahna Diwas* in different blocks of the district. It invited and appreciated PRI members and frontline workers, who managed to achieve 90 per cent coverage under various social security schemes. The felicitation event motivated and incentivised positive action among the PRI functionaries.

Ensuring self-governance of areas with local indigenous communities, the parliament accorded special powers to the Panchayats through the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act - PESA, 1996. The projects, which were implemented in districts dominated by local indigenous communities, an overarching focus was given on implementing PESA in its true spirit. The autonomies to manage subjects such as management of natural resources, local planning, and protection of customs, culture and tradition along with complete autonomy to establish the process and system of customary mode of dispute resolution were incorporated in these districts.

A number of projects used innovative technology to improve the governance quality of various service delivery programmes and schemes. The uniqueness of these initiatives was the involvement and capacity building of frontline workers.

NJKF experimented with the Swasthya Slate and Health Cube for the betterment of maternal and child health (MCH). The technology was fairly handy and significantly improved the status of MCH by capacitating the frontline health workers for efficient health service delivery, especially addressing Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) and Infant Mortality Rate (IMR). The positive impact paved the way for scalability, replicability and acceptability, thereafter. Swasthya Slate is a mobile tablet attached to a device that enables frontline health workers to conduct 13 diagnostic tests² for prevention, diagnosis, care and referral of diseases. It is also equipped with a GPS and camera features, which enable location tracking and photographs of the patient can also be taken for future references. The device is both wireless as well as 3G enabled. The ANMs upload information after performing all the tests

on the Swasthya Slate portal. The data can be viewed online by other higher-level officials at the Primary Health Centres (PHCs). The same process is carried out for the same pregnant women for her second and third Ante Natal Care (ANC) services. The convenience, cost-effectiveness and flexibility of this pilot project indicates its positive potential for scalability. The Swasthya Slate enabled point-of-care diagnosis at the doorsteps for women. The device is portable, quick and easy to use and facilitates quick results with minimum efforts and mistakes. It has empowered the health workers by making them technology and internet friendly. The SwasthyaSlate devices can also identify high-risk pregnancies in a timely fashion and refer it with timely action and medical care. The Panchayats with Swasthya Slates depicted significant improvement in spreading awareness about the importance of antenatal and post-natal check-ups as reflected by higher registration of women. Additionally, the large number of administered tests indicate that ANC and Post Natal Care (PNC) services are being conducted regularly.

The Welthungerhilfe project used a web-based monitoring and tracking tool developed by AKVO to digitise the preparation and monitoring processes of SDPs. This tool was used to monitor different processes and outcomes like regular attendance of school teachers, provision of mid-day meals and school infrastructure. In addition, the 'Mobile for Mother' (MfM) technology, was intended to transform the age-old manual system of data tracking into a digitalised platform. The ASHA workers tracked pregnant women using the MfM application and followed up with ANC and PNC services. The application helped to reduce multiple formats of reporting and streamlined the government Management Information System (MIS). The Sahaiyyas referred to the app as a step-by-step



² These tests include: blood pressure, blood sugar, blood group, urine protein, temperature, pulse, haemoglobin, HIV, Hepatitis-B, pregnancy, syphilis, malaria and several other biometric tests.

counselling tool. Critical cases could be tracked easily by referring block level facilities. The mobile phone, a part of the MfM, was used to reach out to Mamta Vahans and ANMs during emergency.

6. Facilitating interfaces and dialogues between community and governance institutions for greater effectiveness

The projects under this initiative emphasised the importance of bringing the community and governance institutions for dialogue and interface meetings so that each side could share their perceptions, experiences, and expectations for improving access to services. These interface meetings were used for seeking accountability of the government officials and elected PRI representatives in a non-threatening environment. Instead of blaming each other, these interface meetings emerged as platforms for problem solving.

ACTED organised Regional and District Forums by bringing together CSOs, citizens and government officials. These platforms provided opportunities for all participants to discuss their contexts and problems, while opening the window for solutions and recommendations that would help them. For example, the deputy district commissioner proposed to set up a rehabilitation centre for the PWDs in Ri-Bhoi district, a change that was brought up because of the social inclusion workshop conducted in the district.

The NJKF project set up a steering committee at the district level by bringing government-line departments and the district magistrate (DM) chairing the project steering committee meetings. It initiated a district-level task force to address the health service delivery.

Aragamee organised several state and district-level consultations. Besides sharing information and seeking cooperation from the stakeholders during the consultations, these events were a great opportunity to showcase best practices. These consultations facilitated interactions between people, Panchayat-elected representatives (including Zilla Parishad chairpersons), government officials, legislators, subject matter specialists and NGOs. Participation of women was given special attention in these events.

Under the CESVI project, the BRSSG members were encouraged to share their knowledge, issues and challenges among themselves, scheme experts, Panchayat officials as well as government officials,

through state and district-level conferences. The primary aim of organising such conferences was to build a platform that would go beyond the taluk and village-based discussions, while creating new opportunities for BRSSG members to interact with decision makers at the state and district levels. Participants were also motivated to discuss their stories as well as their planning strategies. By opening the closed doors of communication to the higher level of governance, BRSSG members were further motivated to improve their own communities.

As a part of SAATHII project, sensitisation meetings and strengthening support visits were organised with the state, district and block-level government departments. These meetings and visits helped to update the government departments on the progress of the project activities related to PLWHA, follow-up on previously submitted applications, invite officials for advocacy events, secure support letters from State AIDS Control Societies (SACS) and District AIDS Prevention Control Unit (DAPCU), and obtain approval copy of the schemes from various departments. The project organised sharing workshops at the state, district and block levels.

SIGNIFICANT OUTCOMES

The projects achieved a considerable number of positive outcomes, which are highlighted in the following section.

1. Improved access to information and services

The projects, spread across varied locations, provided information on how to access public programmes and schemes and in case of any grievance, how to communicate the same to the concerned authorities. The facilitation provided by each project to navigate the complex bureaucratic procedures contributed to an increased number of applications, follow-ups, and eventually access to services. The projects targeted numerous such public programmes related to health, education, and each programme experienced improvements in enrolment, access and benefits.

2. Enhanced community participation, especially participation of women

The awareness generation, organisation building and capacity building interventions undertaken

by the projects, contributed to significant increase in community participation. The people not only participated in project activities, but also in the affairs of PRIs. A number of projects worked with women SHGs and facilitated their participation in a specially convened *Mahila Sabha*. Equipped with information and new awareness, these women attended the *Gram Sabhas*, and influenced the decision making processes for development planning. A lot of them also participated in social audits, public hearings, and other interface meetings.

3. Increased accountability of the frontline government functionaries and PRI members

The enhanced engagement of the community members in planning, using social accountability tools, and in other deliberative forums such as *Gram Sabha* and other interactions, contributed to accountability from the government officials, particularly the frontline officials and PRI-elected members. They became sensitised and responded positively to the community's needs and demands. The erstwhile defunct PRI committees and committees related to monitoring of government programmes became active and started proactive monitoring of service quality, availability and accessibility by the poor and marginalised.

4. Bridged the digital divide

As discussed in the earlier section, a number of projects utilised the government's eGovernance and Digital India programmes. In fact, many projects experienced the shortcomings of technology without any human intermediation, particularly in remote locations with excluded communities. Nevertheless, these projects demonstrated how a functional, human-technology interface and intermediation can effectively bridge the digital divide. As a result, local communities became aware and capable of using a range of digital platforms for accessing services and communicating grievances.

WAYS FORWARD

The projects discussed above have clearly demonstrated that generation of demands through

community organisation building, awareness and information; community participation in local planning, monitoring and oversight; capacity building of PRI-elected representatives and frontline government functionaries; and facilitating dialogues and communications between community and service providers can all enhance access to public programmes and schemes for the marginalised and vulnerable people. The formidable outcomes achieved by using significant strategies could be replicated as a package because of their synergistic nature. However, depending on the context, scale and aspiration, the use of various combinations can also be an option. In this section, we will highlight some possible ways to replicate and scale up the lessons learnt from these interventions.

1. Scaling up access to information and services through CSCs

Access to information by the rural communities, in an intelligible manner, is an absolute prerequisite to improve access to public programmes and services. The responsibility for information dissemination function can be played by the CSCs, also called the *Atal Seva Kendras*, in a massive scale. Under the CSC 2.0, launched by the Government of India in 2015, at least one CSC would be established in each of the 2.5-lakh Gram Panchayats in the country. These CSCs were supposed to be integrated into a single platform with the existing 1.5-lakh CSCs. These CSCs are envisaged as one-stop centres to provide a host of ICT-based Government-to-Citizen (G2C) and Business-to-Citizen (B2C) services.

The EU-supported projects demonstrated how the existing digital divide can be bridged effectively by strengthening an ICT-based information centre and adding an extension function through trained and qualified citizen volunteers or staff. To maximise the outreach and benefits of CSCs to the citizens, along with technology, the community members need to be aware of the available services. In addition, many projects focussed on capacity building of frontline government functionaries including the CSC operators. Such capacity building efforts have contributed to enormous improvement in people's experience of CSC functioning and the sensitive behaviour of government officials.

2. Engaging civil society organisations for enabling community engagements

Many of the strategies adopted by these projects are not unique CSO-led interventions. These strategies have been planned by many public programmes and schemes. However, because of many institutional bottlenecks and lack of capacities, the government functionaries often fail in their pursuit. Engaging CSOs in facilitating community engagement through awareness raising, participatory planning, social accountability and community monitoring made a lot of differences. The CSOs are uniquely positioned to play the intermediation function by facilitating dialogues and communication between the community and government functionaries, including PRI representatives, which is critical to improve effectiveness and accountability.

The projects having confronted the challenges of how well-meaning public programmes get entangled in procedural uncertainties and confusion came up with innovative solutions at the Gram Panchayat, block and district levels. This enabled services becoming accessible by the communities and helped in building the confidence of frontline government functionaries.

A critical factor that needs to be addressed is the capacity building of CSOs to continue this intermediation function. These projects created considerable learning opportunities for a range of civil society groups and contributed to enhance their perspectives, knowledge and skills. Investment in such capacity building efforts through training, mentoring, coaching and learning visits must be supported.

In addition, partnership with CSOs for periodic research and evaluation for measuring the effectiveness and impact of government programmes and policies should be considered. A timely feedback and knowledge of implementation

and procedural bottlenecks as well as what is working well on the ground can be a valuable input in decision making by policy makers, policy managers and implementing agencies.

3. Building capacities and linkages with PRIs

The PRIs have been envisaged as institutions of local self-governance and are entrusted with planning, implementing and monitoring a considerable number of government programmes and schemes. The Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) Guidelines, 2018, clearly delineated these roles for Gram Panchayats, Panchayat Samitis and Zilla Parishads. It emphasised the role of *Gram Sabhas* and other working and standing committees of PRIs. The GPDP Guidelines acknowledges the role of CBOs including SHGs and their federations as institutions of the poor and marginalised in the planning and implementation of interventions for economic development and social justice. For example, the responsibilities of the SHG network listed in the National Rural Livelihood Mission framework include participating actively in *Gram Sabhas* and other forums of Panchayats, providing feedback through community-based monitoring, and supporting Gram Panchayats in their development initiatives and planning exercises.

However, in reality a large number of Gram Panchayat-elected representatives lack understanding and capacities to implement these guidelines in letter and spirit. The projects, therefore, aimed at building capacities of PRI members, activating the committees, and strengthening the *Gram Sabhas*. The positive outcomes contributed to enhanced access to government programmes and schemes by the community members. The future interventions must take this lesson into account and strive for building capacities of PRIs to establish and nurture linkages with SHGs, their federations and other CBOs.

CASE STUDIES



IMPROVING ACCESS TO INFORMATION and Delivery of Public Schemes in Remote and Backward Districts of Northeast India

A project implemented by **ACTED** in partnership with:
• North East India Committee on Relief and Development • Public Affairs Centre

“

I am very happy that now people are aware about my CSC and come for different information relation to the social schemes; it is building the knowledge and capacity of the community, and is also increasing my income up to 15%.

”

Mr. Bahadur
*in his Common Service Centre
near Durga Mandir, Goalpara
Town, Assam State*

THE CONTEXT

The North Eastern region of India, comprising eight states, is culturally diverse and home to a large number of ethnic groups. For decades, the region's geographical isolation and lack of infrastructure have adversely impacted its development outcomes. This is further compounded by the fragile security situation in the region, which prevents government services from being delivered. This puts the local population in a double jeopardy, as many of the people are unaware of pre-existing development programmes and schemes; while the few who are aware, are most often unable to access these services due to poor implementation.

In this context, ACTED, in partnership with North East India Committee on Relief and Development (NEICORD) and Public Affairs Centre (PAC), implemented a project on "Improving Access to Information and Delivery of Public Schemes in Remote and Backward Districts of Northeast India" during January 2014 to March 2018. The project was supported by the European Union (EU) and implemented in 232 villages across the Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya, the Wokha district of Nagaland, and the Cachar and Goalpara districts of Assam.¹ The project aimed at enhancing delivery of government schemes

¹ The original ambit of the project was to work in seven backward districts of five North Eastern states. However, for a variety of reasons, in 2017, the project partners reduced the coverage area of the project to these four districts with a target of reaching out to 650,000 households across 232 villages.



for the benefit of the local population. As a result, the project brought together government officials, civil society organisations (CSOs), Self-Help Groups (SHGs), citizen leaders, village volunteers, community members, citizen reporters, media organisations, micro-entrepreneurs, private service providers/companies, and members of elected Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).

The project focused on improving the delivery of 10 key public schemes² and services, mainly related to health, education, livelihood, food security, women and child development, rural development, and agriculture. The project trained the communities on how to use the Right to Information (RTI) Act and helped them to sign up for *Adhaar*, a key requirement to access many of these schemes.

The massive exercise required a wide range of intervention strategies, such as facilitating CRCs and CSCs, developing information pamphlets and handbooks, organising meetings with all stakeholders, conducting workshops with concerned individuals, and training members of the local population to help spread awareness and help their community sign up for the schemes.

A major aspect of the project revolved around **using social accountability tools** to identify various gaps, which hinder delivery of the scheme benefits. The two major tools used were the CRC and CSC. Both employed qualitative and quantitative analysis of the community's feedback on the services they received; however, these tools followed distinctly different methodologies and approaches.

The first CRC was conducted in 2014 across seven districts and covered 10 schemes. A total of 2,542 households were surveyed. The report showed that awareness about the schemes and quality of services varied significantly from one district to another, and from one scheme to the next. For example, when asked about the RGGVY scheme, citizens from Cachar and Goalpara complained about the difficulties in getting the sanctions necessary for

² These 10 schemes included: Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram (JSSK); Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS); Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY); Mid-Day Meal (MDM); Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee (MGNREG); Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY); Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM); Rajiv Gandhi Grameen Vidyutikaran Yojana (RGGVY); National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP); and Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS).

and ensuring accountability by improving access to quality information on these public schemes and service delivery mechanisms. The project especially focused on improving the living conditions of the most remote communities and socially excluded groups with particular attention to women.

THEORY OF CHANGE AND STRATEGIES

The project was premised on the assumption that the use of social accountability tools like Citizen Report Card (CRC) and Community Score Card (CSC) will elicit feedback on the performance of existing public schemes and assess the unmet needs of the communities in a participatory manner. The information and insights generated through these participatory exercises would then be incorporated into the formulation of District Action Plans (DAPs) as the basis for improving public service delivery.

Achieving these results would require the involvement and commitment of numerous key individuals and organisations, working together

obtaining an electricity connection, while citizens in Churachandpur and Wokha reported paying bribes to the staff during installation. Some of the main grievances commonly listed by the community were to do with lack of awareness, confusion surrounding the application processes to access these schemes, corruption and bribery, lack of any feedback mechanism and inefficient service delivery.

The second CRC was conducted in 2016, for which a total of 2,734 households in 200 villages across seven districts were surveyed. It was found that overall awareness levels of the target schemes had increased between the first and second CRCs, leading to higher enrolment rates. However, since there were more enrolments, the number of citizens expressing dissatisfaction at the quality of service also increased (except for some schemes like SBM and RGGVY). This may also reflect the fact that the quality of services was still inadequate and left a lot to be desired. However, at the same time, tangible improvements were observed, such as the IAY scheme, where the main type of houses built were changed from mud housing to brick housing in all districts, except Chandel and Churachandpur (where mud houses are still very commonly used).

Two CSCs were conducted over the course of the project. The first round of CSC was conducted in 2015 in 14 blocks across seven districts, which were attended by a total of 543 community members (including 239 women and 87 persons from minority groups) from the 200 selected villages. Members from marginalised sections of the community (women and minority groups) were especially selected so that their voices could be reflected in the overall score and their specific needs could be highlighted and addressed. To enable this, three performance ratings on each scheme were given separately by each group (women, minority groups and the general population). In five of the districts, only two groups gave scores (women and the general population) since a large chunk of the population in these districts were from the minority groups themselves.

In the group discussions, they were asked to rate the performance of concerned government and Gram Panchayat officials on a scale of 0 to 5 (5 being the highest level of satisfaction) for the 10 targeted schemes. These scores were based on understanding the difficulties in applying for the scheme, the

Citizen Report Card (CRC) is an assessment where interactions are held directly with the community to understand the knowledge and the accessibility they have to the services, as well as to learn about the quality of services and the transparency mechanisms in place. At its core, the CRC is not an opinion survey as much as a quantitative survey to arrive at a scientific and unbiased analysis of the qualitative experiences of a citizen. The citizens are chosen through a rigorous sampling method. In this case, the questionnaire included objective questions to collect details about respondents, followed by scheme-based questions on their awareness and satisfaction levels, on the application/registration process, and grievance redressal mechanisms. Two CRCs were conducted during the project, with the first one being conducted in the beginning of the project and the second one towards the halfway point. This helped illustrate the impact of the project actions as well as its effect on the people.

experience of the community regarding the scheme, and quality of the benefits provided and redressal mechanisms. The government officials (130 of them, including district and sub-district officials) were also asked to provide scores on the same parameter. This data was then compiled and face-to-face meetings were organised between the two parties in each of the project locations to debate and discuss the scores given by the other. These discussions were quite interesting and helped one party understand the point of view of the other, encouraging dialogue where earlier there existed unsaid resentment. For example, in Ri-Bhoi, it was found that payments as part of the MGNREGA were significantly delayed, sometimes up to three months, which was blamed on the local government and panchayat officials. The community was then told that this was mainly due to the fact that funds from the higher authorities of government were not released on time, thus causing a delay. The government officials promised to encourage stronger dialogue with the district and

Community Score Card (CSC)

follows a different approach, which is far more qualitative in nature, data for which is gathered through focus group discussions rather than through individual interviews. Citizens as well as local government officials are given an opportunity to provide scores based on their opinion on the delivery of scheme benefits. Both parties initially score separately, but are then brought together for a joint analysis of the results, where they engage in dialogue with one other to understand the steps necessary to improve the experience for both parties. This is a very significant step as it helps one empathise with the other as well as find solutions amenable to both parties.

state governments to release the necessary money for payment.

A second CSC was conducted in 2018 toward the end of the project, to compare the two scores (based on the same parameters) so that the impact of the project could be understood. Improvements were observed on the access and delivery of schemes, while scheme benefits differed significantly from district to district. For example, the final average scores given for the PDS scheme in the second CSC across four districts were 2.86 (Ri-Bhoi), 4.00 (Goalpara), 3.14 (Cachar), and 4.29 (Wakha). Overall, more than 87 per cent participants said that scheme-related services had definitely improved across all schemes. Scores for some schemes like MDM and NSAP had improved slightly, but both parties agreed that more progress could still be made in the future. A consistent complaint across most schemes seemed to be the grievance redressal process, or the lack of it. Progress on this front was only limited to a few schemes, which were not necessarily consistent across all the districts.

These surveys were helpful in understanding the needs of the community as well as officials from the local government, helping form a database that was not only useful for the project, but for any future projects conducted in the region. Furthermore, the

project created an online dashboard with all the above data, which anybody can access and utilise, whether a government official or a CSO.

These findings were then compiled to develop the **District Action Plans (DAPs)**. Each DAP was formulated for identifying the gaps (such as lack of awareness or inefficient service delivery, among others) for each scheme in the respective districts, and proposing recommendations to remedy them. Activities such as phone alerts, radio and TV programmes as part of a sustained information campaign, preparing a service provider handbook and various trainings were conducted in the run up to the preparation of the DAPs.

As part of the DAPs, numerous steps were taken to improve awareness on and implementation of the schemes. The project utilised several modes of communication to take the message as far as possible. To foster local journalism efforts, 21 fellowships were offered to local journalists from the districts to publish articles on the schemes. These ranged from articles on scheme awareness to pointing out gaps in delivery of services, or providing stories of people availing the benefits of these schemes. This was part of a concerted effort to encourage the community to demand the benefits entitled to them as well as put pressure on the local government to improve the quality and delivery of these scheme benefits. In total, 535 articles were published, with the best articles being awarded. Twenty TV and radio programmes were developed and nearly two million SMS messages (providing information on the schemes and the application process) were sent to all members of the community. Handbooks were developed in various local languages, with information on each of the 10 schemes, their purposes, eligibility requirements, entitlements due as part of these schemes, application processes and contact details of relevant government and Panchayat officials. This was done to ensure maximum coverage so that any citizen could access the information through at least one of the many mediums provided above.

Twenty-four **Common Service Centres** were also set up across all four targeted districts³

³ Originally, the project worked in seven districts and supported 35 Common Service Centres. In 2017, the project focused on just four districts and 24 Common Service Centres.

Common Service Centres were a one-stop shop solution designed to make people apply for various schemes along with improving their scheme-related awareness.



Centres in the other districts, so that the centre owners could share concerns, discuss challenges and learn from each other's experiences. The best-performing centres in each district were also awarded for their performance in two rounds held in the last year of the project.

to help members of the community sign up for any scheme as well as access any information on them. Services provided by these centres included a fee-based internet café, copies of the service provider handbook, information on the 10 targeted schemes as well as on RTI and *Adhaar*. In addition, one could also avail printing, photocopy, and stationary services. Some centres even provided facilities for Permanent Account Number (PAN) card applications, scholarship applications, application forms for various examinations, loan applications, etc. The Common Service Centres were an attempt to foster local businesses to encourage financial sustainability. Quarterly reviews of the 24 centres were also conducted during the last year of the project to assess the quality of services provided, along with exposure visits to Common Service

A number of workshops and training sessions were conducted throughout the project on sensitive issues such as gender and caste as well as to spread information on schemes and issues affecting the delivery of scheme benefits. Two surveys, one being a gender and minority audit of each scheme and the other on understanding the constraints of the government and Panchayat officials, were also conducted. The gender and minority audit (conducted during the first CRC) was introduced in the project to highlight the needs and demands of the marginalised groups and women living in the districts. For example, in Cachar, Muslims formed 36 per cent of the total population, but only 16 per cent had availed of the benefits of the IAY. Thirty-one per cent women respondents added that their MGNREGA job card was not with them, but with the village headman, making it harder for them to



access work. Twelve social inclusion workshops were organised with government officials to sensitise them to the challenges faced by marginalised groups and, in turn, learn about the impact that social exclusion has on a community. The capacity and constraints assessment (CCA) also had similarly interesting insights into the challenges faced by government officials while providing scheme benefits. The report showed similar concerns across all the districts, i.e., how an inadequate number of staff, lack of information materials, and insufficient knowledge held back the delivery of services. Therefore, to rectify these deficiencies, eight training workshops were organised with Panchayat and government officials to improve their knowledge of the schemes they handled as well as the type of grievance redressal mechanisms that should be put in place. It was encouraging to see the large turnout as more than 500 officials came to the workshops.

Now armed with the knowledge of the schemes, there were some direct action that the officials were able to take within their capacity. Additional staff were hired to deal with the workload, along with grievance mechanisms (such as a complaint box) being set up

for certain schemes (such as IAY and MGNREGA). It must be said that despite their desire to do more, a lot of their capacity was hindered by the linear and hierarchical nature of the Indian bureaucracy, which works primarily on funds that trickle down from the Central Government. Schemes such as MGNREGA are heavily dependent on the Central Government for funds, which in a lot of cases, just may not be available. This puts the local government officials in a tough situation, as they are not able to meet their obligations for scheme implementation, imprisoning them between the mercies of the people, and the central and state governments.

Furthermore, to consolidate and reflect all the lessons learnt during the project, 54 **Regional Forums and District Forums** were organised in the region, bringing together CSOs, citizens and government officials. These platforms provided opportunities for all participants to discuss their contexts and problems, while opening the window for solutions and recommendations that would help them (and the project). For example, the deputy district commissioner proposed to set up a rehabilitation centre for the differently abled people in Ri-Bhoi - a change that was brought up because of the social inclusion workshop conducted in the district.

As a result of the action, over 45,592 households were granted new entitlements to all of the selected schemes, with 87.2 per cent of all the citizens reporting a marked improvement in the delivery of the selected schemes (measured through CSCs). Empowered by the awareness efforts of the project, 29 RTIs were filed by the citizens to access various kinds of information on the schemes. In 22 such cases, corrective actions were put in place, such as displaying Mid Day Meal menus, setting up complaint boxes, number of doctors/staff in Primary Health Centres, etc.

MAJOR OUTCOMES

The quantitative outputs of the project have been outlined above, but the qualitative outcomes of the efforts of the project were very substantive. The numerous avenues created to reach out to the citizens (Common Service Centres, awareness generation programmes, CSCs, etc.) so that they could not only learn about the schemes and entitlements, but also

enrol themselves in them, was impressive, resulting in behavioural as well as social change. The Common Service Centre, in particular, was an interesting approach to simultaneously support local business as well as awareness efforts in the four districts. Due to the “one-stop shop” nature of the Centre, it was convenient for local citizens to go there and understand the entitlements due to them, as well as clarify any doubts/problems they may have about enrolling into such schemes. The Centre owners attended workshops, so that they could disseminate relevant information and deal with any doubts correctly. They were ably supported by the provision of handbooks, charts, and illustrations, which they could use to explain the issue to the citizen as well as hand them out to people for future reference. It was also observed that the Centres also began to modify their services, taking into consideration the needs and demands of the local community. For example, the Centre in Nongpoh, besides providing information about the 10 chosen schemes, also assisted with PAN card and student scholarship applications. The Centre owner helped more than 700 people register online so that they could validate their teaching diplomas, along with helping new voters register themselves online on voting lists and helping people apply for passports. The success of the Common Service Centres peaks for itself, as between January 2016 and August 2017, over 6,000 people benefited from the various services provided by the Centre in Nongpoh.

Citizens gained confidence to approach the respective government and Panchayat officials, besides being encouraged to file complaints and argue for what was due to them. The walls between the government/Panchayat officials and the citizens were slowly but surely eroded through the common platforms that were created to encourage dialogue and conversation between the two parties. This was a process, which was slowly undertaken throughout the length of the project, built upon brick by brick. The process was initiated through the social accountability tools (CRC and CSC), which helped the local community and government officials understand each other’s position, as well as making each party reflect on the efforts they themselves were making to access these services. The CRC and CSC provided the basis upon which the DAP was formulated, as it identified the gaps in implementation and the solutions needed to



plug in these gaps. Accountability was further strengthened by the creation of platforms such as Regional and District Forums, which further helped get the two parties on the same page.

One of the major highlights of the project was the formulation of the DAP, or rather, the way in which it was developed. On the back of efforts made through the CSC and CRC, the DAP was a multi-pronged, multi-medium approach to create long-lasting transformation, not just by improving scheme access among the local community, but also by bolstering local journalistic efforts and local entrepreneurial ventures, while specifically highlighting the problems of marginalised communities. The thorough nature of the CSC and CRC helped pinpoint the areas of improvement, and the experience of the project team was instrumental in identifying the most appropriately fitting solutions. For example, the idea of strengthening local journalistic efforts was an efficient way to not just improve social accountability and awareness of schemes, but also help consolidate the ties between the region’s youth and their community. A key element of the success of the DAP was that it addressed both the supply and demand sides of the issue, i.e., lack of awareness and inaccessibility of schemes among the local community. On one hand, the people were made aware of their entitlements, through newspaper articles, SMSs, TV shows, radio skits, and the creation of Common Service Centres (demand side), enabling them to make government officials more accountable for actions (or lack of it). On the other hand, government and Panchayat officials (the supply side) were strengthened through

The project was influential in bringing together numerous parties on the supply and demand sides, onto a common platform, to help create sustainable change.

sensitisation workshops and information sessions, helping ensure that they were informed about their responsibilities (a lot of them were unaware) and attuned to the needs of the most marginalised sections of their community. The results of these efforts can be clearly observed, as citizens have begun to vociferously complain about the services provided to them, and government offices in the four districts have set up a grievance redressal mechanism to properly address these concerns through the official channels of communication.

Although no follow-up activities were implemented due to lack of funding opportunities, many of the project actions were designed to be self-sustaining in the long term. Communities and government officials now had a better idea about the schemes and issues faced in their districts/localities and are able to orient their actions accordingly, besides advocating improvements in delivery of scheme benefits as well as improving access to them. Volunteers, enumerators, owners of Common Service Centres, and all other local actors across the four districts can help their communities as they now have considerable knowledge about the target schemes and are willing to share their knowledge to improve access to these schemes. Additionally, all the findings obtained through the CRCs and the CSCs have been published online and made available for public consumption. This will act as a reference for stakeholders such as government departments as well as CSOs. It was encouraging to note that tools such as the CRC and CSC received a very positive response from the community and government representatives. The citizens, especially women and marginalised groups, got an

opportunity to make and present their assessment of the services and schemes that affect their daily lives, something which they had never done before. More importantly, the facilitation of dialogue between multiple parties helped remove the degree of scepticism and resentment that existed earlier, replacing them with an understanding of the other's point of view.

LESSONS LEARNT

One of the biggest successes of this project was the way in which it brought together the citizens and government officials, creating a solid foundation that will yield results for times to come. This was the first occasion where citizens, especially marginalised and vulnerable groups as well as women, got an opportunity to make and present their assessments on certain public services existing for years, making the entire process very empowering. This also was the first time government officials were given the opportunity to understand the context of the other, and listen to their problems, as well as air their own issues to the other party. The project was also influential in bringing together numerous other parties (CSOs and media houses) onto a common platform, such that their coordinated efforts could help accentuate the positive change achieved. This was not an easy effort, and while these changes may not be immediately apparent, their effect will bear fruit in the future. These efforts also help form a good platform for CSOs looking to work in the region, going forward, and further improve scheme accessibility and implementation.

Coordinated efforts on behalf of the project team as well as partners (NEICORD and PAC) also made efforts to include the local community in every step of the research process, as they helped out in data collection for the CRC and CSCs, and played a major role in dispersing the findings of these studies. This participatory approach considerably improved the accountability of the project among the local community, as they felt part of the change

being implemented around them. The creation of Common Service Centres hugely contributed to this effort, as they were formed by the local community and became a central location to discuss and solve issues about any scheme.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the use of innovative participatory research tools such as the CSC and the CRC, was extremely useful for the project, as they helped understand the context of the local community from the districts of Cachar, Goalpara, Ri-Bhoi and Wokha. A key aspect of both the tools was that project officials took the time to listen to the complaints of the people, government officials as well as the local community, and assess specific solutions for each party via the DAPs. Whether it was conducting multiple awareness campaigns among the community or sensitising government officials to the needs of marginalised sections of their district, painstaking effort was made to ensure that both parties could flourish. The varied nature of these actions resulted in a considerable improvement in access to the selected schemes, as well as the number of new entitlements received as a consequence of the

project. According to the second CSC, all of the participants reported a marked improvement in schemes such as MGNREGA, JSSK, RKVY, SBM and the MDM. Across all schemes, there was a considerable improvement in infrastructure as well as the capacities of local officials. The latter was seen in the case of the ICDS programme, where ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activists) workers are contributing better to the system, and the staff (in some districts even the related staff) for JSSK (especially the doctors) are behaving better with patients. However, there are still programmes where the service quality needs to be improved - the quality of meals given under the MDM programme, the frequency and amount of pensions given under the NSAP programme. The Action Plans formulated should be able to address these concerns if they are properly implemented, going forward.

Despite the wide ambit of the project, it was able to successfully establish a sense of ownership among the local community about their schemes, by making them aware of the multiple entitlements due to them. Efforts were made to boost the local economy as well as demand accountability from panchayat/government officials through Common Service Centres and journalism scholarships.

LEAD PARTNER



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PUBLIC AFFAIRS CENTRE
Committed to Good Governance

FUNDING SUPPORT



INCREASING ACCESS TO INFORMATION

on Government Schemes and Entitlements in Six Backward Districts of Northern India

A project implemented by **Action Aid India** in partnership with

- Samvad Samajik Sansthan • Samajik Shodh Evam Vikas Kendra • Vikas Sahyog Kendra
- Vasudha Vikas Sansthan • ActionAid Delhi Regional Office

“

The overall resonance of the project towards self-reliance and sustainability was very strong and the success of the project has set wonderful precedents and case studies for many such future initiatives. The very fact of bringing the poor to the forefront and collectivising them into cohesive and sustainable groups is indeed a futuristic and courageous strategy.

”

An Independent Observer

THE CONTEXT

People in certain geographies in India experience extraordinary difficulties in accessing basic necessities of life. They face various forms of social discriminations and exclusions, and also lack basic services like education, health, food security and livelihood security. The rise in income inequalities and regional imbalances adds to these woes. In such a case, the concept of social protection takes great prominence. It provides a shield to the marginalised and vulnerable populations from further exploitation. It facilitates local communities to preserve their assets and gain knowledge to further their empowerment. Social protection is provided by both Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and public agencies; however, it works best when social protection is guaranteed by the state.

Action Aid India, with support from the European Union and in partnership with five local CSOs, wanted to initiate a change of this scenario through the project, “Increasing Access to Information on Government Schemes and Entitlements in Six Backward Districts of Northern India”. The vision was to promote active agency of marginalised people in finding their own solutions to socio-economic problems, making it a bottom-up initiative wherein the poorest and most marginalised communities come together and exhibit solidarity for their rights and justice. The project was implemented in six districts across five states— Barabanki and

Pratapgarh in Uttar Pradesh; East Champaran in Bihar; Latehar in Jharkhand; Jhabua in Madhya Pradesh; and Chamba in Himachal Pradesh. A local partner was involved in each state—*Samvad Samajik Sansthan in Uttar Pradesh, Samajik Shodh Evam Vikas Kendra in Bihar, Vikas Sahyog Kendra in Jharkhand, Vasudha Vikas Sansthan in Madhya Pradesh* and ActionAid Delhi Regional Office in Himachal Pradesh.

THEORY OF CHANGE AND STRATEGIES

Several communities in India are highly marginalised and vulnerable. Their social and economic standing makes their living realities more complicated to deal with. For instance, the Gujjars of northern India have a migratory lifestyle where they change their destinations seasonally. While in states like Himachal Pradesh they hold the status of a Schedule Tribe (ST), in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, the Gujjars are considered as a Scheduled Caste (SC). For them the issue of accessing public services is not as straightforward as other rural populations and requires a deeper intervention. The project had identified several other similar communities who were uniquely vulnerable in their own customs.

The objective of the project was to empower the most marginalised and make them self-sustainable to raise their voices against any injustices against them at present as well as in the future. To achieve this, it was realised that a community can meaningfully exercise its range of rights and entitlements only when it has access to adequate information and capacities.

The project recognised that a uni-dimensional, rights-based approach is not holistic and might not entirely cater to the welfare of people. Apart from community empowerment, it engaged and empowered the supply side, i.e., government functionaries whose services affect the everyday lives of communities. Based on the pre-assessment of the situation through a baseline survey, the project concluded that the poor and inefficient governance mechanisms of the state needed a strategic intervention to ensure better transparency, accountability and efficiency in government machineries.



The project asserted that the state mandated social security is essential for promoting equitable growth and inclusive development. This is equally important for the realisation of basic human rights of the communities in question. This is especially true for basic services like education, health, livelihood, and food security, etc., which are integral elements of an individual's basic human rights. Thus, the other important intervention area of the project was to capacitate and train the members of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and other government officials in providing efficient and fair services to local communities. The project adopted a number of strategic interventions to pursue the overall objectives of empowering the communities as well as supporting and capacitating government functionaries.

Participatory Village Development Plans

The preparation of a Village Development Plan (VDP) is often captured by the elites and power holders. It is often dominated by the upper classes and castes. The project challenged these power

PRI, PIC, IRC and CBOs were the four pillars of awareness action and outcomes.

dynamics and used a bottom-up approach for VDP preparation by involving a greater number of marginalised communities with equal voices, stakes and representation. The first step lay in capacitating marginalised communities. They were trained to use tools and techniques to help them understand the process of VDP preparation and articulate their own problems. Time tested Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques such as Social Mapping and Resource Mapping were used across all the locations. A powerful analysis of well-being was conducted to assess the social and economic well-being of the marginalised populations in the target villages. For example, a well-being analysis would map the physical and social infrastructures of the village and assess which communities benefit from a structural, physical and social transformation in the village. Thereon, these plans and outcomes were taken to the PRIs to ensure implementation and action. There were simultaneous networking and advocacy with other relevant government departments (for example, rural development, social justice, livelihood, etc.) to ensure reverberating responses throughout the action site.

Use of social audits, public hearings and right to information

The project used social audits and public hearing regularly to ensure the transparency and accountability of government functionaries. When concentrated in the hands of the few, information leads to unequal power dynamics. The very reason why the Right to Information (RTI) Act came into force was to make information publicly available to promote accountability and establish communication

between the citizens and state authorities. The project encouraged the marginalised communities to use the RTI Act to get information from various government departments and then take any discrepancies to PRIs and other redressal institutions.

Setting up non-ICT based Information Resource Centre (IRC)

A widespread lack of information among the poor and marginalised populations of rural India is one of the major causes of their lack of access to government services and provisions. Apart from empowering them with the capacity and tools to raise their voices to the government for injustices against them, it is equally important for them to be aware about the range of schemes and initiatives they are entitled to. To fill this information void, the project set up Information Resource Centres (IRCs) in all locations. The IRC was a simple, non-ICT based centre set up at a Gram Panchayat Office accessible to large target populations. In most cases, the community themselves took the responsibility of running the IRCs through full-time volunteers.

Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1993, envisaged three-tier PRIs as the backbone for decentralised self-governance of Indian villages. The elected members in PRIs and Gram Sabhas together were supposed to institutionalise bottom-up participatory planning as the basis for village development. Unfortunately, in many parts of India, due to lack of capacities and resources, PRIs have remained weak institutions. A village without a functioning Gram Panchayat often reinforces the traditional caste and class power dynamics where individuals from higher castes and classes dominate decision making. In most of the project villages, Panchayats and IRCs enjoy strong linkages. In many cases, IRCs have played a key role in getting local communities their entitlements and in building

A stronger development indicator is not when people are supplied with services but when people demand information.



Building Community Based Organisations (CBOs)

The project partners have created strategic need-based CBOs in all the respective intervention locations. The CBOs are the hubs of social and political inputs. There is no doubt that the intensive capacity building on strategic ways to build power through organisation has played a key role in sustaining the economic change and

capacity for elected representatives related to entitlements. Sarpanches and Ward Panches are aware of the preparation of VDPs and IRCs. Many Sarpanches and Ward Panches were influenced by the functioning of the Panchayat Information Centres (PICs) and sought advice from them. The PIC were developed as a strong civic association interface with the institutions of decentralised governance. People did express that the Panchayat was an important institution for them because it was the route to access development resources from the state. People thought an IRC had a very important role of keeping up the pressure on Panchayats to work well for the entire village. People also felt that PICs had an important role in keeping the spirit of accessing panchayat services.



The success of VDPs in Manika can be gauged by the fact that the Chief Minister of Jharkhand, Shri Raghubar Das, launched the 'Yojna Banao Abhiyan' programme in December 2015, which is similar to the VDPs that VSK has been working on. The Chief Minister's programme seeks to "link people living in rural areas with project planning activities and provide them opportunity to write development story for their villages.

building a better quality of life. The solidarity and focus on collective action developed into a political orientation that constantly put pressure on the exploitative system that had impoverished the vulnerable families for years. With the support of project partners, around 720 CBO members, who were well-informed community leaders in different villages, took several initiatives for helping community members access public services and making local administration accountable for delivering quality public services. Over 2,289 exclusively trained CBO members directly influenced the access to schemes and processes of accountability. Such actions in the form of firm assertion of rights through collective struggles in many cases have forced the state institutions to become responsive to the needs of marginalised communities.

All the CBOs had their own unique priorities. This solidarity and unification of individuals towards a common purpose was a good strategy that will hopefully continue even in the absence of the project.

MAJOR OUTCOMES

Facilitating participatory **Village Development Plans (VDPs)** has been a powerful exercise to ensure inclusion of the most marginalised in village level decision making. The developmental priorities of these marginalised and vulnerable are now reflected in the formal planning processes, which not only empower them but also hold the elected

PRI members and government functionaries accountable. The interfaces facilitated between citizens and Gram Panchayats as well as with line department offices changed the power equation in favour of the former.

A total of 742 VDPs were formulated over the duration of the project. In Jhabua, 57 VDPs were formulated over 4 years and total of Rs. 6.2 crores worth of works were taken up over the 4 years. Construction works under 9 categories were sanctioned with funds worth Rs.30,300,000/-. In Chamba, 80 VDPs were prepared over 4 years and Rs. 13,360,000/- worth of works were sanctioned. In East Champaran, 70 VDPs were prepared and works under 22 headings were sanctioned for funds worth Rs.11.05 crores. In Latehar, 121 VDPs were prepared over the duration of the project and works worth Rs. 12.8 crores were sanctioned by the government. In Barabanki, 33 VDPs were approved by the Panchayats and in Pratapgarh, 80 VDPs were prepared and got approved by the Panchayats.

The use of social accountability tools such as **Social Audit and Public Hearing** have empowered the community to demand transparency and accountability from the existing decision makers in villages. The accountability of the Gram Panchayat members and line department officials were established, and their responsiveness has increased.

The Social Audits in Chamba mainly focused on the National Food Security Scheme, Social Security Scheme and Right to Education (RTE) Act. The community leaders, particularly the youth, were the drivers of these public hearings and social audits, which led to increased ownership. In 18 Panchayats, where public hearings and social audits were conducted, people experienced improvements in quality of work and enrolment of 5,830 people under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Other positive outcomes included release of pensions, public display of budgets and expenditures in PRIs, re-enrolment of drop-out students and immediate release of due wages.

In East Champaran, the community members constituted a Dalit Adhikar Morcha (DAM), which extensively used RTI applications to access relevant information and engaged in public hearings with

government departments to act upon it. Active engagement of DAM led to electrification of hamlets inhabited by Dalits and open discussions on issues related to budgets and expenditures of PRIs and line departments along with other higher caste communities. The social audits revealed the discrepancy in food distribution where often low-quality food was distributed to the Dalits. The DAM raised voices against this discrimination and official actions were taken against Fair Price Shop owners.

In Jhabua, a total of 18 social audits and 18 public hearings revealed many discrepancies relating to the MGNREGA, which were subsequently resolved with interventions from officials. The provisioning of adequate food rations from PDS shops and sanctioning of the delayed money on various development projects were other issues that were resolved.

In Latehar, a pool of the project's trained community leaders conducted a social audit of Adivasi Vikas Yojana (a state government scheme for the betterment of the local indigenous community), and a series of public hearings on the implementation of the RTE Act, pension benefits, and food security over the project period. These had greater impact on education like recruitment of teachers, improvement in the quality of mid-day meals, provision of toilets and water facilities. These also led to more people getting access to ration cards, food security, disability pensions and old age pensions, among other benefits.

The Information Resource Centres (IRCs) established under the project assisted in accessing relevant and authentic information by the community and made these useful assets for the community to access information and assistance about various government schemes on an ongoing basis. The functioning of the IRCs has now been handed over to the Gram Panchayat and other CBOs who are capable of taking this initiative forward on their own. For example, in Barabanki and Pratapgarh, the local communities of 14 out of the 20 Gram Panchayats in the project area have committed to take on the responsibility of the IRCs.

In total, the project established 96 Panchayat IRCs reaching out to 234 villages in the targeted six backward districts (Pratapgarh and Barabanki: 37 IRCs; Chamba: 20 IRCs; East Champaran: 13 IRCs; Jhabua: 18 IRCs; Latehar: 8 IRCs).

Encouraged by the results in Pratapgarh, the state government has now consulted the group on conducting social audits in three other districts of Kaushambi, Allahabad, and Barabanki. The Uttar Pradesh government has set up a District Resource Group to be represented by two people from each block, who will in turn train the Block Resource Groups. The Block Resource Groups are tasked with training the Village Task Force. This model will ensure that VDPs are made for all villages and that social audits and public hearings are conducted efficiently.

In total, over 16,737 applications were facilitated by IRCs, out of which 12,383 people benefitted through the entitlements. In Pratapgarh, 2,180 people have benefitted from the IRCs, and in Barabanki, 1,522 people have made use of IRCs in accessing public information on various schemes and services. In the Mehla and Chamba blocks, more than 50 per cent of the 17,574 target population reported knowledge of public schemes available to them. Also 5,232 out of the total target population have acted to access government schemes. Moreover, 60 per cent PRIs and local officials started providing information on various services to poor communities. In East Champaran, around 1,617 people benefitted by IRCs under different schemes like old age pensions, widow pensions, installation of solar lights, etc. The active presence and work of *Dalit Adhikar Morcha*, particularly of Shri Narendra Ram, made the process even more efficient. Despite his being a Dalit, his work was acknowledged and appreciated by one and all. Narendra Ram is now tirelessly working towards establishing an IRC in his Panchayat and ensuring access to one and all. In Jhabua, over 900 people have benefitted from IRCs. In Latehar, 4,811 people have benefitted from IRCs under several schemes. In spite of not finding a designated place for IRCs in Latehar, the community members showed their determination by offering space in their own houses for their functioning. Many Mukhiyas and Ward Panchs

The local indigenous community in the highly forested Latehar have succeeded in getting community forest Right claims.



of the target villages sought advices and were influenced by the functioning of IRCs.

The sensitisation and capacity building of PRI members have had a far-reaching impact on the communities. Armed with new information from their trainings, the PRI members have been able to advocate for enhanced access to schemes and services by the communities. A total of 453 government officials and 863 elected representatives received training on community needs in relation to various public schemes and entitlements. Fourteen training and capacity building activities were undertaken in Pratapgarh and Barabanki for training over 86 PRI officials. These trainings of PRI members were mainly

around MGNREGA and preparation of VDPs. In Mehla and Chamba blocks, the project trained 230 PRI officials, including 109 women from Dalit and Gujjar communities. Over 46 trainings and capacity building workshops were organised on RTI, RTE, preparation of VDPs, economic literacy and budget accountability for governance as well as state and central schemes. In Jhabua, seven trainings and capacity building workshops were organised on preparation of VDPs and various entitlements. In addition, the project also established interfaces with block officials in all the districts, which resulted in local authorities accepting and approving VDPs for implementation.

The baseline survey revealed location specific issues. The **scheme-based intervention** in those particular locations were, therefore, implemented on a need basis. As per the data collected for the end line survey, efforts at increasing access to entitlements and services reached out to 21,833 households of 124,448 persons over the four years from 2014 to 2017. For example, unemployment was reportedly a major issue in

Barabanki, Pratapgarh, Chamba, Jhabua and Latehar. The CBO members from these districts lobbied with the district administration to improve the implementation of MGNREGA. The community members accessed MGNREGA work in 86 villages by encouraging people to submit their work demand applications, getting receipts of the same, availing 100 days of employment, and other provisions of the MGNREGA. More than 12,761 work demand applications were submitted, out of which 9,451 families received work. There has been an increase in the social audit of NREGA at the Panchayat level. Moreover, the social audit committees were strengthened in the project area, which resulted in people receiving Rs. 3.07 crore pending wages.

In Chamba, the project worked with the Gujjars, who were uniquely disadvantaged. The Gujjars are a migratory indigenous community who stay in the hills of Himachal Pradesh during summers. Their migratory status makes them an ambiguous entity in the eyes of the state and in a lot of cases deprives them of their basic citizenship rights. Gujjars are primarily dependent on cattle rearing and small odd jobs for their livelihood and are, hence,

Shayama Singh came out as one of the rare examples in not just Latehar district, but in a larger context, where women are generally the mute spectators of Panchayats despite having a leading role. Shyama Singh, part of a local indigenous community herself, was elected as the head of Namudhar Panchayat. She was also elected as the leader of the village assembly. An agile woman, she contributed greatly in improving the quality of schools in her Panchayat. She additionally did some commendable work in utilising the MGNREGA funds for the betterment of Adivasi villages in her region. Shayama Singh is one of the many examples that this project has created by activating the generally dormant Panchayats of these regions.

The project catalysed an organisation of the milk producers from the Gujjar community in Chamba, called Pragati Swayam Sahayata Samuh. Over time, about 250 Gujjar families joined in and together they produced 1,000 litres of milk every day. This newly formed CBO wrote to the District Collector of Chamba with the assistance of a pre-established Gujjar Welfare Board to put forth their demand. They were eventually allocated a shop and the cooperative is now selling milk and milk products at market price.

A breakthrough came in when the Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh recognised that large populations of Gujjar communities have never benefitted from state welfare schemes. A delegation of District Gujjar Welfare Society, a CBO formed with the encouragement of the Action Aid team, met the Chief Minister to bring the conditions of these communities in Himachal Pradesh to the notice of the authorities. As a result, the government took note of their demands and made the registration process easier.

greatly dependent on state provisioned aids and services. The project undertook extensive efforts of registering the Gujjar community members under different government schemes. In several cases, the community members did not even possess basic identity proofs, which were provided to them during the project. A considerable number of children in the community were first generation school goers. The project enrolled over 187 Gujjar children in schools.

Caste-based discrimination is rampant in East Champaran. This discrimination and segregation can be easily observed in the very pattern of village households and land ownerships. The Dalits in this region are mostly landless agricultural labourers and despite their rightful ownership of land are denied access to it by the upper caste landlords. With the support of CBO members, a total of 3,267 Dalit families applied

Grameen Mazdoor Sangathan:

Pratapgarh's Bhaddiv Village saw a revolution of its own kind when a group of women, who were generally behind the veil and seldom part of meetings and discussions, openly debated in the meeting of Grameen Mazdoor Sangathan (GMS). In addition, they ensured follow-up actions to improve the provision of services in the local schools. Voices were openly raised against the principal who was physically unavailable in the school most of the times. GMS also undertook other services like provisioning of food ration and PDS shops, demanding a fair price and timely distribution of their rightful share of food.

The **Donki Village case:** Much before the onset of the Forest Rights Act, the Donki Village of Latehar district had its own ingenious way of forest mapping. To preserve the valuables of the forest and to keep a check on the exploitation of forest resources, the community members devised their own conduct and rules for usage of resources. Every member swore to protect the forest cover and keep a vigil on any mischief in the forest. A forest guard was appointed by the Village Pradhan to keep a constant check on forest resources. This brilliant and sustainable plan, due to the push by the project team, got a legal sanction. The people claimed their Community Forest Rights in four separate patches around the village of 120 acres, 383 acres, 128 acres and 118 acres, respectively. On 9th March 2017, they received their titles and on 15th August 2017, they received all relevant documents. Today, the village has claimed rights over 873 acres of forestland around their village. Till date, they have received rights for about 750 acres.

for homestead lands. Out of them, 93 families received homestead land in East Champaran. The project began a litigation process to ensure the rightful ownership to individuals. Some of these cases are still pending in court.

Latehar is a highly forested district and falls under the ambit of the Forest Right Act (FRA). After three years of perseverance, the local indigenous community in Latehar district of Jharkhand managed to get Community Forest Right claims for six villages in four Panchayats. Villages were granted the right to protect and manage community forest resources under FRA over 1,629.2 acres of forest land.

LESSONS LEARNT

This ambitious project in six backward districts of India has led to some inspiring stories of change. In addition to substantial changes in the lives of people, the project has also empowered them to be their own voice and agency in the future. Most of the communities were highly marginalised with barely any space for substantive representation. The very fact of bringing them in front and collectivising them into sustainable groups is indeed a futuristic and audacious approach. Many successful examples of these collectives have been elucidated above and can pave the way for continuing such efforts in other contexts and geographies too. The strategies must be devised according to the needs and priorities of the communities themselves.

In addition, the project has also painted a hopeful picture of the functionaries of the state. It is a common perception that these institutions are corrupt and ineffective and do not deliver according to the needs of the people. The project took the lead in engaging the government officials and bringing them closer to the lives and difficulties of the local community. By imparting them with skills and training, the project enabled an environment of trust and goodwill, which will be of tremendous use for these communities.

Lastly, the project once again re-affirmed the power and importance of knowledge, information and awareness among the community. Information and knowledge are the essential requisite for awareness of one's own life realities and possible solutions to impediments. The Action Aid team, along with all partner organisations, reinforced the relevance of disseminating awareness and information among local communities.



CONCLUSION

In conclusion, what made this project unique is the nature of the communities the project was dealing with. Each district had its own distinctive constituency of highly marginalised populations. Giving them a voice was a fairly challenging task,

but the project re-strengthened the need of engaging in such difficult terrains through its multi-dimensional impacts. The overall resonance of the project towards sustainability and self-reliance was very strong and the success of the project has set wonderful precedents and case studies for many such future initiatives.

LEAD PARTNER

CO-PARTNERS



FUNDING SUPPORT



ADDRESSING NUTRITIONAL and Income Insecurity of Underprivileged Communities by Improving Access to Relevant Government Schemes

A project implemented by **Aragamee** in partnership with:

• Agranee • Bikash Parishad • Chale Chalo • Harmony • Seba Jagat • Mahila Vikas
• Regional Centre for Development Co-operation • Society for the Welfare of Weaker
Sections • Organisation for Rural Reconstruction and Integrated Social Service Activities

“

I am a poor Kondh woman. I wanted to do something for my village. Our villages wanted me to contest in the election for the post of Naib Sarpanch. I won it, but did not know what to do, and how to do my duty. With Aragamee's help, I and my villagers learnt many things including how to collectively work for our own development, and access the government services.

”

Mrs. Sarada Majhi,
Urladani Panchayat,
Kalahandi District, Odisha

THE CONTEXT

The remote districts of local indigenous populations in Odisha are among the poorest in India. The chronic and acute poverty in the state has affected the food and nutritional security of the people in general, and such indigenous communities in particular, rendering them the subjects of exploitation and abuse. Hunger has made them victims of ill health and economic loss. A critical determinant of this under-development has arguably been the lack of quality public services.

Poor governance, half-hearted planning, ineffective programme implementation, lack of awareness, access, and people's participation are among many other reasons.

Much of the government spending has little impact because of poor planning and targeting. The elected local leaders are often ignorant about the provisions, procedures and allocations related to various public schemes and programmes. The people lack strong community mechanisms of their own to raise their voice. The problem is more acute for women.

Against this backdrop, Aragamee and partners, with support from the European Union, implemented a project, "Addressing Nutrition and Income Insecurity of Underprivileged Communities by Improving Access to Relevant Government Schemes", from January 2014 to December 2018. Aragamee partnered with

nine local civil society organisations (CSOs), namely Agraneer, Bikash Parishad, Chale Chalo, Harmony, Seba Jagat, Mahila Vikas, Regional Centre for Development Co-operation, Society for the Welfare of Weaker Sections, and Organisation for Rural Reconstruction and Integrated Social Service Activities.

The project intended to improve the quality of life of the poor communities in remote pockets of indigenous populations by enhancing their participation in local governance and improving information and access to the government schemes. This intention required facilitating access to information to different government schemes, relating primarily to nutrition, income and employment, education, and health through training and discussion forums. It channelised the local youth to effectively reach out to the local community and facilitated interface with the government institutions for effective government response towards enhanced efficacy of public schemes.

The project provided a premium on the rights of children, women from SC and ST communities, landless and marginal farmers, migrant workers, and displaced communities. It targeted Integrated Child Development Service (ICDS), Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), Mission Shakti, Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) and other public schemes, relevant to these backward local regions. An overarching focus was to operationalise Panchyats (Extension to Scheduled Areas)-PESA in the true spirit, as the provisions intended to empower the local communities with strong constitutional backup. The project intervened in 20 blocks¹ across 10 most under-developed districts² in Odisha, covering 1,000 villages under 100 Gram Panchayats from these blocks and districts³.



THEORY OF CHANGE AND STRATEGIES

Access to information and awareness among the most marginalised communities pertaining to public schemes and programmes was critical to enable appropriate actions. This would build a foundation for an aware, alert and confident community, who would actively participate in governance, from planning to implementation and effective monitoring. Improved functioning of the local governance institutions would pursue through not only enhanced awareness of people, but also through their active participation, demands and voices in Gram Sabhas.

Synergising and leveraging youth energy and innovative activities were considered to be an important component. Using the existing institutional structures, activating the inactive bodies, creating new groups, committees and networks, were necessary. It was a participatory intervention, with the local community identifying the priority needs and actions. However, engaging other stakeholders, especially the government,

1 Belpada, Bangamunda, Rayagada (R), R. Udayagiri, Madanpur Rampur, Thuamul Rampur, Phiringia, Tikabali, Dashamantapur, Lakhimpur, Mathili, Korkunda, Kaptipada, Thakurmunda, Tentulikhunti, Dabugaon, Boden, Nuapada, Kashipur and Rayagada (G).

2 Bolangir, Gajapati, Kalahandi, Kandhamal, Koraput, Malkangiri, Mayurbhanj, Nabrangpur, Nuapada, and Rayagada.

3 Six out of 20 districts fall under the Kalahandi, Bolangir and Koraput (KBK) region, identified by the erstwhile Planning Commission for their poverty and backwardness.

Synergising and leveraging youth energy, participation of the local community in the local governance processes, and engaging other stakeholder, especially the government, media and NGOs, were adopted as the pathways of the project.



media and NGOs, was also assumed to be key to programmatic success.

From the beginning, the project adopted a youth-centred approach. It enabled local youth, at the grassroots level, to play a key role at the Gram Panchayat and block levels by initiating action. Having recognised the youth as a major vehicle for social change, a series of training and capacity-building exercises were taken up. The events focussed on active and responsible citizenship, volunteering, community engagement, youth participation and leadership. Young women and men showing clear leadership abilities from those trained were identified as *Sachetaks* (change agents) to spread awareness, initiate and facilitate action. A total of 40 *Sachetaks* were recruited across

10 districts. Two *Sachetaks* (a male and a female) were selected from each of the 20 blocks. They were trained on the skills of community mobilisation, engaging with government officials and elected representatives, and facilitating participatory processes in Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha meetings. The training programmes enabled the *Sachetaks* to monitor responses to petitions and complaints that were to be filed, and also to represent critical cases to district-level authorities for their attention and action. These *Sachetaks* played a nodal role in disseminating information and facilitating community mobilisation at the Gram Panchayat and village levels.

Information gathering and dissemination was an important component. The information particularly related to various government programmes and schemes had to be prepared and presented in a meaningful and easy-to-understand manner for the internalisation of the local community. Dissemination of Information Education and Communication (IEC) material was achieved with posters, pictorial booklets, periodic handouts, newsletters and audio-visual formats. Street theatres and other traditional media were used for better communication. Among

other media, 3,542 wall paintings in 917 villages provided people information on government schemes, and created needs to share their issues at the Gram Panchayat, block and district levels. A total of 32,198 women and 41,763 men could be aware of the government schemes by attending 1,987 weekly *Haat* programmes, which proved to be a great innovative synergy that brought market goers to the doorsteps of government offices for demanding services. The Right to Education (RTE) rallies were organised to raise awareness about the new Act, and the roles and responsibilities of School Management Committees. A total of 126 RTE rallies were conducted, which were attended by 17,390 men and 13,460 women.

The project documented the best practices and disseminated the same to stakeholders, which not only brought visibility to the programme, but also motivated result-oriented actions for improving the delivery and access to government programmes. Special coverage was given to how women were involved in the welfare schemes, actions taken by women themselves, and how they could influence implementation and monitoring. The process of dissemination emphasised women as an important target group. The topics, timings, and places for dissemination sessions were chosen according to the priorities of women. International Women's Day was celebrated to create a platform for women to become aware of their rights and of gender equity. A total of 3,936 women attended various sessions on International Women's Day. These documents provided essential directions for strengthening local

governance and people's participation. Mainstream print and electronic media were involved for wider publicity of the outcomes and impact. There were 42 district-level media meets attended by 3,421 men and 2,167 women.

Organising interface workshops was necessary for raising awareness and influencing decisions and action. Interface workshops with government organisations and Panchayati Raj institutions were organised at the Gram Panchayat and block levels, to facilitate sharing of information, and to share and discuss issues related to exclusion, leakages, and irregularity of government functionaries identified by the community through monitoring of availability and access to services. Approximately 450 official interface meetings were organised involving about 65,000 people.

Several state and district-level consultations were organised. Besides sharing of information, and seeking cooperation from the stakeholders during the consultations, these events were a great opportunity to showcase the best practices. These consultations facilitated interactions between people, Panchayat-elected representatives including Zilla Parishad chairpersons, government officials, legislators, subject matter specialists, and NGOs. Participation of women was given special attention in these events. With women as a focus group, there were women-specific events too. The district and state-level women's conventions brought together more than 6,800 women from 10 districts, majority of them from local indigenous communities.



Health and Nutrition

- 1,219 immunisation camps were organised
- 4,800 children benefitted from the health camps
- 1,199 Anganwadi centres regularised breakfast
- 1,082 Anganwadi centres were supplied with water

The project created a number of local institutions such as Citizens' Action Forum (CAF), Citizens' Action Group (CAG), Block Level Information Centres (BICs), and district and state RTI forums.

CAFs were constituted as a platform of local people to demand for accountability, and engage with the existing institutional frameworks, including the Gram Sabhas and Palli Sabhas, grievance days, nutrition days, and employment guarantee day. Every block had a CAF, comprising trained youth, community leaders, and *Sachetaks*. There were 20 CAFs, with *Sachetaks* as conveners.

CAGs were formed as village/Gram Panchayat level structures, for taking coordinated effort towards increasing the efficacy of different government programmes, filing complaints, and monitoring responses to petitions. CAGs were constituted by the members of the community, with support from the project staff. Regular events were organised to sensitise the CAG members and other participants on the government provisions and facilities, rules and regulations, roles and responsibilities of SMC and ICDS committee members. More than 1,500 CAG meetings were organised with participation by 23,079 men and 18,563 women.

The project established BICs, which facilitated coordination between the people and the government, especially on different schemes. BICs not only made people aware and active to get the benefits, but also connected the villages with the state and Central Government schemes. The BICs were equipped with brochures, leaflets, posters, and application forms for different schemes and

programmes. The BIC were staffed by the block (or district) coordinators and the *Sachetaks*, who spread information, raised awareness, and worked with people and service providers, besides organising regular meetings. The BIC meetings were held in all 20 blocks, attended by 11,657 men and 9,045 women.

Efforts are now being made to convert the BICs into Citizen Assistance Centre (ASC) or *Jana Seva Kendra* (Peoples Service Centre, PSC), after the end of the project. This would help the people to continue to get different types of assistance. ASCs/PSCs would be located at the block headquarters/towns with all facilities. A revenue model is being worked out to collect a marginal fee from the people so that the PSCs become self-financed.

The district and state RTI forums were organised to facilitate implementation of the different provisions under the RTI Act. NGOs, academics, media, RTI Activists and CAF representatives were recruited in the RTI forums, which gave back-up support to the communities at various levels. There were 1,384 men and 706 women, who benefitted from 21 RTI forums. The project established a very good working relationship with the State Information Commissioner (SIC), who was regularly apprised about the issues and challenges. The active cooperation of the SIC led to encouraging changes. Previously, when RTI complaints were filed, there was no response even if the work was done. The project ensured that the complainants and those who had asked for information received the written response.

To help people gather information in direct, interesting and innovative ways, a weekly Haat Programme was launched by making use of the traditional weekly market centres in each block. Attracting people with bright tunes and folk songs on a megaphone, the Haat Programme broadcasted information on the different government programmes and schemes in the market place, frequented by people in large numbers. The response was immediate and significant. Hundreds of people wanted to know about the schemes and flocked to these makeshift tents for information. While their queries were answered, they were also advised to contact the programme personnel, or visit the BICs. Leaflets and pamphlets were distributed to those who were interested to know more. The stalls of the Haat Programme were always crowded.

Community ownership is important for sustainability of successful efforts and outcomes. The people soon realised that it was important for them to immediately address the issues both at village level meetings and training forums organised at the BIC level. The issues were frequently discussed at the question-answer sessions at Gram Panchayat, block and district-level training forums. As they reached the solutions, they also learnt as to how they and others can continue reaping the benefits. There are regular meetings and discussions with the block and district-level groups on how to maintain continuity so that CAGs and district RTI forums can be sustained.

MAJOR OUTCOMES

The activities and approaches of the project contributed to different kinds of results in the field in terms of the places covered, people reached, capacities built, schemes implemented, and services provided. The action has succeeded in changing roles, behaviour, situations, approaches, procedures, and so on. The following paragraphs present the outcomes thematically.

Pre-school going children get better access to health and nutrition

As a result of the action, 1,240 Anganwadi centres were regularised. While cooked food was regularised in 1,343 Anganwadi centres, dry food distribution was regularised in 1,291 Anganwadi centres. Besides, a lot of Anganwadi centres started offering breakfast regularly. Water supply was ensured in the Anganwadi centres. In 356 villages, Anganwadi buildings were either constructed or repaired. The Anganwadi workers also started regularly coming to the centres, taking proper care of the infrastructure, and providing better care, health and nutrition services to the children.

The results were achieved primarily because of the active intervention of the members from the *Matru* Committee (MC) and *Janch* Committee (JC), as their complaints were raised in front of the CDPOs for follow-up actions. They worked in the same way with the CDMOs, who came forward to facilitate implementation of the health-related schemes. As a result, 236 centres were improved with better infrastructure and services for child immunisation.

Primary Education

- 552 new teachers were appointed
- 1,017 school teachers were regularised
- MDMs were regularised in 454 schools
- MDM being provided regularly in total of 1004 schools

Village Health and Nutrition Days (VHNDs) were held in 740 villages. This contributed to the attendance and benefit of all eligible mothers in the localities. While the VHNDs were not conducted regularly, the project led to regularisation of 815 VHND, which were attended by the officials. Overall, it enabled more than 15,000 children to benefit from better access to the improved health and nutrition infrastructure and services.

School going children get better access to primary education

Continuous efforts led to several changes in the schools, especially in terms of infrastructure, human resources, and the mid-day meal (MDM). Because of the regular meetings of the *Janch* Committee (JC) and School Management Committee (SMC) and their complaints, vacant teacher posts were filled up. The students used to get only one-half of an egg for three days. The persistent and assertive presence by the JC and SMC ensured each child getting six eggs per week. As a result of the engagement with government institutions and officials, especially the DEOs, there were positive changes, in terms of recruitment of new teachers, and construction of new school buildings. New school buildings were constructed in 430 villages, new teachers were appointed in 369 schools and the jobs of serving teachers were regularised. MDMs were regularised with active involvement of the SMCs. After regularisation of teachers and MDM, a better teaching and learning environment has been created benefitting more than 16,000 school-going children, which led to a massive reduction in dropout cases.

About 312 labourers from 13 villages did not receive payments for works done under the MGNREGA for more than eight months. After awareness drives under the project, they submitted a complaint on the grievance day to the District Collector. Within a month of submitting the complaint, all 312 labourers received full payment. A total of Rs.5.85-million labour payments were made.

People get work and wages

The efforts resulted in formation of labour groups and their increased demands for works in the Gram Panchayats under MGNREGS. These people and groups were able to submit their grievances. More than 2,410 grievances were lodged as the project helped the deprived people to raise their problems in front of the government officials for better solutions. A total of 6,389 ration cards were issued, with a good number of people from BPL families getting their cards. While the project worked on five schemes, the Grievance Cells organised by Agramee and partners in Mayurbhanj, Kalahandi and Gajapati focussed on 10 different schemes. The Food Commissioners had attended these programmes where 100% BPL families were given ration cards. In 1,150 villages, people have been able to receive payments, which were withheld for six months to more than a year.

The project helped the poor and deprived get their work, with benefits reaching to the people and villages as needed and demanded by them. A total of 5,229 beneficiaries got 100 days of work under MGNREGS. Nearly Rs. 11.65 crore of wages were generated through the labour groups. A total of Rs. 67.23 crore of MGNREGS wages were generated. The action regularised the labour payments, which reduced out-migration.

The project helped a large number of people in getting access to other different schemes. The *Sachetaks* and BICs particularly were instrumental in providing these benefits. The *Sachetaks* played a key role in collecting necessary information from

the BICs and sharing at appropriate levels. They also provided the grassroots-level information to the BICs and helped in engaging with the government institutions, and bringing changes as well as creating beneficiaries.

Number of People Accessed Various Government Schemes

Schemes and Programmes	Beneficiary		Total
	Male	Female	
Old Age Pension	3,145	3,287	6,432
FRA Land	2,768	2,798	5,566
100 Days of Work under MGNREGS	3,075	2,154	5,229
Youth Skill Development Training Programmes	3,256	1,534	4,790
Widow Pension	-	4,398	4,398
Handicap Pension	193	232	425
PAY/IAY/BPG	3,490	3,176	6,666
Jan Dhan Yojana	1,870	1,564	3,434
Biju Swasthya Kalyan Yojana	1,120	987	2,107
Biju Krusak Kalyan Yojana	2,329	2,167	4,496
Total	21,246	22,297	43,543

Women participating in local governance

The project helped the community, particularly women, to become aware of their rights. Awareness, capacity building and facilitation activities led to a lot of changes at the level of information, interest, and action. People took ownership and initiatives; they came forward to question the development decisions and action. They showed readiness to discuss their issues and needs of their areas, and participate in village-level planning, decision-making, and Gram Sabhas.

More than 1,200 Gram Sabhas were held during the period of five years. Approximately 100,000 people, of which 48,114 were women, participated in these Gram Sabhas. Women showed tremendous interest on village development planning. They massively participated in different meetings in their respective Gram Panchayats. With regards to governance matters beyond the Gram Sabha, the tribal women did not lag behind and took up leadership roles. They came to the forefront and openly raised their

issues with the officials and formed their own labour groups for the MGNREGS work. They demanded their job with the PEOs and Sarapanchs.

The women leaders organised other women in the villages for their rights, and demanded that their views and needs to be considered. They offered solutions as a part of the planning, and took actions against injustice, exploitation, and violence. Processing of country liquor was mostly closed due to active role played by the women groups. There were 2,914 anti-liquor movements organised during the project period. Tribal women started taking interest in politics. They also formed a state-level federation, *Mati Ma Ro Santano* (Children of Mother Earth), to address their issues in a collective manner.

LESSONS LEARNT

The initiative of the youth had significant influence in terms of creating pressure and momentum for more effective and efficient delivery of government programmes, and for increasing the transparency and accountability of the officials and elected representatives.

The CAGs led to a major involvement of community members, especially the youth. These bodies were able to create significant impact and ripples, pushing for effective implementation of different programmes, and ensuring inclusion of the most vulnerable sections in key programmes. The CAGs strengthened the spirit and determination of the project staff and villagers to achieve the goal. There have been outstanding success stories as villagers and women groups demanded for transparency and accountability during implementation of schemes. The trend of following up of issues in villages and lodging complaints went up substantially, which shows the impact of awareness on CAG members. 12 CAGs are active even after the end of the project. These are being facilitated by the partners, especially where the NGOs/CBOs are active.

The CAG meetings proved to be powerful events as the project faced a lot of challenges from irregular school teachers, Anganwadi workers, corrupt ward members, Sarapanches, ASHAs, GRS, contractors and their supporters in the villages. There have been instances of life risks to different Block Coordinators, *Sachetaks* and CAG members



as they received threats, both over the phone as well as in person.

The *Sachetaks* were instrumental in facilitating the actions of the CAGs, helping to raise the issues at different levels, by reading out the information from the relevant IEC pamphlets, facilitating writing of applications, planning and organising visits to the concerned authorities.

One block-level Information Centre with a District or Block Coordinator and its two *Sachetaks* faced a tough challenge to cover the operational area of 50 villages and five Gram Panchayats, mandated for each Block. Nevertheless, the easy and open access to application forms, leaflets, brochures, posters on different government schemes and the facility of getting petitions written by the *Sachetak* or the Block Coordinator had seen a steady rise in the number of visitors to the BICs. Around 12 BICs are still continuing to play their important role beyond the project period.

The project was able to solve several widespread and long standing issues such as shortage of teachers

in schools, malfunctioning of AWC, unavailability of health personnel, services and medicines, lack of MGNREGS jobs, delay in wage payment, low participation by women, and their lack of voice in Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha, and unwillingness to approach the Collector's Grievance Cell.

The project adopted some strategies to bring the results, which could be replicated elsewhere. Written petitions were filed for immediate addressal of the issues with the concerned government officials at block and district levels. Collector's Grievance Cell was utilised for quick and sure addressal. This had built up the morale and self-confidence of the villagers, and led to quicker results. Filing of RTI, as an important tool, encouraged more village leaders to get involved in the process and get quicker justice, especially in the case of delay in wage payment, or deprivation from government schemes. The spectacular success of the weekly *Haat* Programme also puts this strategy on a stronger footing. The results provided practical solutions to the deprived people in their daily life and led to acquisition of knowledge of new ways and means, which is likely to remain in the long run.

CONCLUSION

This five-year long project contributed significantly to transform the development scenario in 1,000

villages under 100 Gram Panchayats in 20 blocks across 10 backward districts in Odisha. Significant efforts were undertaken for people to access information on five sectors of nutrition, health, education, MGNREGS and governance. The local leaders, beneficiaries, women groups, PRI members were sensitised about the relevance of continuous efforts in order to take action and get the benefits. They were helped in how to get involved in different processes. This included support in how to gain access to the related information and documents including the application forms of the government schemes. They were supported to demand a transparent and accountable implementation of the government schemes both at the village and Gram Panchayat levels. The people were given the information on the targets of different schemes to find out the level of achievements in their respective villages against these targets. These targets, information on how to achieve these by filing public petitions generated demands among people as they could see the gap between 'what should have been done' and 'what was done'.

The beneficiaries and PRI members were told that their successful efforts to address any issue would be highlighted in the newsletters. This has not only encouraged them, but also created a sense of continuity in their minds. Many government officials were supportive of the initiatives by the





people. These officials would continue providing information and guidance on access to the schemes. The programme has been able to bring together civil society organisations, bureaucrats, media, academicians, and village community members on a platform to discuss the RTI Act.

The key results pertained to employment, education, health and nutrition. The delay in MGNREGS wage payment was solved with timely payment in parts of the project area after filing the written petition to the departmental heads by the affected beneficiaries. The issues of teacher-shortage, non-committed, absentee and irregular teachers were also quickly solved by filing written petitions to the BEOs by the

villagers. Besides, the issues of delay and absence of ICDS service delivery, absence and irregularities of Anganwadi workers were addressed through village meetings and conversation with these workers; the reluctant workers became sincere and committed to the ICDS norms.

After getting information on the various schemes and policies, a lot of individuals came forward to demand better implementation of the government programmes. Their strong voices have achieved many tangible results. With their efforts and results, the entire community has benefitted, at least in terms of a visible immediate evidence and confidence.

LEAD PARTNER

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FUNDING SUPPORT



STRENGTHENING PARTICIPATION

in Local Governance to Enhance Access to Entitlements and Basic Services by Marginalised Tribal Communities

A project implemented by *Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP-I)* in partnership with *Development Support Centre*.

“

Women are interested and want to come forward to voice themselves; it's the barriers in the community that force them to withdraw. But as I had the support of my family and sisters in the women's federation, I mustered the courage to come forward and voice myself, now as I am an EWR. I feel responsible and motivated to take up the cause of women and governance forward.

”

Sunita Ben
Sagbara Block,
Narmada District, Gujarat

CONTEXT

The 73rd and the 74th Constitutional Amendments Acts (CAAs) are landmarks in the history of Indian democracy for establishing the constitutional authority of the nation's local self-governance institutions. Ensuring self-governance for areas with local indigenous populations, the parliament accorded special powers to the Panchayats through the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act - PESA, 1996. Panchayats in areas with indigenous communities now have the autonomy to manage their natural resources and local planning, while protecting their customs, culture and traditions, along with complete autonomy to establish the process and system for all customary dispute resolution. The provisions enshrined in the Constitution can only be realised when the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are empowered and strengthened to anchor and facilitate good governance. Participation of community members, especially marginalised sections such as women and differently abled persons, is essential to ensure inclusive and sustainable development.

Against this backdrop, the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (India) Limited and Development Support Centre initiated the project, "Strengthening Participation in Local Governance to Enhance Access to Entitlements and Basic Services by Marginalised Tribal Communities". The project was supported by the European Union (EU) in the states of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat in India. It was

implemented over a five-year period from 2014 to 2019. Madhya Pradesh is the second largest Indian state and the fifth most populous state with over 75 million residents. The state ranks 33rd on the Human Development Index (HDI) with a score of 0.594, which is lower than the national average of 0.640. Gujarat is the sixth largest Indian state and the ninth most populous with an HDI of 0.527 (2007-08). Considering the status of human development indicators in these two states, it was essential to design and nurture a process for strengthening local governance institutions as the key force in planning, implementation and monitoring the development programmes for the communities. The community's access to information on public services through various media for their informed participation was deemed an essential element.

The project aimed to build capacities of the Gram Panchayats to facilitate participatory local planning, monitoring, and effective delivery of public schemes by establishing accountability and transparency in the system. The project was premised on the assumption that quality information available with the community would lead to their participation, which in turn would ensure good governance at the local level. The project intended to address the governance deficits through a spectrum of support, which included ensuring rights of the marginalised and the accountability of governance institutions. The project was concentrated in six blocks of five districts—Narmada and Sarbankatha in Gujarat, as well as Dhar, Badwani and Khargone in Madhya Pradesh. It reached out to 16 Gram Panchayats in each block, with a total of 96 Gram Panchayats in the two states. The blocks were largely populated by the local indigenous communities with some households from Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Other Backward Castes (OBCs). The villages were selected on the basis of their larger proportion of local indigenous populations and strong community institutions like Self Help Groups (SHGs) and farmers' groups.

THEORY OF CHANGE AND STRATEGIES

The project believed that empowered citizens could contribute to strengthening local governance institutions for facilitating transformation in their lives. It focused on creating avenues, opportunities



and dialogues with stakeholders including state and non-state actors for building capacities of PRIs so that they can perform governance functions effectively. Access to information, participation of citizens, especially women from the marginalised sections, and creating facilitative instruments like *Jan Suchna Kendras* were the project's key strategies.

A baseline survey, conducted at the inception stage using participatory methodologies, was anchored through the PRIs and elected representatives, especially women. The gender segregated data generated from the survey was used to assess the status of awareness and interface with the system for availing entitlements by community members. The data collected through collective means served as an advocacy tool for the Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) Forum to take up with the block and district administration and other elected bodies.

The project operated on the core principles of *Soochna* (information) leading to *Sahbhagita* (participation), which ultimately led to *Sushashan* (good governance). Therefore, the focus was to

The project demonstrated the power of information in strengthening the governance institutions for effective delivery of public services.



enhance the capacity of PRIs through introducing processes to help in improving transparency and accountability in the system. The process was anchored by enabling *Gram Sabhas* and *Gram Panchayats*, so that they could perform their governance role effectively in local planning and monitoring of public schemes. Panchayats and Gram Sabhas started taking initiative in the formative phase and later took responsibilities for planning, delivery of services, and monitoring in a participatory and transparent manner.

Thus, to achieve the objectives of enabling quality delivery of entitlement schemes and basic services in health, education, and socio-economic security to poor and marginalised, local indigenous households in the community, the

project opted for multiple strategies of capacity building of PRI institutions with special focus on the Gram Panchayats. Firstly, the project focused on preparing participatory Village Development Plans (VDPs) and strengthening governance processes at the grassroots. Secondly, enhancing information outreach and creating institutional support for the *Jan Sampark Kendras*, which acted as the nodal points for accessing, sharing and analysing information between the state and the communities for citizens to access information to demand services. Thirdly, facilitating and helping create forums for the EWRs to collectively engage with government authorities for participatory planning, monitoring and implementing development works and public services with gender sensitivities.

Mahila Sabhas for strengthening grassroots governance

The intervention focused on using participatory methods for enhancing participation of community members especially of women in *Gram Sabha*, planning and monitoring exercises at the village

and block levels. It used technology, which helped in enhancing participation through its outreach and accessibility of information at a scale. *Mahila Sabhas* were critical events in the community for raising women's issues. Along with community members, the project ensured that the *Mahila Sabhas* met immediately before every Gram Sabha to identify and prioritise their needs and concerns regarding entitlements and public services. The women PRI members and the members of *Mahila Mandals* and SHGs participated in the *Mahila Sabhas*. The EWRs could use this forum for advocacy, awareness and sensitisation of women in the community towards their entitlements. It also created a platform for them to further take up these issues for advocacy with *Mahila Mandals*.

Enhancing skills for participatory planning and monitoring

The project developed capacities of the Gram Panchayat elected representatives, especially the EWRs, on participatory planning and monitoring. The outcomes of the participatory processes led by the community leaders provided a firm ground for the Gram Sabhas to hold informed discussions. Skills were built on conducting participatory social audits as mandated by several government programmes such as National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), and the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA). The participatory social audits assessed the performance of welfare schemes and the overall governance process. The community processes were followed by public hearings and *Mahiti Sabhas* (information meetings) whenever needed. This was to ensure that all eligible people received their benefits and all information regarding their entitlements and other services were available. It created an ecosystem of transparency and accountability at the community level.

Village Development Plans (VDPs)

Gram Panchayat members were trained to develop micro-plans for their Gram Panchayats using various Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools with the active participation of villagers. The presence of at least 50 per cent women for the planning meetings were mandatory. Trainings on financial

management, resource mobilisation and other government norms and processes were organised to enhance the capacity of the PRI members to be able to anchor the process of village level planning and implementation.

Nagrik Soochna Kendra (NSK)

The NSK was the key driver to reach the citizens and to empower them as well as the Gram Panchayats to access information on public schemes and programmes. Over the years, the NSKs played critical roles by working with citizens and Gram Panchayats as well as at the block levels. The NSKs are now extended as Gram Panchayat level information centres for their citizens. This has ensured sustainability of the NSKs. At the NSKs, people can enquire and learn about details of all new and existing schemes of the Central and state governments. It is common for rural populations to be oblivious of public schemes or remain unaware of all those who can benefit from such schemes. They are often unable to claim these benefits because of inconsistent paperwork or absence of necessary documentation. Often, either the government office is very far or the government officials manipulate citizens and, hence, people are left bereft of their due benefits. NSKs used different ICT tools such as the Mobile *Mahiti Karyakram*, Helpline, SMS, e-camps and other events to ensure that citizens have access to information. NSKs facilitated citizens' access to various government schemes and services. The focus of the work was to ensure that citizen get the benefits tied with each scheme and service from various government departments. These centres assisted in following sectors such as nutrition, health insurance, immunisation, agriculture and poultry for interventions regarding livelihood enhancement, social security schemes (widow, old age and disability pensions), school education and tribal development departments, assistance to women in getting land rights, etc.

The project has effectively complemented the use of on-ground awareness and mobilisation strategies like conducting information camps, people-to-people contact by *Nagrik Mitras* and village-based community volunteers, thematic/scheme specific information campaigns. These were achieved with the use of Interactive Voice Response System (IVRS), tele-helplines and text

messaging as a powerful, new-age strategy for mobilising and creating awareness among less literate and less informed communities, while also relaying important messages/scheme related information from government departments to the communities.

Application of ICT for improved governance

The project demonstrated how synergy between technology and governance process can result in ease of access to information for citizens. Mobile phone technology was used to promote awareness and disseminating information to the rural communities. These services provided information related to government schemes, plans and budget allocation in the project area. A mobile phone-based IVRS system that can be accessed by communities to receive information on government schemes and procedures and enable them to seek clarification was developed. *Nagrik Mitras* played an active role in encouraging and supporting communities to use these services to understand and access public programmes better. The *Nagrik Mitras* and community volunteers were able to mobilise communities and connect citizens to schemes by creating awareness, guiding them on required application and documentation processes, supporting them in preparation, submission of applications and following up on the status of applications, etc. The project provided support to elected Gram Panchayat representatives to use e-governance measures and ICTs to share information on entitlements and schemes. Government functionaries, Panchayat officers and computer operators for the e-gram and other e-governance services were trained for data management and use of mobile-based information service using the internet.

Implementing pro-active disclosure under RTI Act

The elected Gram Panchayat leaders were trained, sensitised, and supported to implement the provisions under RTI Act, especially the pro-active disclosure of information. Key provisions of the RTI Act were translated into the local languages and displayed at various public places like the Gram



Panchayat offices, the local schools, and the local health centres through IEC material such as posters, wall writing and signboards.

Preparation and dissemination of IEC materials

The IEC material included a series of publications like booklet, pamphlets and posters on various public schemes and programmes. Locally relevant materials, especially by using folk media, was produced in local languages by members of community-based groups. Innovative and traditional communication material, usually in the form of India's oral tradition of sharing information through songs, stories and folk theatre, was also used and collated as case materials. For instance, in a particular Gram Sabha, the Gram Panchayat secretary readout all information about benefits of schemes, budgets, expenditure, MGNREGS works and payments, using folk lyrics, folk songs and even connections to various incidents in that Panchayat, as a medium of disseminating information. Explaining complicated issues through folk songs is a popular oral tradition among rural communities, especially among women.

Elected Women Representatives Forum

The project facilitated the formation of EWR forums at the block level. Collectivisation has been a core element of the initiative, and the project has emphasised on creating convergence of efforts by the EWRs. A forum at the block level has helped

in providing a platform for the EWRs to organise themselves, share learnings and advocate for the common cause. Considering that the block is the intermediary administrative level for convergence as part of the local governance function, it played a strategic role in consolidating the EWRs to collectively representing themselves for advocacy and action.

MAJOR OUTCOMES

Increased women's participation

Over the five-year duration, the project was able to create substantial gains. The strengthening of the institutions was a very impactful process, which helped in empowering the Panchayats to create dialogues with the citizens, especially those from the marginalised sections of society. This resulted in increased participation in both Gram Sabhas and Mahila Sabhas. Mahila Sabhas have seen a rapid rise, which has helped community women to participate in the governance processes and contribute to enhancing the development of their communities. Meanwhile, under the leadership of EWRs, Mahila Sabhas have been very active and women in the community have raised their issues beyond Gram Sabhas to reach the block, sub-division, and district levels. The district level *Jansunwais* (public hearings) ensured that due follow up was done to their demands. The continuity of Mahila Sabhas has impacted women's participation in the Gram Sabhas.

Access to entitlements and services

The project has demonstrated the linkage between strengthening the governance institutions and creating avenues for access to information for citizens resulting in the local communities accessing their entitlements under various government schemes and policies. In the five years of the project's implementation 51,711 citizens were able to access various benefits across the five target districts. The project included beneficiaries like pregnant or lactating mothers, widows and single women, persons with disabilities, elderly citizens availing pensions and landless families, etc., in sectors like health, education, livelihood and social security.

Sunita ben was a resident of Sagbara Block, Narmada district, Gujarat. She had been mostly confined to household chores until she became part of the SHG and joined the Navjeevan Adivasi Mahila Vikas Manch in 2007. In 2014, she was selected as the Nagrik Mitra and was trained on the RTI Act and its provisions, local self-governance, social audit and was informed about government sponsored schemes and programmes. She also worked with the Gram Panchayats in ensuring access to information and public services to the local communities, during which she realised that there was an urgent need for participation of elected women representatives in the governance process, this motivated her to participate in Panchayat elections, which she won and became a EWR in 2015. She galvanised the support of the women in the community and negotiated works for access to safe drinking water in the community. She said, "Women are interested and want to come forward to voice themselves; it's the barriers in the community that force them to withdraw. But as I had the support of my family and sisters in the women's federation, I mustered the courage to come forward and voice myself, now as I am an EWR. I feel responsible and motivated to take up the cause of women and governance forward."

Increased outreach and information

A total of 86,000 citizens had experienced improved access to information through the NSKs as well the outreach provided by *Nagrik Mitras* and community volunteers. A significant portion were farmers (nearly 40 percent), followed by the elderly and the parents of school students, to whom the project provided information on agricultural and livelihoods schemes, old-age pensions and information on enrolment/admission to schools and hostels for indigenous people, respectively. In the five years of the project

Using technology for greater information outreach

Sidiyabhai is a deputy Sarpanch of Ubhariya Gram Panchayat, Sagabara block Narmada district in Gujarat. He resides in Gaysavar Village and is a regular listener of the Mobile Mahiti Karyakram message. He is a beneficiary of Awas Yojana, ration card and other schemes, for which he gives credit to MMK. Sidiyabhai is a knowledgeable person, but he believes that the information given in MMK messages is very helpful and accurate, especially information about scheme documentation. He uses the information to support other citizens in his Gram Panchayat. He also plays MMK message in community meetings to spread the information to other citizens.

IVRS for Mobile *Mahiti Karyakram* (MMK) helped in reaching 12,000 citizens across six blocks by regularly sending out voice messages to the community on different aspects of public programmes. MMK has proved to be a very effective tool for communication and citizens have independently used the information received from the MMK. In 2017, on International Women's Day, the project had launched a helpline in both the target states. The helpline is managed by Radio Reporter with the support of block teams and ICT officers. The helpline number is publicised on a large scale through posters, MMK and community meetings. Detailed software was developed for capturing the data of each citizen who calls the helpline for any query/support or guidance. The team is trained for operating the helpline software as well as accessing information to respond to the query of any citizen. During 2017, a total of 596 calls were received and provided guidance. The increased number of calls to the helpline signified the increase in demand for information by the community. The maximum number of calls were received immediately after sending any voice message, which constructed a link in the MMK and helpline services. It also gave the project the clarity that citizens were looking for information and were ready to bear the cost of making a call to the helpline. Digital camps organised with government departments and Gram Panchayats helped citizens

implementation, 23,992 citizens were reached through the efforts of the *Nagrik Mitras*. The project was able to establish well equipped NSKs in all the project blocks and motivated 24 Gram Panchayats to run Panchayat level NSKs to access services at minimum transaction costs. These NSKs have created an identity for themselves with reasonable levels of awareness among the local communities of their objectives and the services these centres offer.



to directly get information and also apply for schemes in all blocks. A total of 14,076 citizens participated in various Digital Camps. The project successfully demonstrated the use of technology for strengthening grass roots democracy. Voice messaging was initiated in 2017 and was able to reach 178,203 citizens while text messaging reached out to 150,309 citizens. In addition, video shows, campaigns, camps and narrow casting were also used. Over all, the effort helped to reach 512,082 citizens with information on various schemes and programmes.

Improved functioning of Gram Panchayats

One of the key areas of the intervention was to strengthen the Gram Panchayats to plan, implement and manage projects independently. This included introducing the practices like informing the community about the Gram Sabhas in advance, holding a formal agenda, documenting the proceedings, strengthening role of EWRs to lead the discussions and manage political conflicts in Gram Panchayats. Elected members were also trained and supported in organising community mobilisation for the project. Nearly 177 Gram Sabhas were facilitated in 16 Gram Panchayats where 7,931 individuals participated.

Acceptance of VDPs by Gram Panchayats

The project was successful in motivating the communities to prepare their VDPs in a participatory

Tinuben Arjunbhai was a resident of Kukarda village of Dediapada block of Narmada district in Gujarat. She was enlisted as a beneficiary of the Aawaas Yojana. After completing the foundation work of her house, she received the first instalment of the scheme. After completing brick work she was entitled for the second instalment. However, she started worrying when she didn't receive it in time. She had no clue what needed to be done, nor whom to approach. One of her relatives knew about the NSK Helpline and advised Tinuben to call the helpline. Tinuben called the helpline where the counsellor informed her to check at the Taluka Panchayat office in Dediapada for the status of her second instalment. She went to the Taluka Panchayat official where she was informed that her name was not on the priority list of the Aawaas Yojana so they could not help her.

Tinuben called the helpline again for a solution to her procedural problem. The helpline counsellor suggested going to the Taluka Panchayat office with a work order of the Aawaas Yojana, which she would have received from the government to confirm her status with the beneficiary list. This time she went to the Taluka Panchayat official who searched her name and they found it. The official now assured her of the second instalment.



manner and get them approved through a Gram Sabha resolution (in most cases) for submission to the Gram Panchayat and for use as a perspective plan to support the annual Panchayat planning. Depending on the acceptability of communities and operational ease, these 78 VDPs were developed at the ward level and aggregated at the Gram Panchayat level. Based on the project strategy, preparation of these plans has been preceded by conducting Mahila Sabhas in the villages to encourage women members to identify key development issues in the village and to list their priorities for inclusion in the VDPs.

LESSONS LEARNT

The project demonstrated the power of information in strengthening the governance institutions for effective delivery of public services. The project has special focus on excluded groups and communities including women and followed a gender sensitive approach towards development which helped in creating a just and equitable opportunity for women to participate in the governance processes and also created a gender responsive approach in the governance processes at the grass roots.

The project has demonstrated that capacity building is a multi-faceted process where an ecosystem has to be created at the community level with both collective and individual measures to build leadership and ensure participation. The project worked in partnership with PRIs and established *Nagrik Soochna Kendras* to build capacity for *Nagrik Mitras* and induced technology for creating a complete ecosystem of support and exchange of information to address the governance deficits at the local level. Thus, the efforts have to be multi-faceted to ensure inclusive development in the community.

The project nurtured a cadre of volunteers, which helped facilitate access to information in the community. Their efforts were amplified by the use of technology and various media platforms. The results were exponential in terms of access to public services to the beneficiaries. Thus, people friendly and affordable technology can help to attain scale, provided it is accompanied by a robust grievance redressal mechanism.

The project has demonstrated the impact of engaging with and building capacities of the elected women representatives who are generally marginalised in the governance processes. The project relied on both individual and institutional capacity building. In addition, it created the EWR forum as a platform for the elected women representatives to share, reflect and advocate for their entitlements, which was a very useful strategy that also recognised their collective agency to bring change.

One of the major learnings of the project is that removing bottlenecks in programme delivery through governance reforms not only impacts enhanced participation of community members, but also creates pathways for more transparency and accountability for institutions. The community





feels more empowered to question the status quo, which deepens grass roots democracy.

CONCLUSION

The project has successfully demonstrated the interlink ages between governance institutions, access to information and empowerment of communities at the grass roots. The project has generated effective strategies to strengthen

PRIs, created avenues for information access by creating a cadre of community volunteers and people friendly technology to ensure people's participation in governance processes and in addressing governance deficit. The project has successfully created an ecosystem where access to information is a key component, resulting in citizens' action, asserting the idea that information can lead to participation and result in good governance, realising grass roots democracy.

LEAD PARTNER

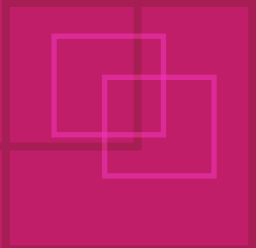


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Rural Literacy and Health Programme

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Although a Gram Panchayat member myself, I had no thorough knowledge about MGNREGA, its budgets, the procedure for Form numbers 2 and 6, or about the budget releasing system. My participation in the Demand Driven Training organised by RLHP changed this completely. Apart from gaining knowledge on these factors, it was also a big learning for me that through MGNREGA, people not only gained employment, but could also improve their rural infrastructure. After this realisation I took proactive steps, and as a result, 80 members in my village have applied for work under MGNREGA.

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Mr. Basavanagowda
Member, Sarjapur, Gram Panchayat
Raichur District, Karnataka

THE CONTEXT

In 2007, the Government of India announced the creation of the Backward Regions Grant Fund (BRGF) to bridge the gap between 250 of the poorest districts in India and the rest of India in terms of infrastructure and development. This was also an experiment in fiscal decentralisation, as it aimed to distribute the funds directly to the Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) based on pre-approved district development plans. Karnataka was home to five of these districts (Davangere, Raichur, Gulbarga, Bidar and Chitradurga) as well as to multiple problems such as low literacy rates, low levels of employment, lack of drinking water facilities, and low levels of awareness about government schemes along with more endemic issues such as poverty, gender discrimination and caste discrimination.

Additionally, despite numerous government schemes having been established to help the community alleviate these issues, it was found that most people had little to no awareness of these schemes, leading to low enrolment rates. The lack of awareness was further compounded by the lack of accountability of the government officials, thus creating a vicious cycle of misinformation. If the people are not aware of the scheme, they do not apply for them; and since they do not apply, they cannot hold government officials accountable, who in turn are unable to address any potential problems since citizens do not approach them to solve any issues. Further analysis showed that all five districts had also under-utilised their allocated

funds, something which was reflected in their development plans (or the lack of one).

With these issues in mind, **CESVI**, with support from the European Union (EU), and in partnership with the **Rural Literacy and Health Programme (RLHP)**, proposed a project. This project, “Empowering People in Five Backward Districts of Karnataka to Access Public Schemes”, would target 20 villages each in Gulbarga, Bidar, Davagere, Raichur and Chitradurga districts of Karnataka.

The project aimed at improving awareness levels among the local population with a special focus on schemes for the health, education, and livelihood sectors. The main assumption operating behind these objectives was that increased awareness levels would not just lead to higher scheme enrolment rates, but would also foster a sense of accountability among government/Panchayat officials, who were responsible for the implementation of these schemes. In turn, their accountability would lead to improved governance as well as scheme outreach and uptake.

THEORY OF CHANGE AND STRATEGIES

The main aim of the project was to affect change among the local community by mobilising, educating and empowering them, for improving scheme accessibility and bolstering social accountability. This approach was prioritised as it was understood that a lot of the underlying problems in these districts came about as a result of a lack of awareness among citizens about the schemes and their entitlements, which coupled with the under-utilisation of BRGF funds was severely hindering development in the area. For example, in Bidar it was found that due to such low awareness levels about government programmes, the citizens tended not to participate in such schemes and, therefore, lost out on their benefits. The basic idea was that if people became aware, they would avail of the benefits of these schemes as well as demand the utilisation of funds put aside for their development. This would require two kinds of interventions, one on the demand side (improving awareness among local citizens) and the other on the supply side (sensitising government officials to the needs of the community). In addition to this, it



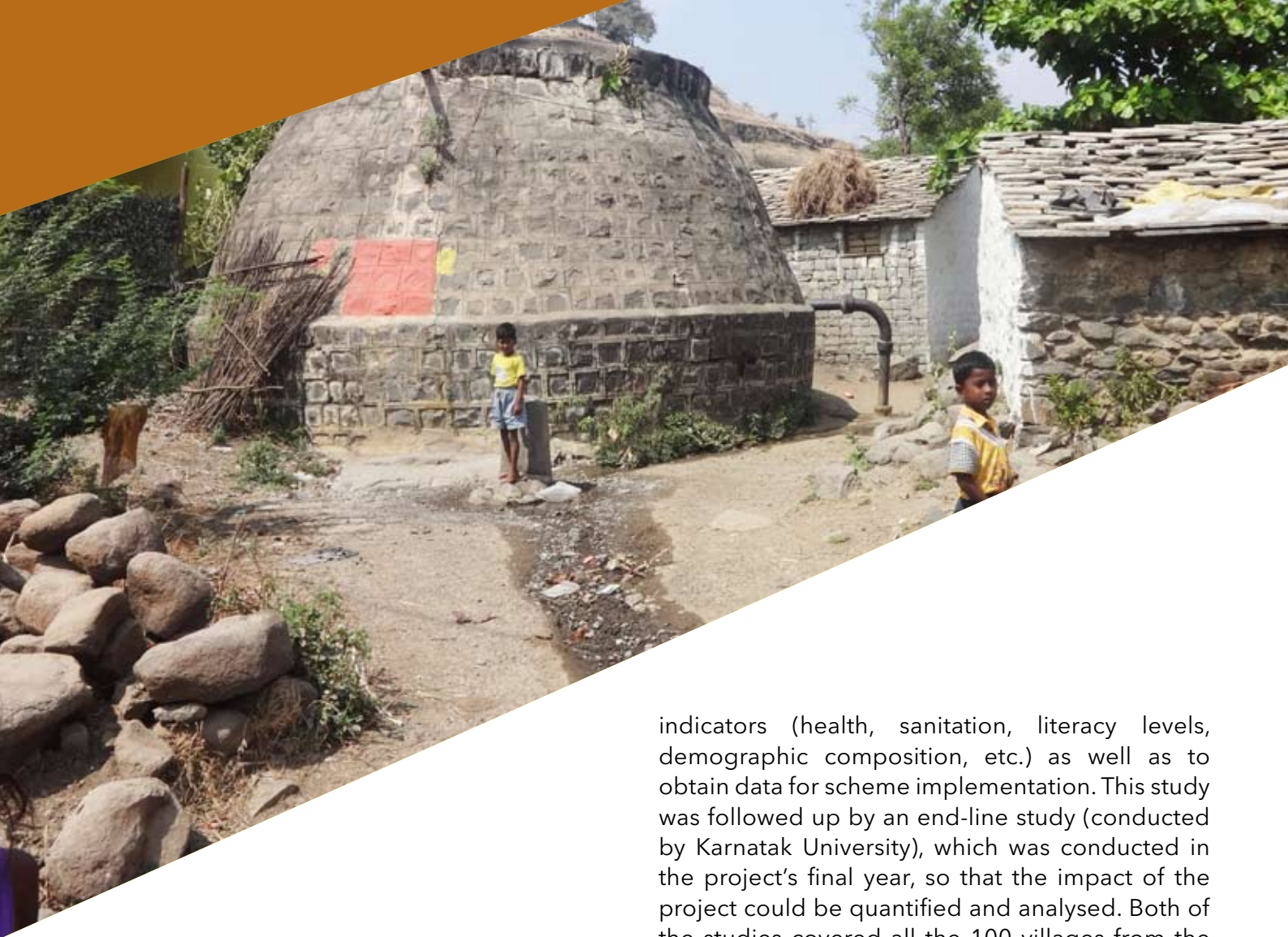
was also necessary to build the advocacy capacities of other supporting actors such as CSOs working at the grassroots level and the local media. The nature of the issue was such that a multi-pronged approach was necessary for the efforts of the project to sustain themselves long after the project became over.

With this in mind, the project chose to focus on those schemes, which would have the greatest impact on the immediate living conditions of local community. Therefore, schemes¹ that mainly dealt with education, livelihood, and health issues were the first to be chosen. Furthermore, citizens were also educated about the Right to Information (RTI) Act, a legal recourse to obtain information from the government.

Besides the poor socio-economic markers of the region, there are also issues of caste, class, religion and gender, which underpinned a lot of the problems associated with these five districts. For example, only 33.15 per cent of all Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) girls in Bidar district were considered literate, despite the overall literacy level of the region being almost double that number, at 71 per cent. A large chunk of the population in these districts were from the SC and ST categories, and due to the subtle, yet systematic manner in which caste discrimination manifests itself, it is not out of place to suggest

¹ Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan or SSA, Integrated Child Development Scheme or ICDS, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act or MGNREGA, Swachh Bharat Mission or SBM and the National Rural Drinking Water Programme or NRDWP.

Despite 88.6 per cent of the surveyed households possessing MGNREGA job cards, only six per cent had received work under the scheme.



that this may have played a role in their lack of development. Providing a quantitative output becomes worthwhile and sustainable only if it is backed up with a change in behaviour, which is what the project aimed to do.

The beneficiaries of the interventions were mainly 150,000 members from the poor and vulnerable sections of the local population, with a special focus on women and scheduled caste community members from the five, selected districts.

After the formulation of the project proposal and brainstorming potential solutions, a baseline study was conducted (in collaboration with Gulbarga University) to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the pre-existing socio-economic

indicators (health, sanitation, literacy levels, demographic composition, etc.) as well as to obtain data for scheme implementation. This study was followed up by an end-line study (conducted by Karnatak University), which was conducted in the project's final year, so that the impact of the project could be quantified and analysed. Both of the studies covered all the 100 villages from the five districts.

The data from the baseline study underpinned many of the assumptions that the project team had observed utilising census data and other reports. Many citizens reported low literacy levels (Raichur district had the lowest literacy ranking in the state), indebtedness, poor sanitation (only 1.7 per cent of the households had a toilet in their homes) and unemployment. With this troubling context in mind, the project team prepared the following actions over the next four years.

The **Backward Region Scheme Support Groups (BRSSG)** was a unique approach adopted by the project, where citizens were trained and facilitated to become "the voice of the voiceless".

BRSSGs were established at the village, gram panchayat and district levels, of each of the five districts.

They represented the interests of the community regarding scheme and scheme implementation. They ensured that complaints from their village reached the concerned government officials and were duly acted upon. The BRSSG members were also encouraged to attend their local Gram Sabhas, which is an institutionalised process to interact with Panchayat and government officials.

To facilitate the formation of the BRSSG, the project identified pre-existing groups (based on caste, gender, and occupation). Each member was chosen by the community on numerous criteria such as their motivation and commitment towards the project aims. They were also chosen on the basis of their gender/caste to ensure that the voices of women and marginalised groups were adequately represented. Each BRSSG group at the village level consisted of 10 members, finally adding up to 1,000 members across 100 villages from the five districts. Additionally, whenever there was turnover in any group, different members were selected by the groups themselves, by striving to retain the basic criteria of representation in terms of gender and backward castes. At the Gram Panchayat level, 21 groups with 420 members were formed by the end of the second year. This was further systematised as five groups were formed at the taluk level comprising 125 members, who were supported by five groups with 250 members at the district level. Additionally, special attention was paid to the inclusion of Panchayat officials at the village level, and government officials at the Gram Panchayat level. Lastly, a district coordinator in each group was chosen to facilitate and plan meetings and sessions in their districts.

The BRSSG members were all trained on how to plan and monitor the numerous schemes, as well as to strengthen relationships between the community and the concerned government officials for effective scheme implementation. These trainings covered relevant topics such as leadership skills, communication skills, petition writing, problem solving, as well as information building on the five target schemes and RTI. In total, 461 such training days were organised, which were attended by 12,417 members. All of these trainings aimed at enabling the members to organise such trainings for their own communities, while acting as the main point of contact between the village and the government. After attending these trainings, the members were able to advocate for change with their government official as well as negotiate any demands on behalf of their community.

These skill-based trainings were very positively received, as members of the local community were adapting skills they would otherwise never have access to. The benefits of these trainings were so powerful, that the project also began to conduct demand-based skill trainings, because community members not part of the BRSSGs (such as SHG and PRI members) asked to be part of the process as well, after witnessing the positive outcomes of such trainings. For example, a lot of the citizens asked for MGNREGA-based training sessions so that they could have more information on local jobs, job cards, budget allocation, etc. There was also a high demand for training sessions on building sustainability for the project's actions. While these trainings were initially organised by the project team, they were later organised and conducted by BRSSG members themselves. In total, 827 such demand-based skill trainings were organised, which were attended by 22,271 people.

However, that is not all! The efforts of the BRSSG extended beyond spreading scheme-related information and petitioning on behalf of their community. BRSSG members were also responsible for setting up Community Service Centres (CSCs),

which are quickly forming an important part of rural infrastructure. A CSC is a low-cost initiative, which helps form a platform for rural citizens to apply for e-Governance services such as *Adhaar*, Passport and PAN. This task was made harder by the fact that there is no separate budget allocated for building such centres at the Gram Panchayat level, but after consistent lobbying by the BRSSG members, the local government finally helped establish six CSCs in the five districts. BRSSG members were also involved in shaping the Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDP) such that the needs of all sections of the local community were adequately represented in the plans. For example, numerous villages and taluks expressed an interest in obtaining more toilets as part of the SBM. These issues were adequately reflected in the respective GPDPs, leading to the construction of 3,042 toilets across all five districts, as a consequence of the efforts of the BRSSG.

Furthermore, BRSSG members were encouraged to share their learnings, issues and challenges among themselves, scheme experts, Panchayat officials as well as government officials, through state and district-level conferences, which were organised as part of the project. The primary aim of organising such conferences was to build a platform that would go beyond the taluk and village-based discussions, while creating new opportunities for BRSSG members to interact with decision makers at the state and district levels. Participants were also motivated to discuss their stories as well as their planning strategies. By opening the closed doors of communication to higher levels of governance,

BRSSG members were further motivated to improve their own communities.

A major chunk of the project objectives was built around **awareness generation** among the local citizens. Due to the low literacy levels in the districts, simple methodologies had to be adopted to achieve the project outcomes. Therefore, the project devised **Mass Awareness Programmes (MAPs)** to spread awareness about the selected schemes (SBM, MGNREGA, TSC, ICDS, RTI and RTE) among the most vulnerable sections of the community. The mode of communication was deliberately kept simple and made to suit the regional context, culture, and language. Therefore, audio visual media such as *kala jathas* (street plays), documentary films, puppet shows and wall paintings were used to take the message far and wide. The implementation of the *kala jathas* was particularly interesting as the initiative was planned in a manner, which would utilise the local culture while providing a platform of expression for the districts. Twelve volunteers were trained in a Training of Trainers (ToT) programme where they learned about the various ways to conduct *kala jathas* along with information on the numerous target schemes. This was undertaken to ensure that the local community could independently conduct and compose their own street plays on any issue, going forward, without any project intervention. Seventy-eight such volunteers from the local community were trained as part of this initiative.

These *kala jathas* would be based on spreading information on the various schemes as well as facilitating discussion among the crowd regarding the problems they face while applying for these schemes. Issues such as caste-based discrimination and violence against women were also discussed. These *kala jathas* were also accompanied by film screenings. Outside vendors were chosen to make documentary films, which provided information on the target schemes of MGNREGA, ICDS, SSA, TSC and SGSY. These films were screened throughout the project period as part of the MAPs. Another documentary film was created in the last year of the project, which detailed the change brought about by the project, by juxtaposing the socio-economic situation before the project with the current situation after the project interventions. It documented these changes from the perspective of the villagers, children, and BRSSG members along with the voice of local government and Panchayat officials.



In addition, international events, such as the International Women's Day, were chosen to spread awareness about gender discrimination. In all five districts, these events were organised to bring together women from the local community to understand and discuss their status in the community as well as the rights and issues affecting them as a whole. About 1,383 women from different villages came together as part of this event, which revealed troubling stories of how women dealt with personal issues such as alcoholic husbands, children dropping out of schools, child marriages as well as lack of proper scheme implementation.

These programmes were completely new to the people in the villages, who had never received such training before. As a result, they received these programmes with a sense of vigour and passion. This led to increased awareness levels regarding the target schemes as compared to the situation before the project. This is evident by the 30 per cent increase in the demand for utilisation and satisfaction derived from using the schemes across all five districts. In total, 1,164 MAPs were conducted across the project period, which were attended by 55,827 people from all five districts.

The other major branch of awareness generation was undertaken through the **Mass Contact Programmes (MCPs)**, which were organised at the village level in the five districts. These programmes were conducted for creating a platform to bring together the community and the local government, so that they could discuss their issues with each other. Such a platform was quite unique in the area, as government officials would rarely interact with the local community, while the citizens were hesitant in approaching the officials because of the lopsided power dynamic. Citizens were under the impression that since they were of lower social standing, they were not in a position to make demands on government officials, let alone the government!

The MCPs were brought into the project with the intention of bridging this communication gap, and creating a two-sided effect. On one hand, it built the confidence of the local community to approach their local government official on any grievances they had; and on the other hand, it sensitised the government officials to the concerns of the community. As part of these efforts, workshops and discussion sessions

Over half of the village attended an MAP organised on 1st April, 2016, at Bogalingadalli Tanda village in Gulbarga district. The local citizens also saw a documentary film on the RTI Act, which made them aware of a right that they were so far ignorant about, i.e., their right to know and demand for services from the government. Encouraged by the film, the community applied for MGNREGA job cards, while those with the cards applied for work under the scheme. Within three days, 139 people received job cards from the Panchayat and people also received work as part of the scheme. They also endeavoured to ensure that they received their wages directly in their bank accounts, and that these funds were duly sent on time.

were organised, where officials provided scheme-related information to the community, followed by discussions on various scheme-related issues confronting the village. Since the discussions as well as the workshops were conducted with the people, this helped create a sense of ownership regarding the MCPs, as officials and citizens engaged in fruitful conversations so that they could find the solutions to their problems. In addition, special counters were also set up during these events to enable people to directly submit suggestions and petitions. These petitions were then forwarded to the concerned taluk/district authorities so that they could be acted upon and community members themselves followed up on these petitions with the support of BRSSG members. An equally important aspect of the MCPs was the *Application MeLa* (Application Fair), which was organised to encourage villagers to apply for the schemes, as well as discuss their concerns with government officials. Government officials were invited to visit their allotted villages for several hours, creating an opportunity for one-on-one interactions between the villagers and the officials. In total, 257 MCPs were organised, which helped reach a total of 15,997 people.

To aid the sustainability of the project, the BRSSGs were legally registered as per the Societies Registration Act.



MAJOR OUTCOMES

Health

As per the social audit, satisfaction levels of the community had gone up to 48 per cent near the project's completion from 11 per cent at its inception. Satisfactory performances (fair and good) also increased to 87 per cent from 43 per cent. The level of awareness increased to 96 per cent from 75 per cent.

Similarly, for SBM, awareness rose to 98 per cent from 70 per cent. Performance of the scheme (receiving entitlements, scheme benefits etc.) also increased to a 92 per cent positive rating (good and average).

The ICDS is one of the longest running social welfare programmes for the health and well-being of children in the country. However, at project inception it was observed that almost a third (29 per cent) did not know of its benefits or that it was a right. At the end of the project period, only a cumulative 10 per cent had a bad experience (seven per cent) or were ignorant about it (three per cent).

Satisfaction levels were high (90 per cent), with 49 per cent reporting a good performance and 41 per cent reporting an average performance.

Education

The education audit was conducted on the community's experience of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the Right to Education (RTE). SSA saw 90 per cent satisfaction, with 44 per cent reporting a good performance. Awareness had drastically increased from 63 per cent to 94 per cent by the end of the project period.

RTE as a landmark legislation resulted in significant government publicity for the many rights recognised. Community awareness increased to 89 per cent from 61 per cent, with a cumulative satisfactory performance at 82 per cent, with good performances forming 41 per cent of that total number.

Livelihoods

The data reveals that by project end virtually all of the members interviewed (98 per cent) knew about the MGNREGA scheme, and only 8 per cent had a bad experience. Fair or good was the experience of the overwhelming (90 per cent) majority. It definitely shows a sharp change from the 36 per cent that it was at the start of the project. Additionally, since this scheme involved direct access to money - there were instances of violence reported when these demands were being made.

The training in MGNREGA and how to access it resulted in immediate benefits. Coupled with the leadership training, it helped the community to stand up to their feudal lords - not an easy ask considering their dependency on the latter for their livelihood and the concentrated institutionalisation of power. 52 per cent liked the training and a further 39 per cent found it to be of average usefulness. Awareness levels also increased from 61 per cent to 96 per cent.

Right to Information

Though the RTI is not a scheme like the rest of them, it was important to spread awareness about it, as it can be used as a tool to access other rights. Data reveals that awareness levels regarding the RTI were at 83 per cent by the end of the project with overall satisfaction levels reaching about 71 per cent.



There is much progress to be made on this front, however, as about 11 per cent do not have a positive perception of the RTI, which is also accompanied by the 'good' perception being rather low at 31 per cent. However, it must be said that this figure was much higher at the end of the project than at the beginning. At the same time, a lot of work remains to be done as almost a third have a bad impression (11 per cent) or still do not know about it (17 per cent).

Increased Trust Between Citizens and Government Officials

The numerous avenues created to reach out to the citizens (*kala jathas*, application *melas*) so that they could not only learn about the schemes and entitlements, but also enrol themselves, was impressive, resulting in behavioural as well as social change. This was coupled by the fact that special efforts were made to create films and street plays in the local languages, as citizens were facilitated to question as well as enjoy the multimedia efforts. This resulted in some positive changes. Earlier there was a lot of distrust between government officials and the community, especially among women and

marginalised groups. Citizens would be unwilling to interact with government officials, while the latter would be unaware of the problems ailing the community. This vicious cycle severely constricted any development in the villages.

The incorporation of the BRSSG members as well as the awareness generation efforts, yielded fruit when the local community not only became aware of the various schemes and entitlements, but were also able to access the previously closed channels of communication with the local government. This communication was initiated either on their own (through application *melas*) or through their respective BRSSG. Government officials, in turn, were able to act according to the needs of the community, since they were considerably more aware of issues now! This sense of accountability that was built was very helpful to achieve the aim of the project, as well as for sustaining the change achieved in the long-term.

Formalisation of BRSSGs Into Backward Region Scheme Support Sanghas (BRSSs)

The project facilitated the formalisation of the BRSSGs at the district level, by putting in place a legitimate structure as per the requirements of the Society Registration Act. These newly formed BRSSs had a far more organised structure (as per the requirements of the Act), and comprised an executive body, a general body, a list of office bearers (president, treasurer, secretary, etc.) as well as specific sub-committees covering the interest areas of the project (health, education and livelihoods). This sense of legitimisation came as a demand from the citizens themselves, and only serves to strengthen the sustainability of the project.

LESSONS LEARNT

Due to the project's large area of impact, adjustments had to be made to its implementation to better suit the outcomes to the needs of the local communities. Additionally, to make this learning process more participatory, it was important to include the community's feedback. For example, as part of the mid-term evaluation process, it was found

that awareness levels among the local community were not as high as envisaged by the project team. Therefore, awareness programmes, which were meant to cease by the end of the second year were continued into the third year as well. Awareness levels among the community were also prioritised due to the high levels of poverty and illiteracy in the area, with the reasoning that the community as a whole would benefit further if they became aware of the selected schemes.

There was also an increased focus on helping eradicate gender discrimination in the initial stages of the project so that local community members were made acutely aware about a woman's experience, and the challenges faced by them due to their gender. This was also done so that BRSSG members could ensure that their demands and needs were not ignored in future, having become aware of the societal barriers imposed on them. Their efforts were rewarded, as many of them have shown a desire to change their socio-economic situation by gaining an understanding of and availing of the schemes available to them.

The project had to further tinker with the initial plan, as during the training sessions and workshops, it was noticed that a lot of the BRSSG members displayed a sense of uncertainty regarding the sustainability of the project. This was largely due to the informal nature of the BRSSG, where a lot of the members feared that "everything would go back to what it was" once the project period was over. Therefore, in the third year, efforts were made to legally formalise these groups, including the registration of BRSSGs with appropriate by-laws and protocols of membership, representation and functioning. The formal structure helped guarantee the sustainability of the groups and the programmes.

While conducting the training sessions, it was found that corruption regarding scheme implementation was rampant. A lot of the citizens utilised their knowledge from the sessions, which spoke about RTIs and began to utilise their "right to know" to access information regarding issues such as lack of scheme implementation and mismatched scheme budget allocation. These efforts eventually bore fruit, when one government official was apprehended and, subsequently, sacked on corruption charges.



CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the project was hugely beneficial in helping to generate a level of interest among the local community regarding the issues they experienced. By becoming aware of the schemes available to them, they learnt how they could alleviate their situations as 'aware citizens' by accessing the benefits of various government schemes, filing complaints about scheme implementation, and working towards the interests of their community at large. The project gave the community the confidence to solve their problems

on their own. Citizens were now able to establish relationships of trust with government officials, since various project interventions had specifically focussed on breaking down the communication walls between them.

The sense of actual, quantifiable change is gradual, and will only be fully actualised if the community continues to work towards bettering themselves. However, it must be added that a sense of ownership, once established, is very hard to chip away, and by formalising the BRSSGs, the project went quite some way in helping sustain the change it helped create.

LEAD PARTNER



CO-PARTNER



FUNDING SUPPORT



FIGHTING POVERTY BY IMPROVING Access and Governance of Public Schemes and Services in Two Backward Districts of Odisha

A project implemented by **Dan Church Aid, Nepal** in partnership with **Society for Promoting Rural Education and Development (SPREAD)** and **DISHA**

“
We had been cultivating on the forest land for hundreds of years but we did not have the rights over them and faced a lot of difficulties from forest officials. Now that we have got it, it gives us self-respect and dignity and we are cultivating on the land more freely.

”
Mrs. Raila Dumta,
Talaguda village,
Nandapur block of Koraput

THE CONTEXT

Blessed with abundant natural resources and a large coastline, Odisha enjoys a growth rate higher than the national average. Yet, it is one of the poorest Indian states with a large mass of its rural population living below poverty line. Poor execution from the government to implement welfare schemes and programmes, marred with high levels of corruption and exclusion, has escalated the incidence of hunger among majority of the rural poor. People's ignorance on claiming their rights and entitlements remain a major barrier, which exclude them from availing the benefits from the government's existing schemes and services.

Within Odisha, Koraput and Sundargarh are amongst the poorest districts with geographical isolation, hilly terrain, low literacy and high concentration of local indigenous populations. The Scheduled Tribes (STs) constitute more than 50 per cent of the total population in both the districts¹. This is ironic, given that substantial developmental resources are being channelled into these districts through a range of targeted development programmes focussing on the weaker sections like the local indigenous population, dalits, women, and children. Owing to their lack of awareness, a predominant share of the rural and indigenous poor in these two districts remain deprived of and excluded from these benefits. This prevents people from meaningfully participating in the governance of

¹ Census, 2011

the schemes. The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and various community monitoring mechanisms like the Gram Kalyan Samitis (GKS), School Management Committees (SMCs), and Jaanch Committees (JC) lack the requisite knowledge and capacity to fulfil their mandated roles for ensuring transparency and accountability in the implementation of the schemes.

Most service delivery mechanisms have systems for grievance redressal. However, majority of the citizens are completely unaware of these provisions regarding where, when, and how to lodge grievances and, in case of non-action, which next level to approach. Little care is taken to analyse and ascertain the factors that first of all result in the grievances, and accordingly amend and rationalise processes to reduce the number and patterns of the grievances. Newer measures such as independent agencies like vigilance commissions and ombudsmen are still in experimental stages.

Against this backdrop, Dan Church Aid (DCA) and its partners implemented an intervention titled, "Fighting Poverty by Improving Access to and Governance of Public Schemes and Services in Two Backward Districts of Odisha". The intervention was implemented with financial assistance from the European Union. This was initiated with the primary objective of reducing poverty, marginalisation, and social exclusion among the most marginalised communities (particularly dalits and indigenous populations) in Koraput and Sundargarh districts of Odisha through increased and improved access to public schemes and services.

Specifically, the project aimed to improve awareness and participation of target communities in governance of the schemes related to five key sectors—food and nutrition, health, education, social protection, and employment—implemented by the government in Koraput and Sundargarh districts. It particularly intended to improve accountability and transparency in the administration of these government schemes. The project aimed at supporting the duty bearers from the village to state levels so that they could address the pertinent gaps in policy and implementation levels, with reference to the schemes, through evidence-based advocacy.

The 51-month (January 2014 to March 2018) action was implemented by Dan Church Aid, Nepal, as



the lead organisation in association with Society for Promoting Rural Education and Development (SPREAD) in Koraput and DISHA in Sundargarh. It engaged with the local and state authorities, PRIs, media, and CBO networks. These stakeholders took action at the Gram Panchayat, block, district and state levels. The action covered a total of 460 villages in 50 Gram Panchayats from the two districts. A total of 259 villages from 25 Gram Panchayats under three blocks in Koraput and 201 villages from 25 Gram Panchayats under three blocks in Sundargarh were covered by this intervention.

THEORY OF CHANGE AND STRATEGIES

It was assumed that the expected results could be achieved by an increase in people's demands for relevant information, and their enhanced participation in Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha meetings, with significant participation from women. The need was felt for streamlining the monitoring committees, with adequate representation of beneficiary communities in their structures.

Community mobilization facilitation and action were the pathways. Women were not only a part of the objective but also a part of the strategy as actors.



It was believed that the project would achieve the objectives through activation of the government's defunct information and facilitation centres like the Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendras (RGSKs), filing of grievances and follow-up, and also by facilitating issuance of government orders to address the gaps in policy and implementation of the targeted schemes.

The expected results could be achieved by using a variety of strategies ranging from mass awareness and mobilisation, capacity building of rights holders, sensitisation of duty bearers, strengthening of collective decision-making forums, and evidence-based collective advocacy. The use of the Right to Information (RTI) Act, by the trained youth and CBO leaders, was an

effective way to access information. The action could not achieve the objectives without focussing on women from the marginalised groups, who suffered double discrimination.

The awareness generation on the services and entitlements from the targeted public schemes for different levels of people were conducted through various means and methods including marketing the IEC materials in the local language. 10,000 posters were distributed to raise awareness, 908 wall writings created interest among people and provided valuable information on the different aspects of the schemes and services. The audio recordings of 15 folk songs disseminated through SD cards added a new value. Additionally, a ready reference (easy-to-use-handbook) on the target schemes/services, roles and responsibilities of the Gram Panchayat level community monitoring committees was distributed amongst the communities. The handbook, in local language, was distributed to all community members in the project zone.

Continuous community-led reflection on issues of non-inclusion and discrimination, capacity building programmes and activated RGSKs were the critical contributory factors.

The project facilitated setting up and/or strengthening of monitoring committees to ensure effective implementation of the government schemes. It organised training and capacity building programmes for the monitoring committee members. The project built the capacities of the youth, leaders and members of the community and CBOs, on different aspects of development, planning, and participation including in Palli Sabha, Gram Sabha and other community-level decision-making mechanisms. The project facilitated continuous community-led reflection on issues of non-inclusion, denial of access and discrimination, schemes, rights, RTI use, and on the importance of engaging with the service providers on grievances, steered by people's groups and youth leaders. About 1,385 members of the monitoring committees were trained on different schemes and how to carry out their roles. There was an increase in the number of women joining the monitoring committees and getting trained. The percentage of women trained varied from 51 in 2015 to 67 in 2017. A total of 1,750 community members were trained on leadership and people-driven advocacy, while the percentage of women in this group varied from 48 in 2015 to 57 in 2017.

The project conducted trainings for the elected representatives of the Panchayati Raj Institutions, the frontline duty-bearers (especially the ASHAs, ANMs, and AWWs), and of middle-level duty bearers on the scheme guidelines, their roles and responsibilities. The project trained 653 PRI members including 287 males and 366 females. With an objective of bringing improved responsiveness and display of better transparency and accountability by them,

1,580 frontline and middle-level duty bearers were sensitised and followed up; 48 per cent of them were women.

The RGSKs were introduced in 2009 by the Ministry of Panchayat Raj under its Bharat Nirman programme. Each RGSK was to serve the poorest and the marginalised as:

- (i) A mini-secretariat at the Gram Panchayat and block levels.
- (ii) A forum for the rural people where they can discuss and prioritise their problems and solutions.
- (iii) A support centre to gain access to relevant information and get logistic support such as help in filling up application forms.
- (iv) A grievance lodging centre.

The government was able to construct only the buildings, without appointing any human resource to manage them. As a result, the RGSKs never became a reality.

The project activated these defunct RGSKs, which emerged as active citizen support centres. During the action period, 15 (12 Gram Panchayat level and three block level) RGSKs were made functional with 30 trained youth managing the centres. The RGSKs were properly equipped with computers, printed copies of different forms, and other IEC materials. The project made the RGSKs more vibrant by disseminating livelihood-related information. The RGSKs provided hand holding support to people for filing various applications and registering grievances.

The RGSKs were equipped with Odia simplified translations of a series of government circulars for ready reference and education of the RGSK facilitators and the leaders of the Gram Panchayat level monitoring committees. The RGSKs remained open for four days a week and on the remaining days, the RGSK facilitators moved from village to



(105 households) and general castes (259 households).

MAJOR OUTCOMES

The project not only raised awareness among the intended beneficiaries, and but also took enabling steps so that awareness could lead to practical efforts and outcomes. People's awareness was reflected in their attendance at meetings and seeking of information.

There was a substantial increase in the number of people who accessed information. With 2014 as the base year, there was 61 per cent increase in the number of people by the end of the project in 2017, who attended the monthly village meetings and became further aware of the various kinds of information on the targeted schemes/services. A total of 645,813 people attended these meetings. In comparison to the situation in the beginning of the project, the last year of the project saw 71 per cent more people attending the meetings of the Gram Panchayats/blocks and benefitting from their awareness and information.

Capacity development of duty bearers and RGSKs as information hubs in the project districts resulted in improved transparency in access to and governance of the target public schemes. During the implementation period, there was a substantial increase in responsiveness and accountability demonstrated by the government officials. Improvement in the roles were found among the Panchayat Extension Officer (PEOs), Anganwadi Worker (AWWs), Gram Rojgar Sevak (GRSs), Auxiliary Nursery Mid-wife (ANMs), Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHAs), and the teachers. The RGSKs, activated with trained personnel, minimum infrastructure and regular flow of all scheme information from state to district, increased awareness and other outcomes for the targeted communities.

Monitoring committees were streamlined with inclusion of more than 5,000 members (around 48 per cent were women) from the excluded communities as they joined the various committees like Most Significant Change Committee (MSCC), *Gram Kalyan Samiti* (village health, nutrition, and sanitation committee), MGNREGS Monitoring and Verification Committee (MVC). After the training,

village holding Village Help Camps, where they not only disseminated useful information on the targeted schemes and services but also helped people in registering claims.

The project used the local *haats* (market places) extensively for information dissemination on RGSK services. The RGSKs and their Village Help Camps reached out to approximately 6,000 people every month. The pilot RGSKs served as Single Window Information Hubs for all welfare schemes, leading to greater awareness. A total of 28,398 people visited RGSKs and more than 85,800 application forms were distributed to people by the RGSKs.

The project strengthened the government mandated multi-level grievance redressal systems to improve access and accountability of the target public schemes. It did so by dissemination of information and support through the CBO leaders and workers. It facilitated proper functioning of grievance and information helplines. The project helped not only in filing the grievances, but also following up through the block, district and state redressal mechanisms.

The project conducted action research for policy inputting and reforms, and used data (baseline survey, impact stories, and social audit) for evidence-based advocacy. The project facilitated four social audits of PDS and social security schemes for development of model guidelines.

The project reached out to 59,905 households with a population of 269,794 from the Scheduled Tribes (40,712 households), Scheduled Castes (8,450 households), Other Backward Classes (10,379 households), minority communities



Panchayats received NFSA food ration cards through help from the RGSKs .

In four years, the project made people aware of the various mechanisms for lodging grievances. The RGSKs helped people prepare written complaints and facilitated in submission of the same to the relevant appellate authorities. A total of 18,179 complaints were lodged by people and followed up through block, district and state redressal mechanisms. Out of the above complaints, as many as 12,588 (about 70 per cent) grievances got redressed. The time taken by the government offices in redressing the grievances has been reduced from two-three months to one month.

RGSKs would now be replicated in 38 GPs by the Government of Odisha at least in the districts inhabited by local indigenous communities. The state authorities have decided to take help of the trained RGSK facilitators as trainers for orienting government functionaries during the Gram Panchayat Development Planning (GPDP) process. Sarpanchs from 40 non-project Gram Panchayats have promised to replicate the experiment.

There was greater participation of communities and their representatives in various stages of decision making on targeted public schemes in multi-level PRIs. The participation in Palli/Gram Sabha has increased almost three-fold. Participation of the most marginalised people in Palli Sabha increased to approximately 70 per cent in 2017 from an estimated 25 per cent. There were 56,575 adults who attended Gram Sabhas with 51 per cent women. Women's participation continued to remain in an average of 50-70 per cent in 2017. Over 200 developmental plans were prepared in the Gram Sabhas prioritising the issues of women, alternative livelihood, trading of minor forest produce, pension, housing, tube wells and toilets.

As a first step before organising Palli Sabhas, people held preparatory meetings to define their agenda. Formerly silent ward members started opening up, and gave greater importance to the Palli Sabha plans. Gram Sabhas could be held with pre-decided lists of demands prioritised by the people. The project brought greater focus on identifying the poorest of the poor for their coverage in the schemes/services. Women became much more vocal in Gram Sabhas and ensured that single and destitute women were benefitted first.

these members were found to be more aware of their roles, attending regular meetings, and having a close watch on the implementation of the schemes/services. Many of them remained present during the service delivery occasions and sites, and helped the government officials in identifying the most marginalised for better coverage. The intensity of community monitoring also increased. Many of the committees even started verifying various official records and documents. Some of the committees shared written recommendations to the government. Many from amongst the 401 trained CBO leaders have got elected as PRI members. They have become ward members, monitoring committee members, and Panchayat Samiti members.

The RGSKs and the Help Camps organised by the facilitators at the village level reached out to approximately 6,000 people in a month on an average. The centres were especially helpful to people in obtaining the National Food Security Act (NFSA) cards. Around 35 per cent (5,699 out of 16,249 total Gram Panchayat level applications) of the NFSA applicants in the 12 pilot Gram

The duty bearers started taking tangible actions to address the gaps in policy and implementation of the targeted public schemes. The project had taken up a series of action researches, which led to dissemination of findings, recommendations and media stories. In response, the government authorities issued circulars/guidelines to address the identified gaps. A total of 14 Government Orders (GO), seven from the Department of Women and Child Development and seven others from the Odisha State Food Commissioner, were issued and followed up.

Recommendations on the future modalities of the Public Distribution System (PDS) shared with the Department of Civil Supplies found a place in the Odisha PDS Control Order of 2015. The State Food Commissioner issued orders for (i) strict enforcement of the provisions of Odisha PDS (control) order 2016; (ii) immediate collection of applications for ration cards from the left-out households, and (iii) quick distribution of application for ration cards. The Odisha Food Supplies & Consumer Welfare Department issued directives twice regarding the re-enrolment of the poorest of the poor under Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY). The Women and Child Development Department revised the Guidelines of the Pension Schemes, and issued a circular for including single unmarried and vulnerable women as another category of beneficiaries in the Madhu Babu Pension Scheme. The Department also relaxed the two-child norm under the National Maternity Benefit Scheme (NMBS) called MAMATA in Odisha, which had posed hindrances to Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) mothers in receiving the maternity scheme benefit.

The project developed operational guidelines so as to conduct social audit of the key target schemes. This and other outputs increased access to benefits like, subsidised food, free education for children, housing assistance, pension, maternity-related cash assistance, subsidised health care, supplementary nutrition, FRA land ownership, and MGNREGS work (plantation and land development), contributed greatly towards reducing poverty and exclusion for a predominant share of the vulnerable households in the operation areas.

As more community-level committees started functioning actively, people's access to the schemes

increased further. Around 95 per cent of the target households could be registered as beneficiaries of the PDS, the food ration scheme, under the National Food Security Act (NFSA). Children got proper food from the ICDS and Mid-Day Meal (MDM) schemes regularly. Maternity cash benefits were available to the eligible mothers and children in time and without leakages. A significant percentage of the aged, widowed, people living with disability, HIV and AIDS were included by the social security pension schemes' monthly cash assistance from the National Government and the state government. The villagers got waged work from the MGNREGA with ease and for higher number of days than the previous years.

As a result of continuous facilitation support from the project, on an average 30,000 households received wage employment annually from the MGNREGS; around 26 per cent of households (who had been left out in any subsidised food scheme during the pre-NFSA period) got their PDS cards because of the project effect; 6,920 mothers benefitted from the maternity schemes; 1,261 households received health expense assistance; 8,462 were included in the state and National pension schemes; 11,110 households received cash assistance for housing; 260 vulnerable children were linked to monthly sponsorship of Rs. 2,000 under ICPS; and 1,577 households received forest land under the FRA Act.

Owing to the strong and strategic social mobilisation by the project, there was greater unity and social cohesion in the villages. Community members came forward to try and ensure that the households who were earlier socially excluded, took part in various development processes and decisions, and that they got a priority in beneficiary selection under the



target schemes/ services. This resulted in increased inclusion of the previously excluded not only in the target schemes and services but also in various decision-making processes and forums.

There are strong possibilities that the government will induct a part of the staff (Gram Panchayat and RGSK Coordinators) as 'Gram Sathi', who would be village support workers on the government system for the mobilisation work carried out by them. It is envisaged that their advanced capacities will be used by the government for activities such as replication of RGSKs in other districts.

LESSONS LEARNT

The projects successfully increased awareness among the targeted communities on the rights, entitlements and duties related to the targeted schemes, as well as increased demand for information. The members of various Gram Panchayat level monitoring committees now better understand their roles and responsibilities in the implementation of different welfare schemes. They now meet on a regular basis and are keeping a close eye on the implementation of the target schemes and services.

The project created a number of GP-level community volunteers who were capacitated and have contributed to the project success. One of the greatest learnings from the project is that the community volunteers are the key to the success of such governance projects. They can help people in gaining easy access to information as well as in accessing and filling up application forms and drafting written grievances for people. They are the real steering agents of change.

Nearly 65 poor and illiterate households in the hilly and forested village of Sanramloi under Bisra block of Sundargarh district were unaware about various government schemes and thus failed to avail their benefits. Disha volunteers helped the villagers to form a Village Development Committee (VDC) to sort out their own grievances. The villagers went to the RGSK at Manko Gram Panchayat to fill up the job demand form; this was followed up and they got work under MGNREGA to develop their respective individual farm land, which has benefited all villagers. They have now collectively benefitted, most of them have success stories to share. Johan Oram has installed a bore well on his land. Habil Munda has developed an acre of land out of his three-acre non-irrigated patch. He has bought a motorcycle from the wages earned; his two sons are in a residential school, and his daughter is in class 10. All of them had earlier dropped out of school.

The capacity of the community volunteers is, however, limited because of their low educational qualifications. In the local indigenous community pockets, especially in Koraput, it is extremely difficult to find educated youth, who can emerge as community volunteers. At present, these illiterate or semi-literate change agents need more time to muster adequate courage to engage the government system, or even to work in a concerted manner with coordination and communication.

It is important that innovative means and ways are found out to create awareness among the illiterate of local indigenous communities about their entitlements, such as through folk songs. All agencies and actors working for such segments of people should think along the lines. It is also vital that any innovative models of solving people's problems be documented at length, and be shared with the government so that they can also learn how to deal with problems, from people's perspectives, with greater effectiveness and efficiency, and replicate the same.



The project proves the effectiveness of a persuasive approach, especially with the government. Among the approaches considered, it was felt that the action would see the results by developing rapport with service providers and government officials, and sensitising them to be more transparent and accountable in their functioning, by supporting them with information on well-performing and not-very-well performing practices so as to bring appropriate reforms in policies and practices.

CONCLUSION

The project was undertaken in Koraput and Sundergarh, two backward districts in Odisha inhabited by a high proportion of the local indigenous population. It was initiated to improve people's access to and participation in the governance of public schemes and services with an aim to bridge the existing information, access and policy gaps. The project covered five key sectors and included some of the important schemes and services falling within those sectors. The key public schemes/ services were then targeted by the project to improve their access and governance in the project locations.

During the action through out its 51-month duration, the project made a large number of people aware about the various mechanisms of lodging grievances. The RGSKs particularly helped people prepare written complaints and facilitated in submission of the same to the relevant appellate authorities. Close to 20,000 grievances were filed

and followed up through block, district and state redressal mechanisms; with around 70 per cent of them being redressed during the four-year period. Overall, more than 65,000 people benefitted since the start of the project because of increased awareness.

The action suggests a closer interaction with the government officials (who are often ignorant of the nitty-gritties of problems faced by people) so that they can understand the plight of people and make an effort to address the same. It is important that the communities are educated to not just complain against the duty bearers; they also need to communicate with the higher authorities on the obstacles faced by the frontline office-bearers so that the overall situation can improve. Further, this would help to enhance the trust between the duty bearers and community members.

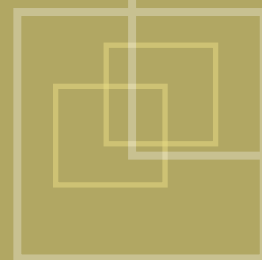
Fifteen RGSKs developed as Single Window Information Hubs contributed to increased awareness and access to public schemes and programmes. The evidence-based advocacy with the government for replication requires not only the presentation of the experiment during the project period, but also a continuous dialogue even after. The fact that more than 50 per cent of the RGSKs are actively functional 14 months after the end of the project carries the evidence of their relevance. The RGSK Gram Panchayats can be a model on proactive disclosure of information by service delivery points, and a bridge between the government, PRI and people.



SOOCHNA SEVA

Facilitating Information Flow and Management of Public Schemes for Citizen Empowerment and Good Governance in Backward Districts in India

A project implemented by Digital Empowerment Foundation



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In absence of the relevant documents the community members had to struggle to receive their entitlement from the PDS shop, the Soochna Sevaks helped them to check receipts and download their Aadhaar cards which helped them to receive ration from the PDS shop. One of the community member shared, “You simplified our toild for the daily bread sir. Now we will get our two meals.”

”

Meriyakhedi Village,
Mdhya Pradesh

THE CONTEXT

Despite numerous welfare schemes, a number of districts in India fare very poorly on development indicators. The government, at present, is the largest service provider in India with a range of welfare schemes, services, entitlements and programmes targeted towards the betterment of the poor and marginalised sections of society. These noble and inclusive welfare schemes, operating at a wide scale, are supposed to benefit millions of people. However, they have still not been effective in reaching out to the poorest of the poor residing in the backward regions of India.

Of the several overarching development goals, education, health, livelihood, employment, final inclusion and social security are of primary importance. The issues related to these six development indicators are particularly troubling in the backward districts of India. Out of the 200 districts, over 148 districts have literacy levels lower than the national average¹. Districts like Barmer in Rajasthan have a sex ratio as low as 902² (national average: 940). Similarly, in West Champaran, Bihar, the percentage of agricultural labourers is as high as 67.54 per cent³, which increases the volatility and insecurity of employment and livelihood

¹ https://nrega.nic.in/Planning_Commission.pdf

² http://censusindia.gov.in/2011census/dchb/DCHB_A/08/0817_PART_A_DCHB_BARMER.pdf

³ http://censusindia.gov.in/2011census/dchb/1001_PART_B_DCHB_PASCHIM%20CHAMPARAN.pdf



a five-year-long intervention in the five districts of West Champaran (Bihar), Guna (Madhya Pradesh), Barmer (Rajasthan), Tehri Garhwal (Uttarakhand) and Ranchi (Jharkhand). To present a comprehensive solution to the information divide in these five locations, the project, *Soochna Seva*, was formulated for intervention in the six areas of education, health, livelihood, employment, social security and financial inclusion. A total of 139 Gram Panchayats were covered during the tenure of the project. It aimed to cover 50,000 Below Poverty Line (BPL) families (10,000 Scheduled Caste or SC families, 10,000 Scheduled Tribe or ST families, 10,000 Other Backward Caste or OBC families and 20,000 socio-economically poor families) and provide them access to the schemes in the above six areas using ICT and non-ICT tools. The idea was to run an integrated information service delivery and citizen entitlement framework in the five Backward Regions Grant Fund (BRGF) districts. A baseline survey conducted at the start of the project helped in assessing the needs of the people and the results were used to establish the benchmarks for the interventions.

THEORY OF CHANGE AND STRATEGIES

options. Jharkhand has a maternal mortality rate (MMR) of 278, in which the Dakshin Chotanagpur region comprising Ranchi, Lohardaga and Gumla districts reported a higher MMR of 294⁴, much higher than the average annual ratio of 167⁵.

India's backward districts are characterised by their own set of development issues, primarily low levels of education, deteriorating health, lack of employment, financial and social security. These issues have huge impact on marginalised populations including the citizens from backward castes and classes. Despite numerous public welfare schemes run by the government (both Central and state), the issues of poverty and social exclusion remain at a constant high. It is in these backward districts that the repercussions of these problems are felt the most.

One of primary reasons behind the deplorable state of development indicators is the lack of information and awareness among the citizens in these areas. The information and communication networks are poor and act as huge development bottlenecks. Illiteracy, ignorance, lack of awareness of government and its activities adds to the woes. There is selective control over information by a section of the citizens and widespread presence of corrupt practices among government functionaries make access to information very difficult for the poor and marginalised.

A deeper interrogation into the possible causes of these perpetuating problems indicates that a majority of the rural populations are still unaware of the public schemes and programmes. Or else, they are trapped in bureaucratic red-tape and find it difficult to grapple with the process of availing the schemes, which can benefit them tremendously. The government, in all its nobility, has introduced digital processes to make the task

Keeping this pretext as the basis of the intervention, the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), with support from the European Union (EU), undertook

4 http://censusindia.gov.in/vital_statistics/AHSBulletins/files/05-Jharkhand_AHS_Bulletin__23x36_.pdf

5 <http://unicef.in/whatwedo/1/maternal-health>

The Soochna Seva project undertook commendable efforts to systematise the learning from other similar projects in a single web-based portal. The Soochna Preneurs and Soochna Fellows were two innovative leads in the project.



easier and quicker for the people. The digitisation of the processes with a parallel digital illiteracy among the citizens further worsened the situation for the marginalised sections of the population. In order to probe for some possible solutions, the first step will be to empower the population with information and make them aware about their rights and entitlements, which they can demand from the government. In addition, it will be equally important to set up an easy-to-use self-sustainable mechanism/system, which acts as a hub for all public scheme information and is accessible to the marginalised sections of the backward districts within their vicinities. This hub will have to adopt a multi-pronged approach and set the objectives of:

- Providing information to the people for accessing various government entitlements and services.
- Capacitating local governance, civil society and the people with the hope that they will thereon drive the information sharing processes without any dependence on an external agency in the times to come.
- Building digital literacy and digital capacity of the people to expedite the processes and avail services in a hassle-free manner, including e-governance based services.

This became the theory of change for the ambitious *Soochna Seva* project, which tried using information and communication as the tool of empowerment in five backward districts of India. The idea was to strengthen the Public Schemes Information access and delivery system to address poverty, rural development, social exclusion and inequity of marginalised groups through information empowerment. The project simultaneously targeted the strengthening of the governance systems at the

Soochna Seva Kendra and Soochna Mitra in West Champaran, Bihar

During the field visit, Soochana Mitra met Mukthar Miyan, a resident of Dewrua Panchayat. During the meeting he narrated his poor condition and asked for help. On further enquiry, the team learnt that Mukthar Miyan may be able to avail Social Security Pension. The team asked Mukthar Miyan to get all his documents and visit the centre. Mukthar Miyan visited the SSK Baghai, where the team helped him to fill the form for Social Security Pension and put his case in the RTPS counter. Mukthar Miyan visited the centre and thanked the team for its efforts as he could now meet his expenses.

district and block levels. The *Soochna Seva* project used a range of strategies to address the information asymmetry and delivery of public schemes and programmes.

The most ambitious element of the *Soochna Seva* project was the establishment of well-equipped, robust and self-sustaining centres of information that are open to the public, known as the *Soochna Seva Kendras* (SSKs). These centres acted as an information hub on a range of Central and state government schemes in each of the selected locations. SSKs were set up at the block level and became the centre point of operations in all these areas. Well-equipped with digital infrastructure and trained human resource, the SSKs became the highlight of the five-year intervention programme. After an initial identification of all the respective government schemes in the six key domains across the target locations, the SSKs undertook the task of identifying citizens, who were eligible for those schemes and reaching out to them through various innovative methods. The SSKs provided digital literacy and digital services to the community members. Having realised the need of basic education in digital literacy, the project team invested in nurturing and training *Information*

(*Soochna*) *Fellows*, who were well-versed with the process of basic digital tasks involved in accessing government services. At the same time, it was observed that basic digital services like printing, photocopying, scanning, etc were rarely available in the villages, and even if available, they were either very expensive or were far off from the villages. The SSKs bridged these gaps and became a powerhouse of services and information for the local community. These services were provided at subsidised cost to ensure the self-sustenance of the centre.

In addition, the SSKs became an important centre for data collection as the centres made it a practice to keep a hard and soft copy of the forms and details of the community members with themselves. This was a very useful practice because the community members used to lose/misplace their government documents very often. Yojana Banks were put up in SSKs, equipped with a big-screen tablet on a podium, which is loaded with Mera App. The Mera App provides easy access to various guidelines and forms related to state and Central government schemes. The Yojana Bank accommodates Central and state-sponsored schemes information in soft and hard copy available for last-mile citizens. It also has an LCD screen, which regularly plays scheme videos, songs and jingles. Moreover, schemes-related Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials printed in the local languages, raised awareness among the beneficiaries about the processes and benefits, while specifying the necessary documents required for availing the



same. In addition, the centres set up a call centre facility, called Phone Saathi, which provided phone assistance and grievance redressal to the community members to avail the government schemes.

In order to make SSKs useful and successful, it was imperative to educate the masses and mobilise them to use and understand the functioning and objectives of SSKs. During the period of five years, rigorous efforts were made by the implementing organisations to run several door-to-door campaigns to identify people who were eligible for benefits under a variety of public schemes and for raising awareness among them about these schemes. This was followed by continuous hand-holding and follow-up support to ensure the enrolment and access of services to the eligible community members. A number of times, several scheme-specific camps were organised in certain districts, depending on the importance and coverage of the scheme. An important means of *Soochna Vahan* (Information Van as mobile unit) was used to disseminate information and awareness in various locations to large fractions of the people.

In order to formalise the task and bring a group of dedicated individuals to drive the project, the *Soochna Seva* Project recruited and trained a team of *Soochna* Fellows. Similarly, it was equally important to engage with government authorities, government service providers and other office bearers to ensure a synergy of efforts and actions.



Nagrik Samwad and Sahayata Kendra (NSSK) in Tehri Gharwal, Uttarakhand

DEF has developed a mechanism for the Grievance Redressal Centre called, Nagrik Samwad and Sahayata Kendra- NSSK, in Tehri Gharwal, Uttarakhand, in collaboration with the District Administration. NSSK is a platform where citizens can submit their grievances simply by dialling 8130313910. It was considered as an extension outlet of the administration to collect grievances for public schemes/entitlements and share them with on-ground authorities of the concerned government departments to propel the application process, ensuring quick relief and support to the beneficiaries. The *Soochna Seva* team remains continuously in touch with the departments for the follow up and final redressal of the grievances, while keeping the concerned citizens informed of the same.

The project organised a *Panchayat Digital Shashakti karan Abhiyan* (PDSA) in 2017 to capacitate the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to use digital means for delivering government services. Additionally, the DEF team assisted the State Government of Rajasthan to convert their Management Information System (MIS) to Janta Information System (JIS) and make all scheme-related information and its status publicly available.

Apart from assisting the community to avail government services, the *Soochna Seva* project tried to tackle issues of accountability and empowerment, which goes hand-in-hand with these efforts. In multiple instances, the project team raised voices against corrupt practices in the service delivery mechanism, took the matters to the higher authorities, and ensured action to solve the issue at hand.

The project co-organised a 100-Day Accountability Yatra with Majdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) and SR Abhiyan in Jaipur. The campaign covered

In Tehri Garhwal, on account of currency demonetisation, there were some complaints of corruption and nepotism against the bank manager of Dhanau block. The locals felt that he was favouring his close friends and family when it came to dispensing cash, while ignoring others who came to the bank to collect money. The *Soochna Seva* Kendra came to know about this unethical practice and immediately brought the matter to SDM's notice. The bank manager was summoned by the SDM and was warned of stern action, if he continued with the practice. Today, the locals are easily withdrawing cash from the bank and are grateful to *Soochna Seva* for its support.

Aastha Jan Kalyaan Avang Vikaas Samiti in Tehri Gharwal. The project also collaborated with the National Skill India Mission and Common Service Centres (CSCs) in various locations. *Soochna Seva* was part of organising a panel discussion on 'Information, Entitlements & Citizen Engagement in Technocratic Times', organised by DEF, as a part of the 10th International Conference on Theory & Practice of Electronic Governance (ICEGOV), 2017, in New Delhi.

The project was able to generate several useful IEC materials including a number of videos and audios, which were communicated extensively through the *Soochna Vahan*. The main partner organisation, DEF, has also been able to put up the online website of *Jan Soochna Portal* to collate all the operations and change stories of several other organisations undertaking similar projects across India, supported by the European Union.

MAJOR OUTCOMES

33 districts in Rajasthan touching over 100 blocks within its three-day activity schedule, engaging with 70-80 community members every day. Apart from conducting seminars, it focussed on workshops related to Right to Information, Right to Education and Right to Health along with rigorous follow up of the applications and complaints submitted to the concerned department.

The *Soochna Seva* project was able to strike some successful collaborations. Relating the current project with DEF's other initiatives, efforts were made to ensure and adopt a cross-learning approach for more visibility and outreach. Other DEF initiatives like *Prayag Mela* brought together DEF's flagship programmes like Manthan Awards, eNGO Challenge and District Collector Digital Champion Award on one platform. The work done under the *Soochna Seva* project was highlighted on such a huge platform to raise awareness among people. Similarly, *Soochna Seva* was also a part of DEF's *Soochna Preneurship Event 2017* in New Delhi in collaboration with Qualcomm's wireless reach programme, which brought wonderful visibility and learning opportunities for the *Soochna Seva* project. The project collaborated with World Vision and UNNATI in Barmer, *Prabhav Niketanin Ranchi*; *Chandorai Shiksha Sansthan* in Guna and

The project established a total of 25 SSKs at 25 blocks in five BRGF districts of five states in India. These centres acted as hubs to provide and facilitate information access to people living in and around 139 Panchayats through 1,100 satellite SSK access points (public institutions, Panchayat bhavans, info-entrepreneurs, etc) delivering last-mile information, entitlement, grievances and e-governance services, reaching 2,60,274 direct beneficiaries.

In the first year, the project developed the Yojana (schemes) database, which had the information of over 679 Central and state welfare schemes. This



The numerous success stories from the project offer hope and motivation to continue such efforts and innovations so that communities lead the development agenda.

database was further updated and added in the coming years and acted as a useful knowledge source for not just the implementing agencies but also for other stakeholders. The SSKs, from the beginning of the project, have been envisioned as a community-driven, self-sustainable empowering entity, which would continue to function even after the discontinuation of the project. The SSKs would bridge the divide of information and make the communities aware so that they can demand access to the Government services on their own.

Another major outcome of the project was the deployment of five *Soochna Vahan* (one in each district as mobile SSK unit) equipped with laptop, sound system, LCD projector, screen, power back-up, printer, tablet, scheme bank, *Phone Sathi* and *Soochna Sevaks* for advocacy, campaigning, liaising, community engagement and services related to online and offline public entitlements and grievances. It is due to these efforts that the project was also able to cover beneficiaries from the villages and Panchayats, which were outside of the target areas of the project. A total of 25 *Soochna Fellows* were engaged in this project to drive the on-field task of assisting the community members and making them aware of their rights and entitlements.

In addition, 200 information entrepreneurs (*Soochna Preneurs*), comprising 100 female members were added to provide information services and entitlement using mobile-based android application called Mera App in five project action districts.

Similarly, Panchayat Digital Shashaktikaran Abhiyan (PDSA) was implemented in 25 Panchayats across five blocks to build synergy between SSK and PRIs. It also capacitated the Panchayat officials with enhanced digital capacities, while ensuring better functioning of governance affairs like Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP), Gram Sabha participation, community engagement, Gram

Panchayat functioning in decentralised and bottom-up planning, mapping, processing, documenting and such other activities with support of digital platforms.

A total of 2,60,274 beneficiaries accessed information on entitlement, grievances and e-governance services through the SSKs. The project followed up 630 grievance application by organising campaigns / camps in the target locations. In the last five years, the project managed to benefit 87,216 people from public entitlements under various schemes. This included 12,942 people under social security (15%), 4,557 people under education (5%), 5,829 under livelihood (7%), 8,554 in health (11%), 32,873 in financial inclusion (39%), 1,936 people under employment (2%) schemes and 20,525 people who benefitted through access to documents and other categories (2%).

LESSONS LEARNT

By the fifth year, the project could emerge out with the *Soochna Seva* Information and Entitlement Framework (SSF). The SSF model by then could exhibit some exemplary models, which are replicable, scalable, and sustainable. The first among these is the SSK. The SSK model is of prominence due to its revenue-generation capability. Digital services like printing, scanning, photocopying, etc are of regular use to the villagers. A central place, which can be run and owned by the community members themselves and which can ease and empower the everyday



The JIS will lead to public access of information related to their rights, entitlements, and other government programmes. The JIS will ensure better transparency and will make the public aware about various schemes, which are being undertaken by government. If successful, this model can be further tried out in several other states in India.

The *Soochna Seva* project indulged in some commendable models of innovation. The *Soochna Fellows* and *Soochna Preneurs* framework was one of them. This model is innovative for its vision to invite active and interested individuals and involve themselves into rigorous process of engaging with the communities on issues related to access of information to avail government schemes. In a multiple of the cases, the project trained local and motivated young people from the community itself and made them *Soochna Fellows* and *Soochna Preneurs* with the hope that the community members would carry on the operations of the SSKs even after the exit of the implementing agency. The model has built the much required digital capacities of individuals and given them adequate exposure through a variety of consultations and forums, which is an investment in their skill building. A model like this can be integrated in several other similar projects as well.

digital requirements of the community is of much use to one and all. The SSK model also appealed to the Government departments and officials and has a certain degree of acceptability from their part. SSKs have shown tremendous impact in identifying, registering and benefiting lakhs of villagers by providing them access to different Government schemes. It is an easy-to-sustain and administer unit and can be adopted and run by members who have acquired certain levels of digital expertise during the course of the project.

Another innovative method was the Android-based application, *Mera App* (dedicated to information and entitlement purpose). The app with key features helped the project in entitlement surveys, mapping and linking beneficiaries with schemes criteria, provide easy and handy information about schemes to applicants, maintain database of beneficiaries, collect grievance and generate live and updated reports.

Another model which shows promises of scalability is the *Janta Information System (JIS)*. It has already been tested out and implemented with different departments of the State Government of Rajasthan.

DEF has brought into place the *Jan Soochna Portal* (<http://jansoochna.org/>) and undertook the task of collating the best practices of multiple other development organisations that have undertaken similar initiatives of empowering communities providing them access to various government programmes and schemes. The portal has been a permanent resource platform for multiple stakeholders, who would want to avail its benefits in the times to come. It will be useful to keep updating and adding newer information to this portal for better use.

Lastly, the *Soochna Seva* project has exhibited brilliant instances of collaborations and partnerships. From government agencies to other civil society organisations (MKSS, Unnati, SR Abhiyan, etc), to corporate firms (Qualcomm) and Nokia, to PSUs (GAIL and Tehri Hydro Development Corporation), to philanthropic foundations (Azim Premji Philanthropic Initiatives), the project has made several collaborations to serve the common objective of empowerment



and access to the communities. The project also made good use of its other flagship programmes like e-NGOs, *Prayag Mela* etc to disseminate learning from the current project. It is due to these dynamic collaborations and partnerships, the project has been able to impact areas, which were outside the ambit of target locations and hence expanded its reach and scope.

CONCLUSION

This project has successfully been able to establish dedicated hubs of information in the targeted five backward districts of India. The geographical variation and reach of this project have been particularly impressive and the idea of bringing a self-sustaining and replicable model of information hub is worth the expansion and trial in other similar backward districts. The *Soochna Seva* model has

exhibited a few cross-cutting collaborations and has tried to maximise its reach by involving a wide variety of stakeholders in its process. The lessons learnt can be well-applied in other contexts too.

The project has also undertaken commendable efforts to systematise the learning from other similar projects in a single web-based portal. The intervention of capacitating and bringing *Soochna Preneurs* and *Soochna Fellows* was also an innovative lead in the project. To sum up, the *Soochna Seva* project set a practical example of using technology and information to solve the access to public schemes and entitlements related to development and empowerment issues in difficult contexts. The numerous success stories give us the hope and motivation to continue such efforts and keep using more such innovative and contemporary means to aid the development of the people.

LEAD PARTNER



FUNDING SUPPORT





EMPOWERING TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

to Address their Poverty through Improved Access to Indian Public Services

A project implemented by **Find Your Feet** in Partnership with:

• Disha Samaj Sevi Sanstha (DSSS) • Gram Mitra Samaj Sevi Sanstha (GMSSS) • Gram Vikas Evam Yuva Kalyan Sansthan (GVEYKS) • Lokshakti Samajsevi Sanstha (LSS) • Ayo Aidari Trust (AAT) • Jharkhand Vikas Parishad (JVP) • Badlao Foundation (BF)

“

Earlier we never attended Gram Sabhas, even though we were sometimes invited. We thought it was for men to participate. However, now we not only attend the Gram Sabhas, we also propose the names of the eligible people for inclusion under different schemes and demand the approval of development work related to tube-well installation, steps for a local pond, an all-weather road and the construction of an Anganwadi Centre. We ensure that all the members participate in the meeting.

”

Ramabai Kobda
Secretary,
Gedagaon Self Help Group

THE CONTEXT

In India, the Scheduled Tribes (STs), also known as 'Adivasis', constitute 8.2 per cent of the population, but account for 47.3 per cent of the poor¹. Dwelling in remote locations, together with historical and cultural factors, Adivasis are both physically and socially isolated from the mainstream society. They face discrimination, violence, and exploitation. Adivasi women are doubly marginalised on account of their gender and suffer from higher levels of ill-health and illiteracy. In Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, the situation is even worse where a predominant share of Adivasis live in extreme poverty.

Adivasis are entitled to receive a range of public services and schemes aimed at reducing poverty by improving access to quality services such as healthcare, education, water and sanitation, housing, employment and income generation opportunities. However, the delivery of quality public services and schemes for the indigenous populations of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand are impeded by limited awareness of their rights, administrative inefficiency and corruption. Most Adivasis lack access to information on the services and schemes to which they are entitled. A survey² in 2011 found that only two per cent of Adivasis in Chhattisgarh were aware of their rights under the Right to Information (RTI) Act.

¹ 2011 Census.

² Find Your Feet conducted this survey in 2011.

THEORY OF CHANGE AND STRATEGIES

Against this background, Find Your Feet (FYF), with support from the European Union implemented the project, “Empowering Tribal Communities to Address Their Poverty through Improved Access to Indian Public Services” from January 2014 to March 2019. The project was nicknamed “*Johar*” and was implemented in four districts of Chhattisgarh (Korba, Raigarh, Kanker and Rajnandgaon) and four districts of Jharkhand (Dumka, Pakur, Jamtara and Godda) covering a total of 240 villages. FYF partnered with *Disha Samaj Sevi Sanstha (DSSS)*, *Gram Mitra Samaj Sevi Sanstha (GMSSS)*, *Gram Vikas Evam Yuva Kalyan Sansthan (GVEYKS)*, *Lokshakti Samajsevi Sanstha (LSS)* in Chhattisgarh, and with *Ayo Aidari Trust (AAT)*, *Jharkhand Vikas Parishad (JVP)* and *Badlao Foundation (BF)* in Jharkhand.

The overall objective was to empower local indigenous communities to reduce their poverty and exclusion by improving access to, and monitoring of, public services. The project organised and enabled the Adivasis, especially women, in 240 villages from eight backward districts in two states, so that they could access and monitor public services and advocate for their proper implementation. It aimed to address the key inter-related barriers, which prevented the Adivasis from accessing public services and schemes. A preliminary analysis showed that lack of access to information about public schemes, limited awareness of rights and entitlements, low participation in local governance institutions by the local communities acted as the main barriers to access public programmes and schemes. Moreover, limited understanding of their roles and weak institutional capacities of service providers to fulfil their roles further intensified the problem of exclusion.

Johar, was designed to respond to the needs of Adivasis, particularly children and women, and covered 21,600 Adivasi households from the Santhal, Gond, Oraon, Pahariya, Birhor, Korwa, Kavar and Pando communities. The project targeted eight public programmes and schemes³ as these together addressed the main issues of the Adivasis, particularly social exclusion and discrimination.

³ *Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY)*, *Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS)*, *Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY)*, *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS)*, *National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM)*, *Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (RGSEAG - Sabla)*, *Right to Education (RTE)* and *Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY)*.

Johar conceived a multi-pronged strategy, which focussed on raising awareness among Adivasis of their rights to information and services, empowering them to claim those rights, and thereby increasing access to quality public services. Several activities were undertaken to achieve these expected results. These included mobilisation of local communities for enhancing their participation, formation of community organisations and platforms at the village, district, state and inter-state levels. It aimed at capacity building of both communities as well as Panchayat and government functionaries, besides establishing public information centres to enable information access by the communities. The project also included organising public hearings and facilitating engagement with public authorities for better governance and accountability.

Because of geographical isolation, inadequate organisations and low levels of participation, the Adivasis lacked the agency and appropriate platforms to engage with and challenge those in positions of authority. Local people’s collectives were thought to be an effective answer to these issues. The project accordingly focussed on establishing and strengthening a sustainable network of Adivasi-led organisations with the capacity to advocate on their issues at various levels and monitor the availability, access, and quality of public services and schemes. It catalysed community-based structures from the village to the inter-state level, thereby creating avenues for increased participation and empowerment.

Johar envisaged that organising Adivasi communities into strong community-based structures could lead to significant improvement in access to information, training and collective action. It created local structures, especially a network of village level Community Based Organisations (CBOs) and representative platform called Tribal Rights Forums (TRFs), which would advocate Adivasi issues at various levels. This structure enabled the local communities to access information on public services and schemes, monitor their availability and quality, and collectively engage with the government for more effective and equitable public delivery systems.

A multipronged strategy, with focus on empowerment, ownership and initiatives, of the Adivasis, mostly women, was the driving force behind the project locally called, Johar.



Johar promoted and developed 405 Self Help Groups (SHGs), as the main platform for Adivasi women, to enable them to access information and public services and schemes. These SHGs have 5197 members including 5021 women. The SHG members received training on management, accounting and livelihood options. In addition, 240 village-level CBOs with 22,117 members (55 per cent women) were also established across the project districts. Forty master trainers from within the CBO members were prepared to train other CBO members on various issues.

The TRF, as a network, began its journey with the formation of CBOs at the village level. A core committee consisting of 15 members selected

for each CBO was formed in each village. Elected representatives of these local CBOs then formed district, state and inter-state level TRFs enabling common concerns to be addressed at the higher levels. The core committee, at the village level, provided a base for selection of members from the same to form district level associations followed by state and inter-state level networking of community members originating from the CBOs. The network, with its four-layered structure from the village to inter-state levels, evolved its role and functions in a complex context of the communities' diverse needs and expectations. Its key roles included building identity and collective strength of Adivasi communities, generating awareness and demand for public service provisions, identifying issues restricting access to their rights and services. It aimed at connecting the community, PRIs, and the government in order to improve service delivery.

The network of CBOs at the village and district levels, and the TRFs at the state and inter-state levels received trainings and support to monitor the delivery of public services and schemes through regular meetings, 54 social audits and 10 public



hearings. All these trainings were conducted with the participation of the service providers. A total of 1,703 (1,028 women and 675 men) members of CBOs were trained, providing them with a good understanding of the provisions, eligibility criteria and application procedures for accessing government schemes and services. A total of 688 (361 women, 327 men) CBO members were trained on lobbying and advocacy with the government, covering a range of approaches and tools, such as rallies, public hearings, media engagement, policy advocacy, alliance building, postcard campaigns and use of the RTI Act and Public Interest Litigation (PIL).

Lack of access to services is both a cause and a consequence of poverty. With this in mind, the project focussed on raising awareness among the local indigenous communities of their entitlements to public services and schemes. Community mobilisation camps were conducted, both to enhance awareness on the government services/schemes as well as to enable them to take action for accessing these services. It ensured that the participating communities fully owned the camps and that any barriers to women's participation were addressed right at the outset. More than 8000 IEC (Information, Education, Communication) materials in local languages were disseminated in these camps and cultural activities such as *Nukkad Nataks* (street plays) and local folk music were used to spread relevant messages.

Another approach implemented by the *Johar* project was to build capacity for service providers including Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) representatives and local government officials to fulfil their roles effectively, thereby increasing the availability and quality of and equity in public services and schemes. It encouraged and provided support to Adivasis to engage in dialogue with PRIs and service providers and participate actively in local governance structures, notably the Gram Sabhas, for improving transparency and accountability. It endeavoured to strengthen the Gram Sabhas as platforms for monitoring the delivery of services at the local level.

Johar addressed both demand and supply issues by mobilising communities to exercise their rights to access public services, while training relevant government officials and PRI functionaries to

sensitise and to strengthen their capacities to enhance performance. Training programmes were conducted for the PRI representatives and local service providers (ANMs, ASHAs, Anganwadi workers, etc.) on their roles in the existing public programmes, schemes, and service delivery. A total of 3,829 government officials and PRI representatives were trained. Due to its strong linkage with the community, the project supported the government staff to reach out to remote Adivasi communities and work towards utilisation of social welfare budgets. Nine *Johar* staff joined as members of the State Resource Teams (SRT) for the Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise (IPPE). While SRT, constituted by the government, is a pool of state level Master Trainers involved in participatory planning, the IPPE is an initiative by the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, to involve all villagers, especially in the backward blocks, in the convergent planning for rural development. The exercise emphasised on reaching out to securing MGNREGA specific needs of vulnerable sections. However, the participatory planning processes were conducted more comprehensively by incorporating all rural development programmes in a single planning exercise. The *Johar* staff, as members of SRT, played a major role in training the Panchayat Training Teams (PTTs), who were the Master Trainers at the Panchayat level.

Besides trainings, *Johar* facilitated 146 meetings between CBOs, TRF members, PRI representatives and other service providers to exchange information on public services/schemes. By establishing linkages between the Adivasi communities and their elected representatives, it further raised awareness of the public welfare schemes and enabled the government departments to fully utilise their budgets. A total of eight Public Information Centres (PICs) established through the project—in partnership with the local panchayats—have been critical in this regard. As a part of the strategy

Johar addressed both demand and supply issues by working with the government personnel, PRI and people (PPP) in the project locations. The focus was capacity, communication and convergence (CCC).

to raise awareness among Adivasis for their rights, the PICs were established in each project district. These centres were designed to provide information, advice and support to Adivasis on their entitlements and support them to access public services and schemes, while also forging ongoing linkages between the Adivasi communities and their respective Panchayats. These eight centres, established through MoUs between the PICs and the local Panchayats, were all housed in the Gram Panchayat premises free of charge and were inaugurated by the Panchayat and government officials. They were staffed by PIC Counsellors, who were funded through the project.

The centres' opening timings varied according to the timings of local markets, but they were mainly open for three to four days a week. On these days, the PIC Counsellors would distribute IEC materials on government schemes, inform community members of their entitlements and support (often illiterate) community members to complete the necessary application forms. They kept records of all the applications submitted and visited/talked to government officials to follow up on any outstanding issues. On the other working days, the PIC Counsellors visited the local communities to conduct outreach, including raising awareness of the PIC services, participating in SHG/CBO meetings, and checking on the status of the applications previously submitted. The applications and continuous follow-up by PIC Counsellors and CBO/TRF members enabled more than 20,000 families to access the services/schemes and their benefits. In some cases, the PICs even intervened, when the community felt

that the Panchayat had not identified the correct beneficiaries for government schemes, leading to tension at times.

Johar promoted community participation in village planning, budgeting, and implementation in Gram Sabha as envisaged by the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA). The new community structures, created by the project, were enabled to participate in planning and monitoring government services in order to improve the performance and accountability of both the PRIs and service providers. The SHGs, CBOs and TRFs contributed to community mobilisation by facilitating different meetings and established clear communication channels for the people to share and address their problems in service delivery. The roles, discussions and information convinced the villagers on the importance of participation and the changes that their actions can bring about. These new structures also played a positive role in revitalising self-governance institutions such as the Gram Sabha, through meetings, mobilisation and participation and advocated for increased involvement in PRIs through the CBOs and TRFs.

MAJOR OUTCOMES

As a result of the well-thought out strategies and effective implementation, there were visible changes among the Adivasi communities as well as increased responsiveness from PRIs and service providers. *Johar* has worked with Adivasis in general and developed their organisations like SHGs, CBOs, and TRFs, which became functional during the project period. The Adivasi communities acted for their own development, availed various opportunities, and benefitted from different schemes and programmes.

All the members of the SHGs, with 97 per cent women, could access information and low interest credit through savings and loans schemes. A total of 3,643 SHG members, including 3591 women, were able to start small-scale income generation

activities, either individually or collectively, with support from the SHG funds. These efforts by the SHG members succeeded in supplementing their incomes. Many SHGs accessed support from public programmes such as the National Rural Livelihoods Mission and the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), and widened the windows of economic independence for women. A total of 390 SHGs got directly linked with the NRLM. On an average, rupees one to one and half lakhs were accessed by the SHGs from NRLM and they are also repaying the loans on regular time. Being impressed by the smooth functioning of SHGs under *Johar* project, the NRLM officials have encouraged their team to learn from the SHGs under *Johar* project.

The CBOs proactively engaged with the government for increased realisation of Adivasi rights, and for making service delivery more effective and equitable. A comprehensive study reviewed the status of implementation of the Government schemes, including analysis of budget allocations, disbursements, and actual expenditure. The evidence collected through this study was used to engage with PRI representatives and government authorities at various levels so that they can meet their obligations in relation to the delivery of public services and schemes. The CBOs and TRFs provided support by sharing information, experience and best practices with multiple stakeholders, including civil society organisations (CSOs), NGO networks and the media in order to increase their impact.

The TRF network members closely worked with PRIs and frontline workers like ICDS and public health workers. They were able to use public resources at the village level, like the use of the Panchayat Bhawan for setting up PICs and for their meetings. Their relations with public authorities at the block level helped in addressing community-level service delivery issues like employment and wage payments under the MGNREGA, Maternal and Child Healthcare (MCH) services, incentives to mothers for institutional deliveries, Public Distribution System (PDS), housing schemes and individual forest rights. The Adivasis attended the public hearings at the state level, where the problems on service delivery were put forth in the presence of the government officials, CSOs, and media.

The TRFs worked closely with government officials to share their concerns and as a result of the training received, they were able to articulate the issues and demand entitlements for their communities. They played an increasing role in monitoring and tracking of service delivery and implementation of government programmes. The 54 social audits conducted, proved to be an effective tool for CBOs and TRFs to review the facilities, advocate on any required changes, denounce corruption and ensure transparency. The Adivasis were found in increasing numbers in social audits and local committees (e.g., School Management Committees or SMCs), for monitoring of the public services delivery. This helped them to acquire new capacities and voice their present needs and gaps. The effectiveness of the TRF was evident from the growing demand and access to public services across the intervention districts. Approximately 25-30 per cent of the issues raised by the network to date have been resolved.

As an effect of the project, 121 Adivasis submitted their applications under the Right to Information Act (RTIA). Out of them, 81 Adivasis acted upon the information obtained through filing a RTIA request.

The participation in Gram Sabhas by the Adivasis increased and they took active part in the local decision-making processes. *Johar* contributed to an increase in the number of Gram Sabha meetings held and the number of people attending the same in the project area. There were 1,160 Gram Sabhas held during the project period. Through the Gram Sabhas, the Adivasi communities participated in government-led planning processes such as the Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise (IPPE II), undertaken in 120 project villages.





The Adivasi women played a meaningful role in local planning and decision-making through increased participation in Gram Sabhas, PRIs and SMCs. One in every two women in the project villages had taken part in Gram Sabhas as compared with one in three women in the non-project villages. The participating communities now have a greater understanding of the role of the Gram Sabhas in scrutinising the work of the PRIs. The active participation by the SHG, CBO and TRF members, particularly women, in the approval of local plans resulted in numerous development works being sanctioned in the project villages, such as the construction of ponds, wells, toilets, and animal shelters.

The training and capacity building programmes for the supply side contributed to their increased responsiveness not only to deliver programmes, but also people. As a result, the needs of the Adivasi communities are being met more effectively. The average annual household income increased by 11 per cent and the proportion of food-secured households had increased from 30 per cent to 43 per cent. Furthermore, the proportion of Adivasi families in the project area living in poverty reduced from 89 per cent to 80 per cent since the start of the project⁴.

A total of 23,432 people including 13,011 women in remote Adivasi areas accessed government schemes and services, relating to health, education, employment, water and sanitation, income generation, housing and social security (e.g. widow and old age pensions). This included

the schemes which directly benefitted women and girls, such as the Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY), safe motherhood scheme and the Sabla scheme for adolescent girls. The proportion of eligible women that had accessed the JSY scheme had increased from 59 per cent in 2014 to 86 per cent in 2016. There were also improvements in the quality of provisions such as the maternal and child health care services provided through the Anganwadi centres.

The PICs were intended as an interim measure to raise awareness of services before the CBOs/TRFs were fully active, and also before the government services such as the Common Service Centres (CSCs) under the Government's e-governance programme were functional. The PICs were to complement the CSCs, but despite lobbying on this issue by the CBOs/TRFs, the CSCs have either not been established or are not functioning properly in many of the project districts, where there is limited connectivity. For this reason, there was a demand to sustain the services of the PICs beyond the life of the project. The PICs were not initially intended to continue beyond the end of the project. As the project progressed, it had become apparent that the participating communities would benefit from a continued, albeit reduced, service to support people in applying for the schemes and remain informed of any new schemes launched. During the project period, 18,898 community members had visited PICs for various kinds of services. The PICs had collected 12,286 applications out of which 11,847 applications were forwarded to the concerned department/officials, and 7,253 applications were resolved.

Establishing the PICs in partnership with the local Panchayats, which provided premises for the PICs within the government buildings free of charge, was an excellent way to build and maintain relationships and work towards the sustainability of the centres after the project (all eight Gram Panchayats have committed to providing the premises after the project ends). It was also planned that after the project, the PICs would be staffed by trained volunteer Counsellors and their running costs would be covered by the fees charged for services. A total of 80 volunteers and 240 village friends were designated and trained by the project to continue the functioning of PICs.

⁴ Mid-term evaluation

The different partners of *Johar* project have taken different measures to ensure that PIC services can continue after the end of the project. These measures included obtaining written commitments from the local Panchayats to continue providing free premises and utilities, charging a nominal fee for each application, using CBO/TRF membership fees, donations and income from SHG income generation activities to cover PIC costs. In addition, it included identifying, training, and mentoring a cadre of literate community volunteers to take over the role of the PIC Counsellors, at a reduced level. However, the persisting challenge in sustaining the PIC services is how to raise sufficient funds to cover the PIC costs, notably a small honorarium for the volunteers, the cost of IEC materials and office maintenance.

LESSONS LEARNT

There are several important lessons highlighted by the *Johar* project. One important learning is about how the capacities of women evolved during the process. The project took numerous measures for enhancing the role of women from the conception stages. These measures brought about a number of important changes for women living in the intervention areas.

Thanks to the SHGs, women were able to engage in advocacy and civic life. The SHGs provided them with a space for social and economic empowerment, enabling them to discuss and collectively develop strategies to address their social problems. They now have the confidence and skills to participate in the decision-making processes. There were instances of women SHG members being invited to public meetings and their opinions being actively solicited on common community issues.

In terms of the chosen implementation modality, the strategic decision to place women-led SHGs at the heart of the new CBO structures in the areas, where they were active, proved to be a very important decision for the project. This has led to positive effects for women's empowerment and participation in CBOs, Core Committees and Tribal Rights Fora at the district, state and even at the inter-state levels.

Women have particularly been empowered by their involvement in TRFs. The benefits resulting from



the project activities, such as increased income and improved access to public services have reduced the initial reluctance by some men to allow the women family members to participate in project efforts and other aspects of social, political and economic life. The SHGs and CBOs, in response, have provided a platform for men and women to work together, on IGAs at the household level and on advocacy initiatives at the community level. Many women have now become 'Mates' (work site supervisors) under the MGNREGA.

The *Johar* project gained valuable experience on how to design and implement similar intervention and play a meaningful role in development by sharing lessons learned, showcasing the experience of the PICs and contributing a possible operational model. This would represent an additional achievement as well as an alternative way of ensuring that the valuable service provided by PICs is sustained beyond the life of the project (albeit in a new institutionalised version). The project implementer should explore avenues of collaboration with the government authorities in charge of developing a PIC-type facility.

A number of measures were taken for enhancing the role of women. As a result, there is a knowledge, voice, democracy, participation, and livelihood. Development became not just a process, but an outcome that they had expected.



The challenge of sustainability of PICs could be addressed in different ways, for example, by registering the PICs under the Societies Act or by introducing PIC mobile units operating at the Tehsil offices (Block offices) on a few fixed dates each month. Moreover, turning the PICs into community libraries and using the existing government staff to run the PICs, besides establishing a toll-free number for the PICs to disseminate information may also prove helpful.

For the sustainability of the PICs, partners and TRF have developed specific strategies. Ten volunteers from each project location have been trained to play the roles as PIC counsellors on rotation basis. The partners have taken the role of supervision from distance. All the district level TRFs have opened bank accounts. All 240 village level CBOs

have deposited their membership fees (the amount varies with every district TRF), into their respective DTRF bank accounts.

Through ICDS, all Anganwadi Centres in the project locations have distributed proper nutritious food. All the Anganwadi workers were regularly associated with the project activities. CBOs are periodically monitoring these centres. The late payment of MGNREGA wages were raised by CBOs and TRF. PDS shops are also being regularly monitored by CBOs and TRF for proper functioning. The irregularities, if any, observed by CBOs, are directed towards concerned government officials immediately.

CONCLUSION

The *Johar* project was very significant to address the needs of Adivasi communities and was effectively managed through a strong community-based approach. It empowered the local indigenous communities and improved their access to public services and government schemes in the intervention areas, thereby helping to bridge the existing divide between accessibility and availability of services.

With facilitation from the project, the SHG, CBO and TRF members could regularly hold meetings with PRI representatives and other service providers to exchange information on public services/schemes. The members played an active role in ensuring that the Gram Sabhas fulfilled their roles in an effective and transparent manner. It is because of better participation and demands generation that PRIs and other service providers increasingly met their obligations with regard to public services and schemes.

The active participation by the Adivasis in the meetings, planning, implementation, and monitoring could increase access to services for target groups, as well as lead to improvement in the quality of services. The contributions of SHG, CBOs and TRFs to the overall results of the project are not only reflected by the increased access to government schemes, but also in areas such as the improvement of school facilities (more teachers, better school menu, toilets, etc.).

By strengthening the community-based structures and Public Information Centres developed as key initiatives, *Johar* made important efforts for sustainability of the different benefits of the projects. Public Information Centres were key instruments for bridging the gap between the communities (as rights holders) and the government bodies responsible for ensuring that their rights are respected (as duty bearers). Despite being parallel structures, they were associated to local authorities and facilitated access to services despite encountering several challenges like staff turn-over, limited government support, unmet user expectations, and sustainability.

While the project has come to an end, the benefits could be continued in project locations and also other places, if similar efforts can be taken by the people and the other change agents. It is important to apply the strategies of the project elsewhere as these are about local structures, community initiatives and ownership, which constitute the factors of sustainability. There are different factors that play a decisive role on the sustainability of project benefits beyond the life of the project, which include levels of government support, TRF volunteers' engagement, strength of local governance structures, fundraising strategy, and PIC performance.

The project succeeded in promoting women's participation through various measures and activities. However, if women participate in CBO meetings and men feel excluded, there could be a risk of segregation, and then self-alienation it should be carefully monitored to ensure social cohesion at the community level. To mitigate the possible negative effects of men feeling segregated from certain project activities, it should be ensured that they remain engaged in the issues.

At the policy level, it can be argued that the existence of an enabling legal environment, that includes PESA, FRA, RTI, sets the legal grounds and justification for continued action in future, regardless of implementation issues and specific challenges in Adivasi areas. This is a crucial point for the overall sustainability of the benefits of the action since the channels for delivery still exist, with possible continuation of the schemes, programmes and services.



SAMMALIT VIKAS JANKARI

Improving Access of People Living with Disability to Information on Public Schemes in Backward Districts of India

A project implemented by **German Leprosy & TB Relief Association India** in partnership with:

- Arthik-O-Samajik-Heeth Ayog, Odisha
- Blind Peoples' Association of India, Gujarat
- Duncan Hospital Bihar
- St. Augustine's Social Services Society, Madhya Pradesh
- Vanvasi Seva Kendra Bihar



Kesaji has beaten the odd of locomotor disability and has been successful in facilitating the disability certificate for close to 1000 PWDs in his community. He got to know about SVJ in 2015 through a CBR Worker which made him interested to associate with the project. He joined the DPO and anchored the community survey to identify the PWDs in the community; the process helped him to identify cases where due to lack of disability certificate and information, PWDs were not able to avail benefits of government schemes and programmes. Kesaji coordinated with the medical department and other government officials to organise disability camp in the community which helped in immediate issue of the certificates based on which bus concessions were received by the persons with disabilities. In 2016, in coordination with the block development officials around 350 Antodaya cards and 50 Annapurna cards were distributed to beneficiaries who were otherwise unable to avail their entitlements. The advocacy with the government and continuous dialogue in the community helped to identify persons with disabilities and facilitate the process to receive social security in form of pension, food security and livelihood benefits as embarked in various government schemes and programs.



Keshaji Choushan

Jada Gram Panchyat, Deodar Block,
Banaskantha District, Gujarat

THE CONTEXT

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) defined Persons with Disabilities as those “who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.” As per the Census 2011, in India out of the 121 crore population, 2.68 crore persons are ‘disabled’, which is 2.21 per cent of the total population. Achieving inclusive and sustainable development would require inclusion and full participation of People with Disabilities (PWDs). The project *Sammalit Vikas Jankari* (SVJ) was initiated in 2014 in Gujarat, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha by the German Leprosy & TB Relief Association India (GLRA) in partnership with other Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). Gujarat has around 10,77,941 persons with disabilities, Madhya Pradesh has 15,32,684, Bihar has 23,05,751 and Odisha 12,28,954. These states constitute to a substantial percentage of the total PWDs in the country. In addition to high level of disability, these states also have a concerning Human Development Index ranking, where Gujarat ranks 21 on the HDI and scores 0.667, Odisha ranks 32 and scores 0.597, Madhya Pradesh ranks 33rd on HDI with a score of 0.594 and Bihar ranks 36 and scores 0.566 as compared to the national average of 0.640. The states have alarming rates of MMR and IMR, the problem is grave for PWD as it is also accompanied with high level of illiteracy, regional income disparities

and discrimination based on social status in the community. The marginalisation of PWDs makes them more vulnerable to the perils of poverty. It is essential that for the full inclusion and participation of PWDs there is a need to have a focussed programme with a rights-based approach, which can create an ecosystem to support the PWDs to engage and participate in the development.

Inclusion of persons with disability in the development is one of the key components for establishing social equity and addressing poverty in the society. The German Leprosy & TB Relief Association India (GLRA) in partnership with five non-governmental organisations including Arthik-O-Samajik-Heeth Ayog (Balangir, Odisha), Blind Peoples' Association of India (Ahmedabad, Gujarat), Duncan Hospital (Raxaul, Bihar), St. Augustine's Social Services Society (Sendhwa, Madhya Pradesh) and Vanvasi Seva Kendra (Adhaura, Bihar) initiated the project with the support from the European Union (EU). An estimated 270,061 PWDs, out of the total population of 12,860,046 (2.1 per cent), resided in the five¹ action districts namely East Champaran (Bihar), Kaimur (Bihar), Banaskantha (Gujarat), Barwani (Madhya Pradesh) and Balangir (Odisha). The project considered PWDs as the final beneficiaries. It aimed to impact 1.3 million people including the PWDs and their families directly or indirectly through its intense and prolonged field interventions.

SVJ emphasised the agency of PWDs as critical in defining changes to their lives. The project identified PWDs and their collectivisation as one of the key processes for their transformation. The focus was to create a favourable environment for the PWDs to ensure their full participation in society. This is only possible when they have knowledge and awareness to demand their entitlements and participate in the development.

The project recognised the legal framework of disability rights in the country to advocate and uphold the rights of the PWDs. At the time of the inception of the project, the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act (PWDA), 1995 was the legal and constitutional obligation of the state.

¹ Source : Integrated Management Information System (IMIS), Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation - NIC as on 01/04/2009 (based on Census 2011 growth data).

Thus, it focussed on the provisions and entitlements enlisted as per the PWDA 1995. According to PWDA, 1995, a 'person with disability' means a person suffering from not less than 40 per cent of any disability as certified by a medical authority. 'Disability' means blindness, low vision, leprosy-cured, hearing impairment, locomotors disability, mental retardation and mental illness.

SVJ emphasises on upholding the rights of PWDs by disseminating information and generating awareness and collective action in order to ensure that the provisions enlisted under various government schemes and programmes reach them.

The state actors like government officials, school administration, etc and the non-state actors including NGOs, Anganwadi workers, Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) workers and Panchayati Raj Institution representatives were identified as key stakeholders, who could contribute to the empowerment of PWDs. The collectives of PWDs catalysed through the project helped them to negotiate and receive their entitlements under various government schemes and programmes, which led to improved access, enhanced quality and delivery of services for them. The project created avenues for both individual empowerment and collectivisation of PWDs to uphold their rights and finally move out of the poverty cycle.

The project was conceptualised with the objective to increase the quality of delivery and access to public services to all PWDs as per the provisions under the national legislation. It factored in the need for a facilitative environment, which could be geared through the CSOs taking leadership in anchoring and extending support to the PWDs. Thus, building capacity of CSOs in the form of Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) was one of the key areas of action. The project aimed to increase the participation of PWDs in the society and promote accountability in state systems and other service providers. The overall objective was to increase equal opportunities resulting in reduced poverty of PWDs, enabling better quality of life and more inclusive development.

One of the initial bottlenecks of the project was the unavailability of data leading to ambiguity on the status of PWDs, especially who were below the poverty line. The situation made them invisible to most of the development programmes and

SVJ through its rigorous community engagement and partnership model emphasised on institution building for the differently abled by the differently abled.



THEORY OF CHANGE AND STRATEGIES

their participation to the governance process was hindered. Therefore, the initial need of the project was to foster a process whereby primary, verified data was generated encompassing factors affecting the access and delivery of services to the PWDs, which resulted in a participatory community data enumeration exercise and documentation. The process helped in securing the gender segregated data for the PWDs at the household level. It also helped to translate two objectives: firstly, it aided in creating a database for the PWDs and track the progress throughout the project cycle and contributed to inclusiveness in the project design. Secondly, it helped to create a robust evidence for intense policy exercise to secure rights of the PWDs.

SVJ through its rigorous community engagement and partnership model emphasised on institution building for the differently abled by the differently abled. SVJ has opted for a two-pronged strategy. First, it aimed to increase access to services through information dissemination to PWDs by collectivisation of PWDs in the form of a Disabled People's Group (DPG) at the village level and Disabled People's Organisation (DPO) at the block and district level. The project focussed on the use of participatory process for community mobilisation. Secondly, it emphasised capacity building of the PWDs and stakeholders that includes state, civil society actors and institutions at the village, block and district levels, using workshops, publications and various forms of media, thereby creating an enabling environment for fostering support and change in the status of PWDs in the communities.

At the initial phase of the project, it was recognised that not much organised information

Accelerating local leadership and building capacity of PWDs has been one of the key focus areas of the project.

or data is available about the PWDs. There was a dearth of data regarding the living conditions or status of the PWDs, which would have been an asset in chalking out strategies for support. The immediate need was to obtain data, which could help identify challenges, barriers and concerns of the PWDs in the district. The unavailability of reliable data sources made it difficult to ascertain the living status of the PWDs and produced ambiguity about the challenges faced by them. Thus, a participatory survey exercise was conducted to identify baseline data to bolster strategies and processes, which could further accelerate the project outcomes.

The baseline survey helped to fulfil two key objectives including a comprehensive profile of PWDs on a case-by-case manner and highlighted the key issues encompassing the information gap, which constrained the full participation of PWDs to claim their entitlements.

Accelerating local leadership and building capacity of PWDs has been one of the key focus areas of the project. The project catalysed and strengthened the existing groups of PWDs at the village level, which identified the other PWDs. Using Participatory Learning Appraisal (PLA) tools, the project identified PWDs in each Gram Panchayat, selected the potential PWD leaders and mentored them to be more informed and take initiatives, thereby strengthening the process of collectivisation. As a result, the project is successful in forming 659 DPGs at the village level in the last five years and has reached out to include 11,580 members in the

DPOs formed at the block and district level, which includes 10,574 male and 1,006 female members.

The process of group formation and guidelines for providing mentoring support were prepared in collaboration with the PWDs and the partner organisations, which helped to streamline the process and create a forum for dialogues between the groups. It helped to create an institution by the Persons with Disabilities for the PWDs. The institutionalisation of support and the opportunity for peer learning has enhanced the quality of life in addition to creating a space for collective advocacy, partnership and negotiation with the state and non-state actors. The project has been able to nurture 409 DPO leaders at the block and district levels.

The DPOs have been the key agents for capacity building of PWDs in the community through knowledge awareness exercises by using participatory methods resulting in awareness among the PWDs and their families. The process also incorporated a gender-sensitive approach to focus on women and girls with disability to capacitate them about their rights, safety, and self-esteem through community level camps, workshops and trainings. It has been successful to train 19,389 girls and women with disabilities under the aegis of the initiative.



The development and dissemination of information communication material in the form of booklets using data from the baseline survey, booklet with information on various schemes, standard operating procedure for formation of the DPG and DPO were produced in the local languages to cater to the community at large. This strategy served as a key tool for information dissemination and empowering the communities.

SVJ had a special focus on *strengthening the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)*. The primary focus was to strengthen the capacity of the institutions by organising trainings and workshops to sensitise the functionaries on specific policy, schemes, and programmes for the PWDs. The project used the strategy to have discussion and joint meetings between PRI members and PWDs to nurture dialogues and align to the cause of ensuring entitlements for the PWDs. The process helped to create awareness among PRI members on public schemes and services available for the benefit of PWDs at the Panchayat, block and district levels. An estimated 11,929 PRI members were sensitised on the rights and entitlements of the PWDs in five districts. Trainings and workshops were also conducted for the PRI members and functionaries on the RPWD Act, RTI, etc, which helped in leveraging support for the PWDs when they approached the institutions.

Communication and sensitisation of the stakeholders has been a key component of the project. The intervention has made conscious efforts to bring stakeholders together and sensitise them to form a socially conducive environment for the PWDs to be able to access their entitlements. This included

sensitisation workshops with village level actors including the Gram Panchayat, Anganwadi workers, ASHA workers, and school teachers helping them in early identification of disability and fostering support to the children with disabilities and their families. In five years, 39,425 stake holders were trained in five action districts.

The workshops with state and non-state actors and groups, including NGOs, helped in identifying the key thrust areas for delivery, identification of barriers and bridging support through the agency networks. Meetings with like-minded NGOs were held once or twice every year in each action district in order to discuss and achieve common goals in the district. In all the districts, a Working Committee was formed with representatives from all NGOs who are working together to decide the future course of collaboration among the like-minded NGOs in the districts.

SVJ has eventually created a cohesive network of actors and institutions to uphold the rights of the PWDs. There has been 48 DPOs formed during the project period, which have culminated to create five Disabled Peoples' Federations (DPFs) that are registered as independent NGOs as per their respective state laws. The collectivisation of the PWD has helped in identification of leaders in the community. An estimated 409 DPO leaders were actively stewarding and advocating for the rights of PWDs in the five intervention districts. The process has helped in negotiating and creating dialogues with the state functionaries accelerating the delivery of benefits for the PWDs. The project facilitation and persistent efforts from the DPGs and DPOs helped in approaching the government departments for getting the benefits for the PWDs.

The DPGs, DPOs and DPFs have played a very crucial role in creating awareness and ensuring effective implementation of the provisions of the new Right to Persons with Disability Act (RPWDA), 2016. The RPWDA paved way for inclusion of many other forms of disabilities, the sensitisation and capacity building process among the PWDs along with the community awareness and mobilisation of the PRI members contributed tremendously to strengthen the collectives to demand for entitlements. Consistent advocacy by the PWDs for the PWDs helped to create a platform for them to recognise their agency and lead the transformation.



MAJOR OUTCOMES

The project demonstrated that access to information through community-based participatory methods can lead to greater awareness among the vulnerable and marginalised groups. The collectivisation of PWDs can create an agency, which enable them to lead their transformations.

Empowering PWDs to access entitlements

The project created a database, which has been a critical point of interface with the community to identify cases where support is needed and to help them access the required information for availing the entitlements. The data helped in monitoring and following up the PWDs on a case-to-case manner. Thus, in the duration of five years, the project has been successful to reach out to 25,814 individual beneficiaries including their families with direct benefits of the government schemes and programmes. The beneficiaries received entitlements under various schemes.

Women with disabilities are further marginalised and vulnerable in the society considering the social discrimination and prevailing patriarchy. The project reached out to 19,389 women with disabilities who further became part of the DPGs and DPOs, which was a significant achievement signifying their empowerment. An estimated 9,934 PWDs received disability certificates and 3,807 PWDs have received disability pension.

Disabled peoples' collectives

The project has been successful in facilitating the creation of DPG, DPOs and Disabled People's Federations at the district level. The process helped the PWDs to gain voice and a platform to collectively deliberate on their issues and challenges. It created a strong forum for awareness and advocacy for them by them. The project has been successful in creating 659 DPGs, 48 DPOs and five DPFs in the five action districts across four states in India.

The members of the PWD collectives have been trained through workshops and trainings at village, block and district level during the project. The workshops were focussed on giving information



on the disability rights, RPWDA, 2016 and its provisions, schemes and entitlements, gender-based support in accessing rights and entitlements, Right to Information (RTI) Act, etc. The process has led to build the capacity of PWDs and has also given them confidence to participate and voice their opinions in the community meetings, forums and with implementing authorities.

The empowerment process has been in partnership with the communities and thus, there are instances where the DPO leaders were invited to participate in Gram Sabhas in Barwani and Balangir districts.

SVJ was also successful in advocating and demonstrating a disabled-friendly sanitation facility. One accessible toilet was constructed in collaboration with the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan Mission as a model in Barwani district of Madhya Pradesh.

As a result of DPO advocacy at the block level, DPO members along with the SVJ team were invited to supervise the quality of the ramps in schools in Barwani district in Madhya Pradesh.

The project strategies, which focussed on individual welfare and enhancing the quality of life along

“ I have been part of the Disabled People’s Organisation (DPO) since 2015 when my friend Ayesha Ben introduced me to SVJ. I have 40% disability due to which my left hand is not functional. I have four children, my husband used to be the only bread earner of the house but due to sudden illness he had to stop working which created a void in our lives. We didn’t have any economic security and thus, I was looking forward to opportunities. I got training in stitching under the SVJ project and also a sewing machine. Initially, I stitched jute bags for many neighbours to put on roof during the monsoon and thus many recognised that I can also extend help rather than depending on others for support. The regular meetings at the DPO helped me to overcome the fear of interacting in group and I find myself more confident now to approach the community and even meet government officials for support. Gradually I took up work as an ASHA worker in the community, the information regarding the persons with disabilities (PWDs) and their legal rights helped me make others also aware about it. I have facilitated around 50 people to receive disability certificates, wheelchair and other benefits under the government policies by coordinating with different government officials. I am proud to be part of the DPO, now I am taking care of my family and the community.

”
Munira Madoi

DPO member, Juna Disa, Palanpur Block,
Banaskantha District, Gujarat

with a rigorous process of collectivisation of PWDs resulted into a significant change in the self-esteem of PWDs in their communities. The DPGs, DPOs and DPFs have contributed to the individual knowledge building and awareness as well as acted as a platform for peer learning and advocacy. This led to greater awareness and acceptance among the communities and accountability of the PRIs and other state institutions. The process helped the communities to recognise the different capabilities of the PWDs and has opened avenues like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS), where they can be employed under the provisions of the scheme. An estimated 1,404 PWDs participated in MNREGS and were provided employment, which is a big leap in fighting the stigma and stereotypes about PWDs. One of the most distinct features of the project is that it has been successful in creating a space for the PWDs to overcome the barriers and demand their rights.

Capacity building of the stakeholders and target group

The project helped in creating an ecosystem for the PWDs to facilitate their capacity building, participation and empowerment in the communities. The efforts were made to build capacities of the line departments, intermediately agencies like the Block office and village, block and district level institutions to recognise and facilitate PWDs in receiving their entitlements. For example, sessions were organised with Anganwadi workers and school teachers to identify disabilities and help in guiding the community members to support the children and receive their due entitlements from the concerned institutions.

The project has counselled 9,795 parents of children with disabilities. The sustained efforts with the schools, parents, and the community resulted in enrolment of 4,402 girls with disabilities attending the primary schools and 665 girls attending the high school in the five intervention districts.

Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions

The project has been successful in fostering a cordial and supportive relationship with the state and the

PRIs, which has been a significant outcome of the intense field processes and dialogue. The focus on strengthening the PRIs helped in advancing the cause in support of inclusion of the PWDs in the communities. The project used various media for communicating with the PRIs like sensitisation workshops, community forums, meetings with PRI members, encouraging them for public notices as a part of disclosure of information, wall paintings, stickers, etc. The processes helped serve twin purposes in the form of building capacities of the institution and strengthening partnership among the PRIs members.

The sensitised PRI members informed the PWDs about the available schemes and services in their respective Panchayats, blocks, districts and facilitate the services for the PWDs living in their respective wards and Panchayats. An estimated 218 Gram Panchayats adopted three per cent reservations for the PWDs after the advocacy with the PRI members through the SVJ project.

Advocacy and Policy Interface

Advocacy by the PWDs through the DPGs, DPOs and DPFs has been a very unique feature of the project and has been successful in elevating the project outcomes to the next level where policy advocacy and dialogue was possible. The DPOs have been able to advocate effectively for their new RPWDA entitlements and network with other available services.

LESSONS LEARNT

SVJ relied on the principle of individual awareness and collective empowerment. The process resulted in formation of DPGs, DPOs and DPF in the five intervention districts, which institutionalised the community efforts of transformation in the lives of PWDs by PWDs themselves.

Improved relationship between different stakeholders is a key element in defining the trajectory of interventions. For example, the local partner organisations already had an effective rapport in the project locations with the community and other institutions, while working on the issues related to health, education, and governance. This past acquaintance served as strength to the

The Municipal Corporation of Deesa in Banaskantha district, Gujarat, identified that there was no institution to support the learning needs of children with disabilities in the city. The Municipal Corporation identified BPA to partner and leverage their technical and CBR expertise to run the centre in Deesa Block. The Corporation identified land and constructed learning facility in coordination with other agencies. Since 2018, BPA is running classes for children with disabilities with the help of community teachers and supporting a vocational training programme in addition to specialised physiotherapy support and counselling for children and parents through visiting specialist. The centre has enrolled close to 60 students with disabilities and has become a nodal point for skill development for the urban and rural youth and children with disability. The centre named *Khusiyo nu Sarnamu* (abode of happiness) is an excellent example of partnership for the care and protection of PWDs in the community where the government has invested on securing the rights of the people with disabilities with technical support and guidance by the civil society and community at large.

project and contributed to local knowledge and resource generation and capacity building leading to sustainability of the efforts.

The project recognised the agency with the PWDs and helped in strengthening it through capacity building, awareness and access to information. The facilitative environment led to an ecosystem where the PWDs could voice themselves and advocate for their rights. Thus, recognising agency and facilitating the process results in sustainability of efforts.

The project also focussed on nurturing leadership and foster collective process of change through stakeholder engagement, which helped in creating a support system for the PWDs.

Attention to gender equality in the participating communities has been an important aspect of the project, which helped in motivating women with



disabilities to participate in the processes. The gender-sensitive approach helped in addressing discrimination and exploitation of the women in the community.

Strengthening PRIs through interactions and dialogues with the DPOs has been a successful strategy in the community to advocate for rights and ensure access to entitlements. It has enhanced accountability on the part of the PRI members to the community at large and PWDs in particular.

CONCLUSION

The process has defined the journey of the PWDs from representation to participation and anchoring transformation through village, block and district level institutions. Information is a significant tool, which enables access to

entitlements. The process of individual and collective capacity building has been an impactful tool and has served to build capacities of the PWDs to become aware, collectivise and demand for action. SVJ demonstrated a model of action, wherein the PWDs have been part of a process, which has empowered them to anchor and nurture programmes and enable institutions by them and for them. The project has helped to address the key issue of lack of leadership and voice among the PWDs and barriers in their collective representation, which served as a key factor in propelling a process of collective action. The processes at the village, block and district level resulted in inclusion of PWDs, thereby demonstrating that it is essential to address the institutional gaps and capacities along with individual needs for support to realise inclusion, which may empower the PWDs.

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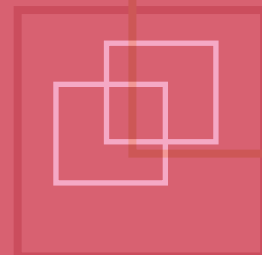
FUNDING SUPPORT



EUROPEAN UNION

ACTION TO IMPROVE PUBLIC Scheme Access and Delivery in Bihar, India

A project implemented by **Nand & Jeet Khemka Foundation** in partnership with:
• Nidan • Nabha Foundation



“

My name is Anjana Kumari and I am posted as an ANM at PHC Kahalgaon. Before this device was launched, we used registers for entering all the data and only two tests like haemoglobin and blood pressure were conducted for women. Women had to go to various hospitals for other necessary tests. Now, with this Health Cube, all tests are conducted very efficiently and all the data is uploaded accurately on the device. We are trained for using the device, and we are also improving every day with the help of this device.

”

Anjana Kumari (ANM),
Pirpainti Block,
Bhagalpur District, Bihar

THE CONTEXT¹

Bihar is the twelfth largest and the third most populous state in India with the highest population density of 1,106 per sq. km. (national average is 382 per sq. km.). Around 58 per cent of its population is less than 25 years old, which promises a considerably high demographic dividend, if managed well. Nearly 81 per cent of its population lives in rural areas and 42 per cent are below the poverty line.

Bhagalpur, located in eastern Bihar, is one of the poorest districts. A highly populous district (30,37,766 persons) with a population density of 1,182 inhabitants per sq. km., Bhagalpur is ill-famed for its poverty with three quarters of its population below the poverty line. The sex ratio of the district stands at 878 and has a drastically low female literacy rate of 38.8 per cent. Only half of the population here is literate.

With alarming statuses of health, education and social welfare, the Nand & Jeet Khemka Foundation (NJKF) selected Bhagalpur as an intervention area for the project, 'Action to Improve Public Scheme Access and Delivery' in Bihar, India (AIPAD). The project was supported by the European Union for five years (2014-2018). Five blocks (Kahalgaon, Pirpainti, Sanhoulla, Shahkund and Jagdishpur), out of a total of 16 blocks, in the district were chosen as the intervention sites. They were chosen

¹ All the data has been taken from the Census Report of 2011:
<https://www.census2011.co.in/census/district/76-bhagalpur.html>

on the basis of their already existing low levels of education, health, and access to public schemes. Over 93 per cent of the entire Scheduled Tribe (ST) population (53,804) and 59 per cent of the Muslim population (2,97,008) of Bhagalpur come from these five blocks.

At the conception of the project, it made a critical assumption that the primary reason for such under-development in the district was the lack of awareness about Government schemes and services among the people. An extensive baseline study conducted at the inception of the project reaffirmed this assumption. To offer a possible solution to this deep-seated socio-economic problem, AIPAD aimed at a multi-pronged approach of increasing awareness and access of the disadvantaged population towards the social schemes in the areas of health, sanitation, education, and social security. An ensuing challenge of this lack of awareness and access was also a result of the lack of accountability of the Government functionaries, which AIPAD targeted to improve. The use of technology aided the information flow and knowledge of the communities. AIPAD hoped to replicate and scale up practices, which would improve the development indicators in the district. A problem so prolonged and deep was not easy to tackle with, especially not by a single organisation. Collaboration was necessitated in this process. While the project was anchored by the NJKF, partnership was established with Nidan and Nabha Foundation. Nidan became the grassroots anchor for the project and the Nabha Foundation undertook the capacity building roles under the AIPAD project.

THEORY OF CHANGE AND STRATEGIES

There are reverberating accounts on the problematic state of various development indicators in Bhagalpur. The district suffers from the poorest health, sanitation, and education indicators in Bihar. There are numerous instances of maternal and child mortality, the state of public health delivery systems are deplorable, dropout rates in schools are very high, compliances to the Right to Education (RTE) Act provisions are dubious. Irrespective of several operational welfare schemes by the Government, the awareness, accessibility and understanding amongst the people towards the advantages and

the provisions of these schemes are shockingly low. These problems were as much institutional as they were structural. In addition to the socio-economic factors of caste, class, and gender, there were factors like inefficient and at times corrupt service delivery, lack of information among the people, delays and bottlenecks in implementation of Government projects, frequent elections and change of Governments, etc., which added to the problems. The need for an intervention to make the situation better was evident. AIPAD undertook the intervention, in this fairly challenging context, to not just improve the access to public services but to also make the members of the community, Panchayats, front line health workers, marginalised people aware of their rights and entitlements. Once aware, the assumption was that the citizens would exert pressures on the supply side, i.e., the Government functionaries, for timely and efficient access to these services. However, to make this happen, the community needed to be made aware about various schemes, benefits that they were entitled to and then generate the sense of ownership and leadership to raise voice for their own causes. These efforts were planned to be in tandem with the Government initiatives so as to ensure a longer life span for these efforts. The other objective was to innovate and come up with technology-driven and people-centric option, which can easily be adopted by the community members and the state departments. It also had the potential to be scaled up in more than one intervention blocks aiming at improving the health status of people and also increasing their access to public schemes of various kinds.

The overall intervention strategy was to increase the quantitative uptake in prominent public schemes of health, sanitation, education, and social security. The quantitative increase in uptake of these schemes will increase awareness and knowledge of people towards these schemes, thereby ensuring accountability and answerability from the supply side (i.e., the Government stakeholders) in providing effective and equitable delivery of these services. An ambitious target population of 10,00,000 people residing in 105 Gram Panchayats in Bhagalpur were to benefit from this project.

After the initial understanding and formulation of the problematic and the possible solutions, an extensive baseline study was conducted to get a precise status of the state of health,

The overall strategy was to improve the uptake of prominent public schemes of health, sanitation, education and social security.



sanitation, education and public schemes in the intervention areas. In all, 994 households and 35 schools were investigated regarding the status of health, sanitation, education and social security indicators as may be applicable in the sampled household. The overall sample was distributed across the 35 villages randomly selected from the four project blocks. The baseline study results were a reaffirmation of the initial hunch of the poor status of health, sanitation, education and public schemes in the selected blocks. Over the four years, the project undertook a range of activities throughout its course. This section will illustrate the strategies, activities and processes implemented in tackling the three pillars of issues under the project.

Health and sanitation

The National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) was one of the major health schemes targeted by AIPAD. NRHM includes Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY), Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram (RBSK), Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matri Yojana (PMSMY), etc. The broad goals of this Central Government scheme is to reduce child and maternal mortality, provide universal access to food and nutrition, sanitation and hygiene, immunisation to children. It aims to strengthen public institutions of health services, ensure easy access to primary health care services and focus on the revitalisation of local health traditions and Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy (AYUSH)².

The baseline revealed a high maternal mortality rate of 317 with 68.2 per cent non-institutional deliveries and around 78.2 per cent of the sample households in the district had no access to toilets. The project in its initial phases, understood the attitudes of

² <http://nhm.gov.in/images/pdf/about-nrhm/nrhm-framework-implementation/nrhm-framework-latest.pdf>

AIPAD empowered the people to demand and access efficient, effective and equitable service delivery for 10,00,000 people.

the community, Government departments and other stakeholders like ASHAs, ANMs, Anganwadi workers, etc., who were directly related to the health schemes. Apart from the initial rapport building efforts, the project made use of the pre-existing initiatives like Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Days (VHSNDs) to mobilise and raise awareness among the community and front line health workers. A close follow-up with the eligible beneficiaries under the schemes of JSY and Mukhyamantri Sanghan Tikakaran Yojana was done throughout the project duration to ensure maximum enrolments of the beneficiaries. Additionally, the project gave attention to the Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) by forming strong networks with the supervisor of the Anganwadi Centres, Child Development Project Officer (CDPO) at the block level and District Project Officer at the district level to ensure quality provision of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) such as immunisation, nutrition, health check-ups, pre-school non-formal education, etc. Social audits of the AWCs were regularly done throughout the project and community members were encouraged to take an active part in these audits for increased accountability. For efforts on sanitation, the project incorporated intensive Behavioural Communication Change exercises, construction of toilets in villages, awareness sessions with school students and PRI (Panchayati Raj Institution) members throughout the four years. The sanitation initiatives were further linked with the Namami Ganga scheme of the Central Government for a more integrated approach. To assess the status of the impact, mid-project data assessments were also undertaken to re-strategise and re-align the focus of the project. Mass health check-up camps were organised for

pregnant and lactating women and children under the PMSMY scheme. The important intervention of the Swasthya Slate was introduced in 2015 in Shahkund block. The Swasthya Slate is an electronic device capable of performing over 13 basic health check-ups for pregnant mothers. Following its tremendous success and support from the authorities, the Swasthya Slate project was scaled up further to two more blocks in 2016 with a much advanced version of Health Cubes (HC).

Under the health programme, the project benefited 81,767 women to avail institutional delivery benefits through JSY. Nearly 6,208 women benefitted from PMSMY (Central Government's scheme focussing on providing assured, comprehensive and quality antenatal care, free of cost, universally to all pregnant women³) through the project support and it facilitated 7,310 Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Day (VHSND). A total of 56,884 students enrolled across 1,001 AWCs and 19,693 pregnant women conducted their ANC tests through the HC devices.



Education

The baseline conducted at the beginning of the project revealed that even though 97 per cent of

³ <https://pmsma.nhp.gov.in/>

the school-age children were enrolled in school, there existed frequent instances of dropouts and low compliances of the RTE Act in the intervention area. Keeping the RTE Act and its provisions at the fore, AIPAD worked extensively on enrolment and re-enrolment of students in the schools of the five blocks in the intervention area. The initial days were used to assess the conditions of the functioning of the schools and the status of dropouts in the schools. Subsequently, regular awareness (Shiksha Melas and distribution of IEC materials) and mobilisation activities were conducted to ensure enrolment of maximum children back in school. The project also incorporated other education-related Government schemes including the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, Mukhya Mantri Balika Cycle Yojana and Mukhya Mantri Balika Poshak Yojana and several scholarships. The project worked towards identification, awareness and access of the benefits to the eligible children under this scheme.

In order to strengthen the institutional side, capacity building trainings were organised for Head Masters and Vidyalaya Shiksha Samiti (VSS) to ensure preparation of good quality School Development Plans (SDP) in a timely manner. The AIPAD team maintained regular follow up for uninterrupted performance of the SDP committees. The team assisted the students in getting their bank accounts opened for direct and quicker transfer of money under various Government schemes.

Under the education programme, 4,03,970 students were enrolled in 784 schools; 2,98,230 students benefited from the scholarships scheme, while 3,50,884 students benefited from the Poshak scheme. Nearly 6,13,700 students and around 3,230 schools were covered under the sanitation campaign with 1,320 SDPs submitted across 784 schools and 2,500 VSS members were trained.

Social schemes

Bihar has a plethora of Central and state government schemes operational in its various districts. Some of these prominent schemes include: widow pension scheme, old age pension scheme, artisan pension schemes, disability scheme, Shatabadi Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Bima Yojana, Kanya Suraksha Yojana, Parvarish Yojana, Kabir Antyeshti Yojana, Ujjwala Gas Scheme, etc. The baseline survey revealed that



only 33.5 per cent of the artisans interviewed knew about the social security schemes for them. Only six percent of the respondents were enrolled in the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY). Furthermore, 56.53 per cent respondents were aware about Indira Gandhi National Widow pension scheme, while only 25.84 per cent of them registered as beneficiaries of the scheme. Around 14 per cent of the respondents registered in the scheme reported to be paid less than the prescribed amount. Out of the 69.35 per cent of respondents aware about the Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension scheme, only 34.41 per cent were registered under the scheme. The low levels of awareness and enrolment called for extensive action by the project teams to ensure maximum enrolment and benefits under these Government schemes.

A multi-pronged, dynamic approach was adopted to work on the social security schemes so as to generate awareness towards these schemes amongst the community members. An extensive identification of eligible beneficiaries under these schemes was made and followed up aiming at enrolling these community members into the schemes. Parallel efforts were being carried with the Government functionaries in-charge of the delivery of these schemes. The demand from the community members enabled and enhanced accountability of these departments towards the communities.

Under the social security programmes, the project supported 46 villages in achieving 90 per cent coverage under the social security. The project facilitated accessing social security entitlements including 18,700 old age people receiving their pensions, 13,572 bank accounts opened under



Innovative initiatives like *Jan-Samwad Rath* and *Cycle Pe Soochna* was implemented for awareness and knowledge dissemination. Use of technology was done extensively through the *Swasthya Slate* project, *Jan Soochna Portal* and *E-newsletter*.

MAJOR OUTCOMES

Apart from the specific quantitative outputs/targets achieved, the project exhibited some substantive outcomes. Owing to its mass awareness efforts, the project managed to result in an impressive uptake of public schemes by the community members. The efforts were further substantiated by active motivation and involvement from the PRI representatives, who undertook this initiative in their own accords and ensured maximum inclusion. These PRI members took the forefront to exert pressures on the Government departments for service delivery. In addition, the project also set up a steering committee at district level by bringing Government line departments and the district magistrate (DM) chairing the project steering committee meetings. Project initiated a **district level task force** to address the health service delivery. The accountability was further strengthened through 105 youth leaders and 73 citizen leaders, who were active facilitators of the process throughout the duration of the project. The active constitution of 52 village advocacy groups was another major outcome in this stride. **Social security camps** proved to be one of the most effective tools of disseminating information and reaching out to the community. Apart from generating awareness about the schemes and identifying eligible beneficiaries, these camps helped people in understanding the documentation process and also helped them in case of any missing documents. During the last two years, apart from the identification of the beneficiaries, extreme focus and dedication was applied on identifying and solving the pending cases of many beneficiaries. Similarly, **Information Centres** became a one-stop solution to a large number of people to avail a variety of information on different Government schemes at one place. Around 12-lakh population has been impacted and informed about their entitlements through the Information Centres.

A major outcome of the project was the innovative application of technology through the **Swasthya**

the *Jan Dhan Yojana* besides 25,476 students who benefitted under the *Mukhyamantri Balak/Balika Cycleyojana*. About 1,16,433 student bank accounts were opened and 14,642 women benefitted from the *Ujjwala Yojana*. Nearly 360 security camps were held.

In addition to sector-specific activities, the project conducted a range of other activities, which were either embedded in all the three sectors of health, education, and social security or were directed at the awareness, empowerment, and capacity building of other stakeholders like the PRI member, community leaders, etc. Regular review meetings were conducted with district and state officials in-charge of the above three sectors and the status of progress was regularly communicated to them. For community and PRI members, initiatives like *Protsahna Divas* were organised to facilitate and acknowledge the good work of the motivated and active PRI functionaries. For increased transparency, *Aam Sabhas* were timely organised for an open discussion of various sections of the village communities. Citizen Leaders and Youth Groups were formed, activated and trained to sustain and amplify the efforts of the project far and wide.

Slate and Health Cube projects for betterment of maternal and child health (MCH) status. The technology was fairly handy and significantly improved not just the health status of MCH but also capacitated front line health workers for efficient service delivery of health, especially addressing Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) and Infant Mortality Rate (IMR). The positive impact paved the way for scalability, replicability and acceptability thereafter.

The Swasthya Slates and HC devices topped the chart of innovation in the AIPAD project. With proven positive results and ubiquitous support from community, health line workers and Government officials, the Swasthya Slates device brought some phenomenal changes in the status of maternal and child health in two blocks in Bhagalpur.

The device was first launched to be used in health sub-centres, primary health centres and additional primary health centres of three Panchayats in the Shahkund block. Swasthya Slate is a mobile tablet attached to a device that enables frontline health workers with first of its kind technology to conduct 33 diagnostic tests for prevention, diagnosis, care and referral of diseases. The National Health Mission (NHM) in consultation with District Health Society (DHS) recommended 13 diagnostic tests⁴ for the pilots that are carried out at the VHSND during ANC and PNC checkups. The Swasthya Slate is also equipped with GPS and camera features, which enables location tracking and the photograph of the patient can also be taken for future references. The device is both wireless as well as 3G enabled.

In addition to the technical capacity of the device of conducting over 13 diagnostic tests, the other factor that makes it innovative is the ease of use by health workers and communities. ANM now fills up all the information related to the women with the help of a tablet. After filling up the information regarding registration and ANC, ANM uploads all the information on the Swasthya Slate server and after performing all the tests such as blood pressure, temperature, haemoglobin, sugar, urine, pregnancy, HIV, syphilis, hepta-B, etc, it uploads the same data on the Swasthya Slate portal. And this data can be viewed online with other higher level officials at the PHC. The same process is carried out for the same

⁴ These tests include: blood pressure, blood sugar, blood group, urine protein, temperature, pulse, haemoglobin, HIV, Hepatitis-B, pregnancy, syphilis, malaria and several other biometrics.

Case: Advocacy Group members of Baluchak Panchayat

Members of the Advocacy Group observed that in Baluchak Middle School, the mid-day meal was not being cooked and served according to the Government issued menu. They visited the school a couple of times and witnessed the issue. After that, they directly spoke to the Head Master of the school and brought this issue to his notice. The Head Master assured that he would look into the matter. Members rigorously followed up with the Head Master and made sure that the issue was given utmost importance. After a few days, the members again visited the same school and found that good quality food was being served to the children, as per the standardised menu.

pregnant women for her second and third ANC. The convenience, cost-effectiveness and flexibility of this pilot gives a positive indication towards its potential for scalability. The Swasthya Slate enabled point-of-care diagnosis at the doorsteps for women. The device is portable, quick and easy to use and facilitates quick results with minimum efforts and glitches. Unlike a lot of other similar tablet-based innovations, the Swasthya Slate is more user-friendly and has been able to garner receptivity in a very short span of time. It has empowered the health workers by making them technology and internet friendly. The Swasthya Slate devices can also identify high-risk pregnancies in a timely fashion and refer it with timely action and medical care.

Acknowledging the fact that it is a life-saving initiative, both DM and DHS collaborated with the team to scale it up in Pirpainti and Kahalgaon blocks. Understanding the need and addressing the recommendation of the dignitaries, NJKF procured a technologically-advanced version of Swasthya Slate, 'Health Cube' and planned on scaling up the pilot with DHS to two complete blocks of Kahalgaon and Pirapinti, so that young mothers and women of these remote areas can get maximum benefits from this initiative.

Youth Group, Pirpainti Block

A group of nine, active youth leaders were trained in the Pirpainti block. These group members are ensuring effective functioning of schools and AWCs by visiting and analysing the strength of students, teachers, and cases of dropouts, overall hygiene of the school, preparation of mid-day meals, etc. In case of any gaps, they discuss the situations with the headmaster and Anganwadi worker and also offer their help, like counseling the parents of dropouts or taking a class session on hygiene and hand wash, etc. These young leaders also help pension beneficiaries by identifying issues in their application forms and voluntarily assisting them at the RTPS counters.

social security and they also raise their grievances to the panchayat levels. These Samitis work to address the unresolved issues and accelerate them to block levels. They also oversee and monitor the functioning of the Information Centres. In addition, the **District Federation** was constituted to resolve cases, which required higher expertise and district-level intervention. The district-level federation is a platform for advocating systemic reforms, accountability issues or matters of public interest at large.

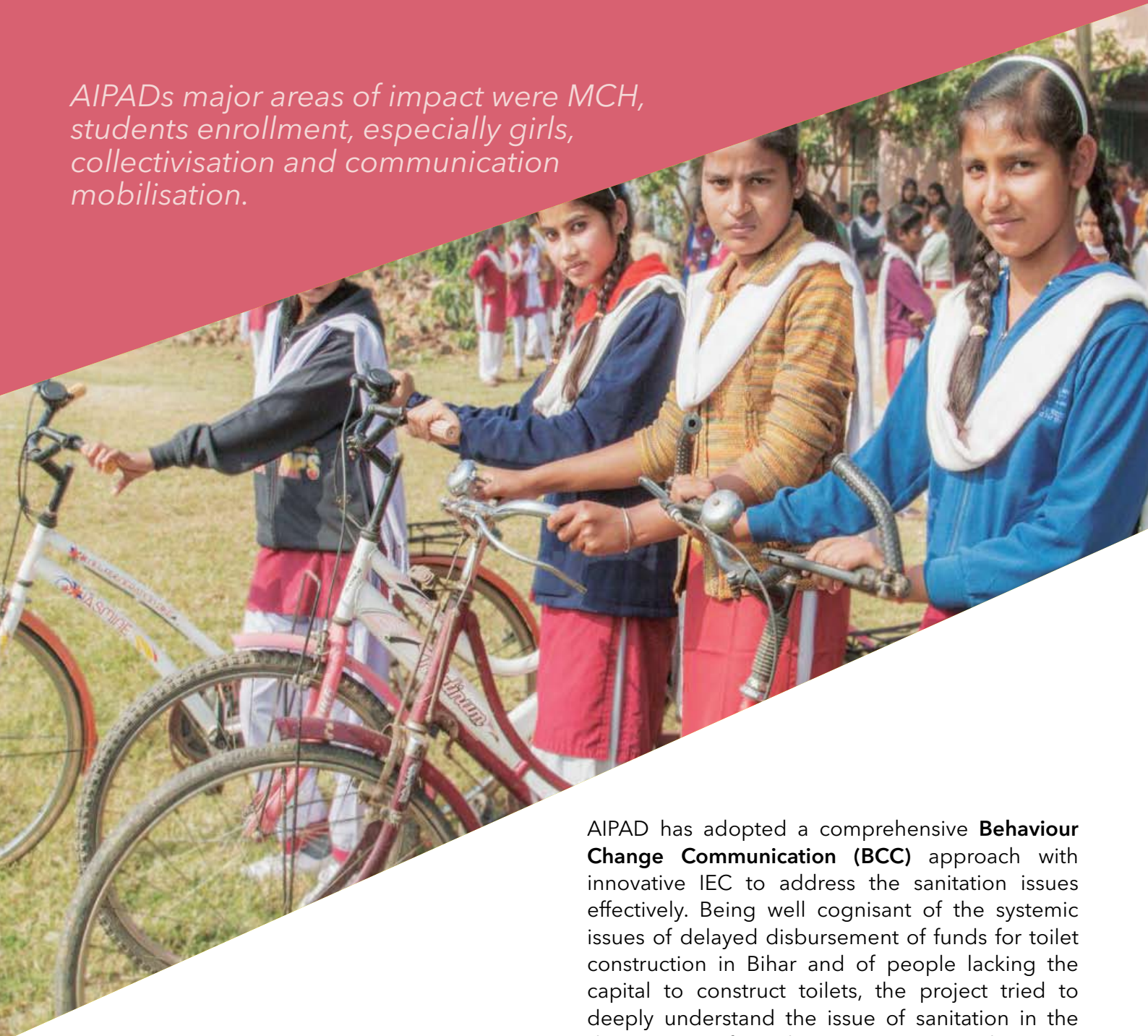
AIPAD has endeavoured to nurture a cadre of **new leader** who could bridge the gaps between communities, local governance institutions, and Government authorities. **Citizen Leaders** were those members of the community, who were concerned about issues plaguing the community and would actively take charge and responsibility to address them. They were given the task of spreading awareness in the community and identifying the population that needed support and access to the Government schemes and resources. The AIPAD team laid down a detailed objective criteria for identifying and deploying Citizen Leaders in the communities. After clearly communicating these objectives to the prospective community leaders and after coming to a consensus on who could become community leaders, the next step was to formulate a strategic plan of action. Constant trainings and hand holding support were provided throughout the course of the project to build capacities and perspectives of each Citizen Leaders, enjoying a much wider legitimacy and acceptability amongst her/his community members. The presence of Citizen Leaders

The panchayats having Swasthya Slate depicted significant improvement in spreading awareness about the importance of antenatal and post-natal check ups as reflected by higher registration of women. Additionally, the large number of administered tests indicates that ANCs and PNCs are being done regularly. With such compelling data, there is no doubt on the absolute need to extensively replicate Swasthya Slate and Health Cube initiatives in other geographies.

The **Advocacy Groups** in the AIPAD project was formed with an objective to strengthen community ownership and empower disadvantaged communities to raise voices for their own rights and entitlements. In four years, AIPAD constituted **52 Advocacy Groups** across five blocks and included people who are genuinely interested in empowering their own communities. Participatory in its approach, the groups focus on including representation from all the facets of the communities and empower them to determine their own objectives. The groups formed by AIPAD's facilitation are functional and regular in their operations and are sustainable entities irrespective of the presence of AIPAD. Similarly, for operations at the block level, **Kshetriya Samitis** were constituted. Through this, the community members gain knowledge about various schemes and entitlements regarding education, health or



AIPADs major areas of impact were MCH, students enrollment, especially girls, collectivisation and communication mobilisation.



ensured sustainability in the project and acted as a useful mediator between the communities and the authorities.

To develop leadership among the rural youth, AIPAD constituted different **Youth Groups** and provided constant support and training to them. This was done to create a strong village-level ownership and capacity to deal with the Government machineries. The youth groups were provided trainings on Government schemes and information on health, sanitation, education and social security. As a result, young leaders have been actively participating with AIPAD members in community work. Creating a brigade of interested, aware and determined youth can be tested out and scaled up. It also serves as a useful sustainability strategy.

AIPAD has adopted a comprehensive **Behaviour Change Communication (BCC)** approach with innovative IEC to address the sanitation issues effectively. Being well cognisant of the systemic issues of delayed disbursement of funds for toilet construction in Bihar and of people lacking the capital to construct toilets, the project tried to deeply understand the issue of sanitation in the district. Apart from the systemic issues, there was also a persistent tendency of traditional behaviour pattern on open defecation and the lack of awareness regarding its health hazards. AIPAD focussed *'on collective behavior change as it is a function of empowered communities, which helped the communities to analyse their behaviour and act on their own to effect change'*. Individual targets were given to field-level workers to make their respectively assigned villages open defecation free (ODF). The team involved multiple stakeholders like children, PRIs, Anganwadi workers, etc., in their awareness campaigns.

Jan-Samwad Rath has been a consistent and popular method of awareness and dissemination in the AIPAD project. A fairly simple model of a mobile

“
My name is Sunida Khatun. Earlier, the ANMs used to only conduct two tests, but with this new device, almost all the necessary tests are being conducted at our doorsteps. We used to go to the city for all the tests, which would cost us a fortune. We had to visit the hospital to and fro to collect the reports. Now, we don't have to go anywhere, as all the tests are conducted right here at our village. We are extremely happy with this device as it has solved a lot of our problems and saved our hard earned money.”

Beneficiary Feedback, Pirpainti

vehicle equipped with easy-to-read, useful IEC materials on health, education, and social security, which went around all the blocks of the district, was adopted. The Rath was equipped with interactive IEC materials and audios and would garner a great amount of interest amongst the community. It acted as a useful starter for further discussions and deliberations amongst the community members. The only limitation of this vehicle was its inability to reach remote and dense locations. The same has been effectively compensated by the **Cycle pe Soochna** initiative, which made mobility, outreach and access more flexible. It acted as a visibility as well as a mass awareness tool.

Another interesting initiative under AIPAD was the celebration of **Protsahna Diwas** in different blocks of the district. It invited and appreciated PRI members and field-level workers, who have managed to achieve 90 per cent coverage under various social security schemes. A felicitation event like this not just motivated but also incentivised positive action amongst the PRI functionaries. It acted as a useful relationship building activity in the AIPAD project and paved way for future partnerships and sustenance.

LESSONS LEARNT

One of the biggest highlights of the project is its success in establishing cordial relationships with not just the community members but also with the district and state-level public officials. These efforts paved way for future partnership and sustainability. There was a clear presence of mass interest in



initiatives like Swasthya Slate, Jan Samwaad Rath, etc., which eventually led to its success. Initiatives like these also have a much higher probability of sustainability and scalability. The AIPAD project has made good use of cross-learning opportunities. Drawing from its exposure visit to Unnati in Jodhpur (Rajasthan), it experimented with the idea of Citizen Leaders and implemented it successfully in Bhagalpur. Lastly, the project acknowledged the importance of capacitating not just the demand side i.e. the community members but also the supply side such as front line health and sanitation workers, Government functionaries and other entities. It is only then that more people can benefit from the schemes and programmes of the Government for a more sustained period of time. It was also felt that there existed a lack of clear and effective communication between the community members and the Government officials. The project, thus, took conscious efforts in bridging those communication gaps and tried continuing the efforts through initiatives like Information Centres, Kshetriya Samitis, District Federation etc. This reaffirmed the continuous stride of working in collaboration, which was a learning as well as a consistent practice of the AIPAD project. Lastly, the biggest learning of the AIPAD project was that availability of basic services, quality of services and regularity of the process brought a paradigm shift in the domains of health, sanitation, education and social security of the action area.

At the same time, AIPAD encountered some challenges too. The biggest challenge was the commencement of multiple major elections, which



Protsahna Diwas

Protsahna Diwas was celebrated in Kahalgaon block on 28 December, 2016, where Mukhiya Shri Sunil Paswan and Shrimati Indira Devi were honoured for their commendable work in their respective villages. They had organised Aam Sabhas for discussions and had personally attended all the meetings. Initially, they took assistance from the projects's field-level workers, but afterwards they hired their own full-time worker to identify the beneficiaries and enrol them.

not just slowed down the pace of activity but also led to shifts and changes in the Government schemes and hence mandated the change of strategies in the project design. Several health practices like immunisation, birth control, etc were strongly impacted by the traditional and religious beliefs. Owing to the sensitive nature of these traditional practices, imposing immediate changes was difficult. There were frequent transfers of Government officials, which impacted the rapport building efforts, communication and consistency of the operations in the project. The AIPAD team faced unprecedented difficulties in working with some of the Panchayat Secretaries. The strategy was further changed and the focus was shifted to working more with the PRI representatives. System lack of proper implementation and disbursement models in several Government schemes made the interventions difficult. This was particularly true for schemes like Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Grameen and Namami Gange, wherein irregular disbursement of resources posed considerable a challenge.

CONCLUSION

AIPAD has created direct impact towards the improved status of the maternal and child health, student enrollment in schools, enrollment of a huge chunk of population in different Government welfare schemes. It has created indirect impact by collectivising and mobilising the community



members towards their own rights and entitlements. Keeping information and awareness as the basis of empowerment, AIPAD displayed some impressive implementation strategies in five blocks of Bhagalpur district of Bihar. Initiatives like Swasthya Slates, Health Cubes, Citizen Leaders, Information centres and community-led forums etc have been particularly path-breaking in changing the entire

narratives of the problem and making it a well-functional reality. The learnings from this project are of great relevance and can be adopted by other organisations and initiatives working in similar contexts. There were certainly a range of challenges, but an effective use of resources and technology was made throughout the project, which made it a story of success and hope.

LEAD PARTNER



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THE NABHA FOUNDATION

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EUROPEAN UNION

COMMUNITY CENTRED APPROACH

to Enhancing Access to Public Services in Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh

A project implemented by PRADAN

“

I became member of a Self Help Group in 2012. Like many other women of my village; I too participated in training on gender, patriarchy, and violence. I understood the reasons for discriminations against women helped other women in getting justice in cases of domestic violence. My association with Civic Literacy and Engagement programme has reinforced my understanding about the values of Justice, Equality, Freedom and Fraternity enshrined in our constitution and built my confidence to stand up against the deviation from such values.

”

Basanti Devi
Aragaro Gram Panchayat,
Chandwara Block,
Koderma District

THE CONTEXT

The Government of India and many state governments implement several schemes and programmes for poverty alleviation. These schemes intend to provide public services, particularly to the vulnerable sections of society. However, their implementation and delivery often remains a challenge. The inefficiency in delivering the programmes can be attributed to the lack of citizen participation, inadequate capacities of the implementing agencies, inadequate monitoring, lack of accountability and corruption, among many others reasons.

In this context, PRADAN implemented a project called, “Community Centred Approach to Enhancing Access to Public Services”. It worked with underprivileged rural communities across 160 Gram Panchayats in 12 blocks from five underdeveloped districts of the states of Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh. In Jharkhand, it was implemented in the Hazaribagh and Koderma districts, while Betul, Dindori and Hoshangabad districts were chosen as the project sites in Madhya Pradesh. The project was supported by the European Union (EU) for 60 months from April 2014 to March 2019. It endeavoured to enhance awareness on the rights and entitlements for various public schemes and building institutional capacities of Self Help Group (SHG) federations so that they can claim public services, making the district administration more accountable and responsible to the needs and demands of marginalised and excluded communities, and

The data filtering at websites revealed that MGNREGA, PDS and RTE (in Madhya Pradesh) provided beneficiary level details for the related schemes while for NRHM, ICDS and RTE (in Jharkhand) beneficiary details were not available. MGNREGA had one of the most comprehensive data disclosure compared to other schemes.

strengthening the availability of information and procedural protocols of public schemes related to health (National Rural Health Mission or NRHM), education (Right to Education or RTE), livelihoods (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme or MGNREGS), and social security (Public Distribution System or PDS and Integrated Child Development Services or ICDS) in planning, delivery, review and grievance redressal.

A base line study carried out at the outset of the project showed that Madhya Pradesh has the highest Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) and Under 5 Mortality Rate (U5MR), while Jharkhand was only slightly better. Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand reported a Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) of 310 and 278, respectively, which are almost three times higher than the national target of 109¹. Only 2.5 per cent of the MGNREGS job card holders in Madhya Pradesh and 1.5 per cent in Jharkhand accessed 100 days of employment during 2011-2012. The average number of workdays generated in Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand was 14 and 15, respectively. The project locations were selected based on high concentration of disadvantaged groups, who have been discriminated economically, socially and based on gender. These marginalised social groups could be categorised as rural (100%), women (100%), tribal and Dalit communities (65%) backward communities (35%), and the economically poor (100%).

The baseline study revealed that while people availed employment under the MGNREGA, wage payment was often delayed. In some cases, job cards had not been made for all the families in the

village, and they did not have sufficient information on the steps to be taken. In places, respondents also shared that they were unable to go to work because there was no crèche at the work site, which meant they had to stay back to look after the children.

An oft-cited issue was the absence of proper physical infrastructure as mandated under the ICDS and RTE. This often included problems such as leaking roofs, lack of boundary walls for the Anganwadi centres and schools, or lack of drinking water facilities. Cattle would stray into the school compounds and school children were made to clean up the cattle dung. The community members in many instances found that the middle school was far away from the hamlets and it was expensive to continue education after Class VIII. The absence of proper metalled roads, or proper connectivity to other parts made commuting difficult and even dangerous during monsoons. The community members cited cases of people falling and seriously injuring themselves and of children being swept away during floods.

The Local communities expressed an overall dissatisfaction in the functioning of various schemes. In most instances, the issues were with the daily functioning of the scheme, while some pointed to the lack of information as a considerable problem. Community members were also probed on issues that affected women in particular. Domestic violence was prevalent in all the five districts of Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand. Some of these were being addressed by the SHGs working in those villages, but the issue was still not openly discussed. Dowry was mentioned as a problem in many locations. Women generally felt that their opinions were not taken seriously in the Gram Sabhas.

THEORY OF CHANGE AND STRATEGIES

The project had three broad focuses to improve accessibility of information in the five districts of Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh. To begin with,

¹ National Family Health Survey III.

collectivisation of the community, increasing access to information, and finally to strengthen local governance. This approach was assumed to result in improved local governance aiding in better access to services. At first, it was felt that there was a lack of active citizenship among the community members. The SHG groups that were formed before this project were seen as the primary agents of change for educating the community and engaging with the stakeholders. This awareness was important because many women who were part of the groups faced domestic violence almost everyday. They would attend the meetings with physical injuries on them. Their families had all the control over their income and the women were completely dependent on them for their own money.

Therefore, it was necessary to empower these women not just by providing them with livelihood options, but by ensuring that they exercised their rights and entitlements as well. This project envisaged working at the interface of social and gender discriminations: working with women primarily from the indigenous, dalit, and backward classes; and systemically attempted to build self-efficacy through group-based methodologies. The approach was thought effective enough to address the needs of the target communities to access constitutional guarantees and other rights as well as provisions under the Government programmes. The project aimed at organising the communities and building capacities of the entire structure—leaders, service providers, resource persons and trainers, etc.—at the local level for ensuring sustainability. The project was to build a three-tier community institution with the primary groups, the village/cluster level committees, and the block/sub-block level SHG federations in five districts.

PRADAN had developed some interesting IEC materials on gender, gendered division of roles, violence, patriarchy, Panchayat mechanisms, sexuality, nutrition, use of ration cards, livelihood options, etc. These information helped the SHGs understand the importance of all these elements for their holistic development. PRADAN collaborated with organisations such as Jagori, Ekjut, Multiple Action Research Group (MARG) and Ekal Nari Sangathan to develop these IEC materials.

Village Level Committees (VLCs) and SHGs discussed the issues of gender and patriarchy, and



took efforts to improve the governance at the local level. At the beginning of the project, a total of 550 SHGs took action on gender, caste and class issues like differential treatment of boys and girls, distribution of household chores, distribution of food, continuing education/employment of girls, dowry, sex selection, early marriage, incidents of violence against women, women's asset/ land ownership, women's role as economic contributors to households, and women's identity as farmers.

For the better understanding of rural women, including the illiterate, IEC and other tools were developed, which included flip-books, picture books, flex, posters, banners and calendars on various issues. The materials were developed on solidarity, gender, health, ICDS, MNREGA, PDS and functioning of Anganwadi centres. This was an important step in the intervention as inclusion of marginalised and illiterate women were also focussed upon in the project. A community-led *Toilet Sanitation Campaign* was organised to ensure the participation of all SHG members to help them understand the importance of toilet usage. Model school pictures were prepared as pamphlets with roles and responsibilities of School Management Committees (SMCs) and the Community Based Organisations (CBOs). Communication through games was found to be effective for illiterate women. The team even used tools like *Theatre of Oppressed* to trigger discussions around discrimination between the girl and boy child, and violence against women. Even a movie named, *Paheliki Saheli*, was shown to women for awareness on menstrual hygiene.



The awareness and delivery capabilities of the duty bearers and service delivery system also needed improvement. This indicated building protocols for a facilitative administrative procedure. The project had two main intervention areas, firstly to empower the women and enhance their leadership skills in village governance and secondly to improve public services through capacity building of service providers.

The project was spread at a vast scale. The village level institutions were strengthened to play a pivotal role in strengthening governance in the villages. These institutions were used as a platform where women expressed their individual as well as collective issues. As the issues kept coming up in these institutions, a thematic group was developed to support such endeavours and Community Resource Persons (CRPs) or *Sangh Sathi* were identified and strengthened. The thematic leaders and other village representatives together took responsibility of different issues and cases in various themes such as institution building, livelihood, rights and entitlements, gender and equality. A special focus was put on all village-level administrative and service setups, which led to

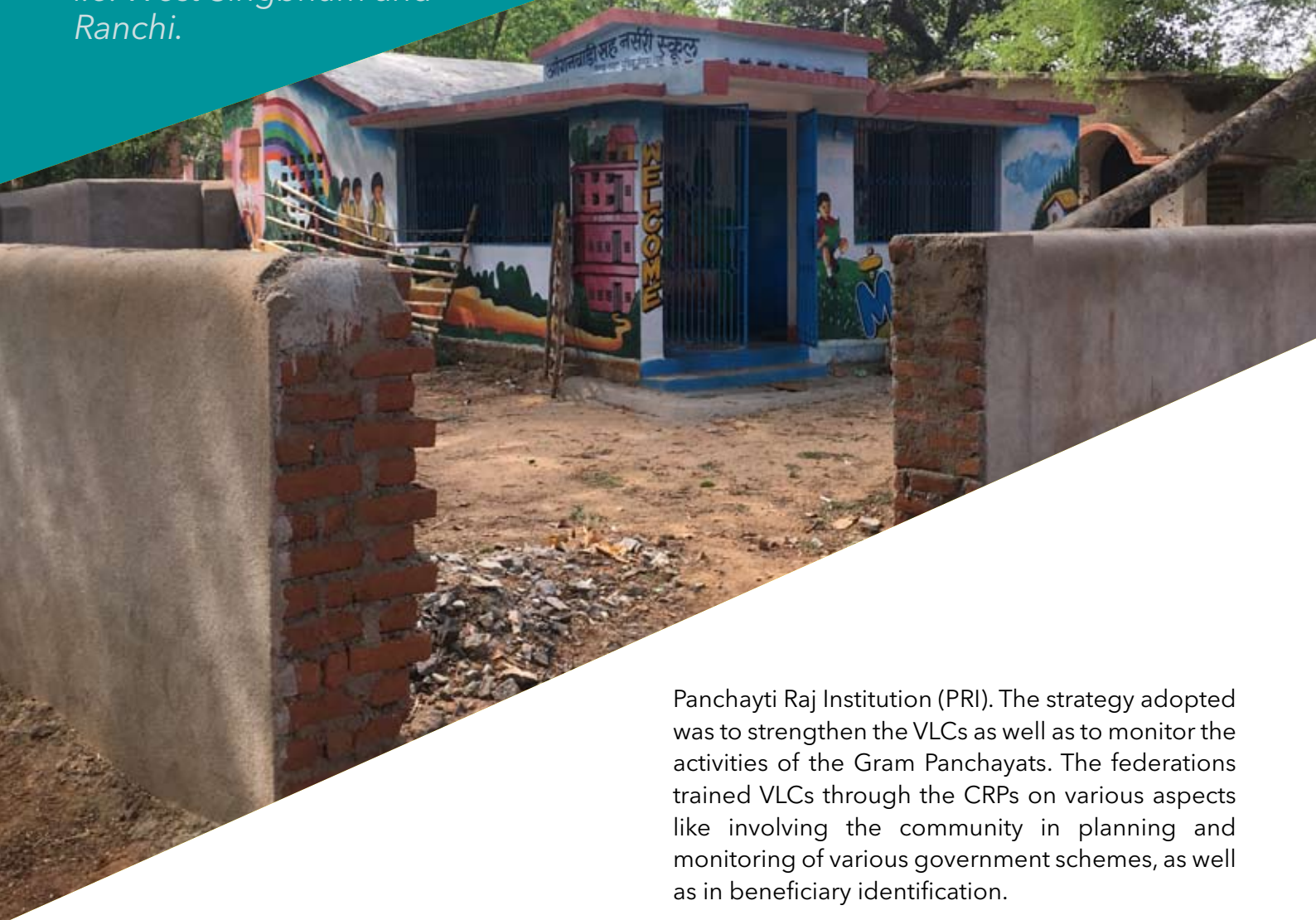
themes like education of children, ICDS and PHC, etc., being taken in closer purview.

A total of 59 CRPs or *Sangh Sathi* (women groups) in Madhya Pradesh and 70 CRPs in Jharkhand were formed to lead interaction with various line departments. Fifteen MGNREGA resource persons (NRP) and 70 community resource persons were identified to further interact with officials and bring information related to a community scheme. It was necessary to build capacities of the SHGs as they critically examined the status of various service delivery mechanisms and their effectiveness. These SHGs were also taken on exposure visits to other organisations such as Disha, Seva, Vanagana in Jharkhand, Gujarat and Chhattisgarh, respectively, so that they could see how other women collectives worked in similar communities on similar issues. These activities boosted the confidence of women and were later seen in their more active roles. Training of Trainers (ToT) was organised for the CRP, NRP, women leaders and the federation were provided training on understanding the mechanism of ICDS, PDS and social security schemes.

In all the 5 Districts, two women representatives were chosen from each hamlet who received training through the "Haqdarshak App" as well as from an organisation, We The People, on understanding Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDP) and how they are made. The Haqdarshak App created awareness among each family and individual on their due entitlements and facilitated application through an android-based mobile application. These leaders got together and made



Damodar Mahila Mandal Sangh as part of the Jharkhand Jan Adhikar Manch, a state level right based network, has been advocating for distribution of eggs in ICDS centres. As a result of their efforts, pilot projects are to be run in two districts i.e. West Singbhum and Ranchi.



a plan for their own village. Making a plan for their village was a stepping stone to taking ownership of village development. With the knowledge of provisions under the schemes and entitlements, planning for their village development created a space for demanding rights. This technology was vastly used, such as in Betul and Hoshangabagh (Madhya Pradesh) where the Haqdarshak App was introduced. Around 1,197 applications were downloaded and around 1,167 applicants received benefits through the app.

The federations constantly provided information and status updates on the implementation of government programmes from publically available data. During their meetings for the annual plan preparation, they advocated for strengthening the

Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI). The strategy adopted was to strengthen the VLCs as well as to monitor the activities of the Gram Panchayats. The federations trained VLCs through the CRPs on various aspects like involving the community in planning and monitoring of various government schemes, as well as in beneficiary identification.

The project developed a one-day training module, and delivered it to enhance the general understanding of *Jal Sahiyas*, the outreach workers of the drinking water and sanitation department. It focused on the *Jal Sahiya's* role and the issues related to health and hygiene. Another training programme was conducted for the women collectives on ICDS, PDS, MDM and WASH. The training modules covered the process for availing entitlements including identification of beneficiaries, benefits under the programme, monitoring mechanisms, etc. Training on ICDS was provided to 1,215 women, while 1,343 women were trained on PDS, 1,265 were trained for MDM and 1,098 on water and sanitation. Training on improving participation in local governance was conducted for a total of 1,540 trainee days.

The federations were able to facilitate engagement with the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) structures at the block level to leverage funds under the programme. For example, the Padma federation (a block level structure) facilitated Revolving Funds (RF) for 70 SHGs amounting to Rs. 10.50 lakh, and Community Investment Funds (CIF) for 73 SHGs amounted to Rs. 36.50 lakh.

Basic Gender Learning Camps were organised where 40 women participated. Training of change vectors was organised to facilitate their capacities as trainers, which would equip them with skills to deliver effective training modules to other SHGs. In this training, 55 trainers participated. These trainers-cum-change vectors took this training content to 4,055 SHG members across 217 village-level training events.

In Madhya Pradesh, the VLC meetings emerged as a forum where community women got together to discuss issues of village governance and entitlements. The good practice of involving the front line workers and duty bearers of various government programmes in the meetings provided opportunities for discussing various issues related to service delivery. The presence of Gram Panchayat members also created opportunities to resolve the issues during the VLC meetings. Among the 46 VLCs that discussed service delivery issues, MGNREGS had the maximum number of discussions in 25 VLCs, followed by RTE in 14 VLCs. PDS and ICDS issues were discussed in 10 VLCs. The women's groups were supported and encouraged to take up necessary roles to bring change in the delivery system. Women were empowered to take up decision-making positions and the project created grounds for them.

PRADAN, along with the organisation Debate Trust, developed training modules on various aspects of participation in the local governance system. The trainings for women members and Adhikar Sakhi (a sub-group of the CRPs who overlooked paralegal cases, cases of gender and caste-based discrimination) covered the role and importance of the Gram Sabha, and the different statutory committees in the Gram Panchayat. To improve the capacities of the Elected Women Representatives (EWR), the trainings also covered process of holding Gram Panchayat meetings, conducting the Gram Sabha, sharing information on government

programmes and schemes, etc. PRADAN and Debate Trust teams also attended Gram Sabha meetings and provided feedback to Adhikar Sakhi and EWR. PRADAN partnered with LEPRO society (works with people affected by leprosy) to develop training modules for supporting and sensitising women on health, hygiene and balanced diets.

The *Sangh Sathis* took the lead in identifying candidates for the elections. PRADAN team supported and developed four modules prepared on the participation of CBOs in local governance elections in which women collectives were trained on the idea of the Gram Sabha—its history, evolution, constitutional mandate and aspiration creation—the Hibre Bazaar and Kerala model, etc. Modules were prepared on the importance of voting and choosing the right candidate, role of the Gram Sabha, the nomination and withdrawal process in PRI elections, need for development of collective plans, etc. These modules were also used to empower the community to understand the process of elections, voting and what should be in the election mandate, people's role in the selection of candidates, preparation of development agenda and seeking commitment to work for the agenda once elected, providing financial contribution to the selected candidates for campaigning, etc.

The federations that were constituted were in constant discussion and negotiation with the PRADAN team as well as the district and state administration for effective implementation of MGNREGS. As a result, grassroots level bottom-up planning and implementation were clearly demonstrated in MGNREGS. More than 300 planned



works were approved by the administration. More than 700 labour days of work have been generated till date. Land and water-based infrastructure has been created, which has positively impacted the region's water scarcity.

To facilitate interaction between local authorities and VLCs, *Gram Samvad* (Village Interaction) was initiated in 15 villages. Orders for conducting fortnightly *Gram Samvad* in 19 villages of Shahpur and Chicholi blocks of Betul District (Madhya Pradesh) were issued by the District Administration after rigorous meetings initiated by the federations. *Gram Samvad* was an attempt to continuously review the work planned, identifying problems in implementation and mechanisms, and to solve challenges through discussions with the Panchayat Sarpanch, Sachiv, Rojgar Sahayak and sub-engineer.

To sustain the new mechanism, a total of five ToTs were organised in Hazaribagh and 30 cohorts were formed to work on civic agendas. Around four ToTs were organised in Koderma, where 60 women were trained on the Haqdarshak application, five central trainings were organised in Betul, where six trainers were identified to work on citizenship. In Hoshangabad, 14 out of 17 Haqdarshaka pps were operational, while 13 Haqdarshaks were operational in Dindori.

The project developed a Gram Sabha Health Inventory tool. The purpose of this participatory and self-assessment tool was to map the community's understanding of the Gram Sabha and its processes and to trigger reflective discussions. Around 23

such events were organised in 21 villages, covering 1,900 women. Before attending the Gram Sabha, the Village Organisations (VO) were now setting their agenda. VO meetings act as forums that provide an opportunity to the village community to discuss development issues, review the provision of services by the government departments, analyse the performance of their Gram Panchayat, etc. The issues emerging from the VO meetings were taken up with the Gram Panchayat and concerned line departments.

An MoU was signed with 11 Gram Panchayats in Jharkhand to create model Panchayats. Various activities such as introductory meetings, Gram Panchayat profiling, exposure visit of women collective members and PRI representatives to Kerala, visioning exercises, Gram Panchayat Executive Committee (GPEC) meetings, restructuring of Gram Panchayat Standing Committees (GPSCs), etc., were undertaken. Various easy, immediate and important tasks such as maintaining cleanliness at the Panchayat office and its regular opening, proactive disclosure of information, roster preparation, putting up a complaint box and notice board, etc., were taken up.

To improve services, most of the Gram Panchayats identified three thematic areas—education, agriculture and WATSAN (an organisation who supports in building sustainable water purifiers). Further, GPSCs were formulated, Panchayat-wise goals and activities around each theme were identified. These committees were also made aware of the values of collaboration and PRI rules, Act, and government orders.

Monthly GPEC meetings were organised in the respective Gram Panchayat Bhawans. A core committee was formed consisting of GPSC members, the head teacher of the local school and SMC President. This committee worked to achieve 100 per cent enrolment and zero drop outs at the local community schools, as well as activating SMCs, among other tasks. The GPSCs now hold monthly meetings.

In five Gram Panchayats of Betul and Hoshangabad districts, several rounds of discussion and capacity building events were organised during 2017-2018, when the project was creating a sustainable process. Subsequently, statutory and standing committees were capacitated as well. Intensive



effective medium of information percolation and awareness generation at the grass roots level.

MAJOR OUTCOMES

The project activities resulted in the political and economic empowerment of women. Women collectives were capacitated with tools to understand how schemes and entitlements are implemented, the provisions included in those entitlements, how they can be assessed and who are the main personnel providing such services.

Through rigorous trainings and sessions, the women's groups were empowered not just with knowledge, but confidence to contest elections in the Panchayats, sharing issues in the Gram Sabhas, interacting with the stakeholders and demanding their entitlements.

The presence of strong women collectives ensured their active participation in preparation of village plans for works to be undertaken under MGNREGS. The community could plan as per their needs and aspirations, thus generating a sense of ownership as citizens. Besides community infrastructure projects, a large number of individual projects for asset creation in the agriculture sectors were approved as a part of the plans. This will help in creating infrastructure for livelihood generation in the subsequent years.

In collaboration with other NGOs and CBOs, *Yojana Banao Abhiyan* (YBA) was launched and carried out across Jharkhand, which was an opportunity for the women to be involved in preparing the village development plans, creating individual and community infrastructure (such as ponds, vegetable crop fields, goat sheds, etc.) to support various livelihood opportunities, collaborating with government officials and finally ensuring that useful assets are created in the village.

Empowerd SHGs held Gram Sabha meetings and brought up local village issues. One such issue affecting all households was that of lack of ration shops in the vicinity of the villages. By meeting with the Sub-Division Officer (SDO), the dealers were called up immediately to look around for resources. These women were ready to even give up a portion of their land for constructing ration shops so that families did not have to travel long



on-field support was provided by professionals by attending, observing, and providing inputs in Gram Panchayat meetings in four Gram Panchayats of Madhya Pradesh. Owing to the partnership with Anode, a governance lab organisation, the organisational capability of the EWRs were considerably enhanced.

To reduce the information asymmetry, PRADAN collaborated with an organisation, Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), to promote a Community Information & Resource Centre (CIRC) in both the states. These centres were provided with laptops, internet, camera, projectors and application forms regarding various schemes, etc. These information centres emerged as tools for digital literacy. They now provide access to the world of information and knowledge of government schemes and the rights and entitlements of citizens, online access to government services, opportunities for distance education, online skilling, online entertainment, filling and filing online forms, scanning, photocopying, personal communication through e-mails and social media, etc. These information centres have the potential to be an

distances to carry more than 30kg of ration (as per the government provision). This act shows that the women and the community value each other's resources for the greater good. It was only when an SHG member decided to forgo a part of her land for the construction of the shop that Tekripura finally boasted of its own fair price shop. At present, the women need not walk such long distances for household rations. A nearby village also benefits from it as their ration too is allotted at this shop. Women of SHGs are now planning to take contributions from the whole village for maintaining that shop.

In 40 villages, VLCs involved PRIs in village planning events where a bottom-up approach was facilitated.

The President of the SHG federation from the Samnapur block was nominated to the state women empowerment committee, which was an opportunity for strategic intervention towards women empowerment from within. Women from 55 VLCs gained confidence from their efforts. These women are, at present, continuously involved with the administration to improve the functioning of the local governance.

Efforts have been made to enhance the functioning of Gram Sabhas, raise awareness so as to empower the community to demand their rights. At the same time, the capacity of Panchayat functionaries has been enhanced to address the needs of the community and bring effectiveness in the service delivery system.

In a contest labelled as, "*Jan vs Dhan*" (People vs Money), 63 federation members won the elections and seven members were elected as *Mukhiyas*. Seven members were elected to Panchayat Samitis and 49 members were elected as ward members. The SHG federations continue to support the EWR by training and capacity building programmes and ensuring that the Gram Sabhas are able to play the mandated role in local decision making. This enhances citizenship among the people and helps them realise the importance of the power each one holds. Good governance only comes when everyone takes responsibility of their duties and gives back to the community.

Enhanced institutional capacity of Gram Panchayats have a positive impact on increased effectiveness.



The efforts helped to strengthen the primacy of Gram Sabhas, where villagers have been able to influence the decisions regarding the selection of beneficiaries of Prime Minister Awaas Yojana (PMAY) schemes to be taken for irrigation and so on. An improved understanding and functioning of the Standing Committees played a pivotal role to meet up to the expectations of the people. The empowered Standing Committees were able to build linkages with the relevant line department, collaborate, and raise issues for the betterment of the functioning of the departments. The improved functioning of schools at Koderma and Hazaribagh in Jharkhand, getting approval for schemes from minor irrigation departments and implementing them as per the approval of the Gram Sabha, selection of PMAY beneficiaries as per the suggestions of the Gram Sabha, improving ICDS infrastructure, increasing women candidates for elections, constructing toilets, etc., are some of the glaring examples of people-centric, pro-poor, inclusive development.

Having realised the importance of strengthening the Gram Panchayats, PRADAN collaborated with the Department of Panchayati Raj (DoPR) to develop 10 Panchayats from the project areas as Adarsh Panchayats. This initiative was jointly facilitated by PRADAN and DoPR with the help of the Anode Governance Lab.

Women's groups are today proactively expressing their concerns about the infrastructure of the schools and quality of education. The availability of facilities including separate toilets for girls with clean water for menstrual hygiene practices is

When SHG collectives participated in Gram Sabhas with a broader understanding and with thorough homework, the meetings became more effective.

one of their concerns that are discussed openly in Gram Sabhas. They started intervening in the SMCs and some of the women have become members in the SMCs to hold the teachers accountable for meeting the required outputs. At the same time, they also shared information with other parents about RTE.

Women are now aware of their rights. The women's collectives have advocated for better services, and proper infrastructure, where children are taken care of with nutritious meals, such as eggs in ICDS centres. The SHGs, VOs and federations are aware of the key provisions provided under ICDS. They are involved with the officials and front line workers about the type and quality of services delivered. This has led to an increase in accountability of the service providers. As a result of their efforts, pilot projects are to be run in two districts of Jharkhand—West Singhbhum and Ranchi. Based on the experience, it is expected to be scaled up to the entire state.

LESSONS LEARNT

Reaching out not only meant spreading awareness on social issues, but also ensured that the resources made available by the government were actually implemented. Thus, keeping a close check on the functioning of various bodies, which earlier claimed to provide services to the people, were now actually accessible.

The organisation has been able to successfully develop models (tools) to collectivise women, their leadership and facilitation skills. Previously

mentioned activities seemed to provide knowledge as well as skills to spread the new knowledge among the people. Simple steps such as wall writing reaped positive response from the community.

From this project, it emerged that community should not look into the schemes only in isolation but it should be linked from a life perspective, which is the spirit behind the introduction of the schemes. That can change the overall world view of the people towards addressing the problems or deficits. For example, with enhanced understanding of their rights and entitlements and understanding around the root cause of malnutrition from a life perspective, numerous cases were reported on child marriages. Subsequently, these marriages were stopped within the families by the women themselves or by the community by complaining to the officials and also by counselling of the family members. The village organisations of Koderma and Hazaribag are now discussing with the parents group of their villages about their roles in improving the children's education along with the issues of absentees of teachers, quality of education, MDM issues, etc.

Women have been groomed as cohorts to disseminate the idea of citizenship and the strength of constitution among the masses. Introduction of Igniting Spark / Samvidhan Mela as a mass awareness tool has also been introduced. With the help of cohorts, the villagers have now been able to address their issues. Getting result is also time taking. There is a need to have early results to establish faith and interest of mass citizens to this path of law, justice, constitutional framework. It needs to dispel the belief that the middleman decides the beneficiary of any scheme as Gram Sabhas are the right forum to do that. There is a need of mass awareness to build environment around that these civic actions, where it justice will be accepted as a norm of the society.

The institutional capacity of the Gram Panchayat has an important impact in the betterment of the



services as well as establishing the local democracy. Panchayat’s power is the power of the people, where people can easily relate to the government.

CONCLUSION

The process of improving access to information to women SHGs and other community members became an opportunity for them to work hand-in-hand with the Government officials and other stakeholders, like PRI members. As their journey of understanding the mechanism to access public schemes began, a number of committees, such as, Nyay Samitis, Adhikar Samitis, etc were formed to monitor the change and responses from the Government officials and PRI elected members.

A variety of trainings and orientation programmes helped in raising awareness among the community. The focus on redefining women’s position aided in enhanced decision-making ability and

redistribution of work at the household level and political empowerment in the public arena.

With support received from the project, the villagers did not just look at the public schemes in isolation but from a broader perspective, which highlighted the spirit behind the introduction of such schemes and the cross-cutting themes. That is why the project had introduced the intervention of “vision building of collectives around the life and livelihood of people”, “visualisation of village as a better place to live in” and the importance of livelihood, health and education in their lives as well as the conceptualisation of each scheme on each sector and understanding them holistically. This approach greatly enabled the women collectives to start taking ownership of the whole initiative and leading it from the front. Their involvement has created momentum in the service delivery practices and demand has been generated from the community to learn more about the issues and the probable solutions from these women’s groups.

LEAD PARTNER



FUNDING SUPPORT



SVAVRITTI

A project implemented by **SAATHII** in partnership with:

- Manipur Network of Positive People (MNP+)
- Network of Maharashtra by People Living with HIV/AIDS (NMP+)
- Network of Naga People Living with HIV/AIDS (NNP+)
- Kalinga Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS (KNP+)
- Disha-Roman Catholic Diocesan Social Service Society (RCDSSS)

“

While my being an AIDS patient remains the same, I have moved on. It was all dark for me when I first came to know about my disease. I was a victim of stigma and self-isolation. Today I have seen the light thanks to SAATHII, and SVAVRITI. I not only get the public services, but also help other patients to access their rights, and also move above and beyond the fear that was imposed on me by me and the society.

”

Ms. Pravasini Pradhan,
PLWHA from Odisha

THE CONTEXT

In 2012, the Government of India¹ estimated that about 2.40-million Indians were living with HIV with an adult prevalence of 0.31 per cent (2009). Children (<15 years) accounted for 3.5 per cent of all infections, while 83 per cent were in the age group 15-49 years. Of all HIV infections, 39 per cent (9,30,000) were among women. India's highly heterogeneous epidemic is mainly concentrated in only a few states—in the industrialised South and West, and in the North East. The four high prevalence states in southern India (Andhra Pradesh - 5,00,000, Maharashtra - 4,20,000, Karnataka - 2,50,000, and Tamil Nadu - 1,50,000) account for 55 per cent of all HIV infections in the country. West Bengal, Gujarat, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh were estimated to have more than 1,00,000 persons living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) each, and together account for another 22 per cent of HIV infections in India.

Though the government has formulated schemes for PLWHA, there are major gaps in accessing them particularly among rural populations, scheduled castes (SCs), scheduled tribes (STs), women and children, and other socially marginalised groups. The reasons include lack of awareness, difficulty in accessing these services, stigma related to HIV/AIDS, sex work, sexual and gender identity, shyness and fear in identifying with HIV for low access to the schemes. For sex workers, social

¹ The World Bank Report, 2012, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2012/07/10/hiv-aids-india>

discrimination and stigmatisation were not a new experience. The daily business of sex work already stigmatised them socially. Gay and other homosexually-active men are a marginalised and hidden population in India. HIV-positive gay men are hard to identify as a group or a community, as they tend to take on a heterosexual identity to escape being “found out”. Coping with a doubly stigmatised identity, as a gay man as well as HIV-positive, was understandably seen as difficult in a closed and homophobic society. The marginality that the group faces forces it to withdraw from entitlements, which is rightfully theirs.

Against the backdrop of this complexity, Solidarity and Action Against the HIV Infection in India (SAATHII) implemented the project, SVAVRITTI². It aimed to increase access to schemes and entitlements for AIDS-affected families, sexual and gender minorities, female sex workers and injecting drug users in 30 backward districts in eight Indian states of Maharashtra, Manipur, Nagaland, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and West Bengal. The project was supported by the European Union (EU) and was implemented over 51 months during January 2014 to March 2018.

SAATHII implemented the project through local partners in five states: Manipur, Maharashtra, Nagaland, Odisha and Rajasthan. In Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and West Bengal, SAATHII implemented the project directly. Four partners—Manipur Network of Positive People (MNP+), Network of Maharashtra by People Living with HIV/AIDS (NMP+), Network of Naga People Living with HIV/AIDS (NNP+) and Kalinga Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS (KNP+)—are Community Based Organisations (CBOs) of PLWHA. The fifth partner, Disha-Roman Catholic Diocesan Social Service Society (RCDSSS), is a faith-based organisation with a proven track record of providing health and social services to HIV/AIDS-affected communities.

The target-and-beneficiary groups that the project addressed are socially excluded for multiple reasons:

- (i) Families affected by AIDS face economic and other hardships because of reduced



employability and/or death of breadwinners, exclusion and denial of family property (specifically for widows and children), and loss of school days due to illness of children or the need to stay at home to take care of younger siblings. The stigma and discrimination faced by the families affected by AIDS is pervasive, across health, employment, education and family/community domains.

- (ii) Sexual and gender minorities face systematic exclusion within their families, societies and institutions because of patriarchal norms and gender-based prejudice, school bullying, sexual violence between partners, exclusion from mainstream employment, leaving many with very few livelihood options.
- (iii) Sex workers and injecting drug users face exclusion partly because of societal attitudes towards sex work and drug use, laws such as the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act (that end up penalising sex work) and Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act; exclusion and risks faced by children because of parental sex work or injecting drug use.

² Svavritti in Hindi means becoming self-reliant.

Svavritti was truly a multi-stakeholder, multisectoral project with ownership in the hands of the intended beneficiaries.



THEORY OF CHANGE AND STRATEGIES

The project intended to increase information, access, and uptake to government schemes by socially and economically excluded groups, specifically AIDS-affected families, sexual/gender minorities, sex workers and injecting drug users from the backward districts across the selected eight states in India. Within this scope, the project would further focus on schemes and entitlements that reduce poverty and improve the quality of life. At the district level, the project worked with local authorities across domains to sensitise them on the need for making health and social-legal protection accessible to families affected by AIDS, gender minorities, sex workers, injection drug users, and about the barriers these communities face in accessing these schemes and entitlements.

The project aimed to increase access to information on social protection schemes and entitlements, as well as legal services to PLWHAs, most-at-risk populations (MARPs) and their families. The stigma attached to HIV/AIDS only adds another layer of marginalisation. It makes it hard to identify the targeted population. The project took the path of analysing the existing schemes and the services provided by various government centres such as Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART) and Integrated Counselling and Testing Centres (ICTC), which were the key entry points to reach out to these intended beneficiaries. These were the pathways designed to reach out the PLWHAs and their families. The ARTs and ICTCs provided a safe space to locate and identify the PLWHAs and MARPs .

The project looked at the resources that were already available. The data and the resource materials provided at the ART centres were assessed and revamped. Information Education and Communication (IEC) materials such as

CMP and CRP were the wheels of the vehicles of awareness and action.

pamphlets, booklets, pocket booklets, and posters were prepared keeping in mind the findings of the baseline survey and the demand from the community for awareness and sensitising other stakeholders. Based on the demand and information collected at the time of the baseline survey, key activities were planned including sensitisation of key stakeholders across sectors, advocacy for making the schemes and services inclusive, tracking schemes and budget utilisation, and using Right to Information (RTI) Act, when needed. This scheme-related information was shared to the people and their families in order to help them access information as well as services.

The sustainability of the project was envisaged through greater involvement of members of the affected and marginalised communities in spreading information on scheme and legal services with field-level education, awareness, and follow up. Some of the members were identified as Community Resource Persons (CRPs), who became the frontline workers. They supported in identifying other PLWHAs at ART centres, spreading information to other areas, and bringing issues to light. These CRPs played an important role as they collected baseline data, mobilised the PLWHAs, MARPs, their families and played a crucial role in advocating change with the line departments and follow-ups. They bridged the gap between the people and the schemes.

Community members and the beneficiaries were trained on modalities and provisions of the RTI Act and the use of it in ensuring transparency and accountability in implementing schemes at the district and state levels. Finally, the project

was able to disseminate good practices and case studies of effective information sharing and schemes uptake at the national and state level experience sharing meetings and advocacy for replication and scale-up.

The project applied a variety of strategies in a manner, where the targeted communities were made aware of their entitlements and schemes. It also sensitised the government officials to enable access to these entitlements to the affected communities.

Generating awareness

Based on the analysis of schemes for social protection and the needs of the affected community including their family members, the project developed a Common Minimum Package (CMP), which included IEC materials related to social protection schemes for each of the eight states. It garnered support from the government agencies in developing CMP. These IEC materials acted as a catalyst to revive the existing services.

A two-page pamphlet was used by the CRPs in awareness generation sessions related to schemes and legal literacy. The pamphlet was provided to the targeted community including their family



members at the ART, ICTC, Prevention of Parent to Child Transmission (PPTCT), home visits, hotspots or the places where the intended beneficiaries of the project are frequently found, and other places of interactions. One of the pamphlets, “My Identity My Rights”, was developed after the landmark judgement of the Supreme Court in 2014 on transgender rights. A directory of schemes and state-specific posters were developed in English and regional languages. These posters included information regarding the available scheme for the targeted community including the family members and were displayed at all the service delivery points such as ART, ICTC, PPTCT, PLWHA Networks, CBOs, and NGOs.

Organising Demand Generation Meetings

Demand Generation Meetings (DGM) acted as an effective platform that contributed to bridge the gap of information on schemes through direct interaction between the service providers and service seekers. It enabled transparency through public disclosure of schemes, budgets and spending, and also acted as opportunities for the community to directly submit applications and follow up on already applied schemes and services. In this strategy, the CRPs met individuals at the ART centres and other service outlets. A detailed need assessment was carried out by the CRPs of those expressing interest in applying for relevant schemes and services. Based on willingness, the individuals were supported in filing the applications. The CRPs followed up with or helped the concerned community members to

follow up with the departments for approval and access. The CRPs and project team visited various government officials at the state, district, and block levels. They also organised sensitisation sessions to enhance knowledge and attitudes related to the marginalised people and their needs for schemes and entitlements. These DGMs emphasised on the prioritisation of the target groups in scheme allocation as most of them were doubly marginalised.

Wider outreach to the families of affected population

The baseline study identified some major problems faced by the affected community such as, problems of identity, stigma, discrimination, and bias from the government officials. These were identified as major barriers to access the schemes and entitlements by the affected members. The PLWHAs and MARPs reported that they were continuously discriminated in their own communities. They were scared to go back to their communities for getting their documents to apply for any scheme. Many a times, their own families did not want to keep any relation with them. Initially some members did not have the requisite identity documents or other supporting documents needed to apply. The application process was prolonged as they needed to apply for some fundamental entitlements before initiating the application process for the scheme. The barriers they faced at the government level included stigma and discrimination by ignorant officials, who displayed a lack of knowledge and support towards the members.

Among MARPs, Female Sex Workers (FSWs) and sexual minorities—such as men who have sex with men (MSM) and Transgenders (TGs)—highlighted the negative attitudes of government officials and of society as a whole that made them fearful of disclosing their identity. They drew attention to the difficulty they faced in obtaining eligibility such as Know Your Customer (KYC) document. Documents such as ration cards were linked to their biological families from whom they were either estranged or to whom they had not revealed their status and/or identity. Lack of family support and inability to get social entitlement documents were highlighted as barriers among people who inject drugs (PWID) respondents.



The project team made a major shift in its strategy in the middle of project implementation in 2016. It focused attention on access to multiple schemes for family and individual members through a Family Comprehensive Approach. The project not only focussed on the families but also linked them with other schemes, as due to HIV/AIDS livelihood options of the families are greatly affected and the probability of getting jobs are often reduced. This step was aimed at improving the overall socio-economic condition of the whole families.

Interface with block, district, state level governments

The baseline survey revealed a number of deficits among the government officials such as lack of motivation in increasing awareness about available services, corruption, and non-transparency in determining eligibility and issuance of social protection services. District-level NGO/CBO meetings were initiated from 2016 as the DGMs began to be organised at the block level. The coordination meetings provided a platform for the NGOs, CBOs and PLWHA networks to share about the long pending applications of the target community members and provided scope for the CRPs to rigorously follow-up with respective departments. The meetings helped to avoid duplication of services to the same client and reach out to a larger number of unreached community members. A total of 2,002 sensitisation meetings and 3,628 strengthening support visits were organised with the state, district and block-level government departments. These meetings and visits helped to update the government departments on the progress of the project activities, follow-up on previously submitted applications, invite officials for DGM and advocacy events, secure support letters from state AIDS control societies (SACS) and District AIDS Prevention Control Unit (DAPCU), and obtain approval copy of the schemes from various departments.

The project organised sharing workshops at the state, district, and block levels. IEC materials, quarterly newsletters, case studies, and best practices were shared through websites, which aided in project visibility. State-level sharing workshops were conducted in all the project states. A total of 18 district-level sharing workshops were conducted



across Ahmed Nagar (two), Bhandara (two) and Amravati (one) in Maharashtra; Kalahandi (one) in Odisha; Bhilwara (one), Sawai Madhopur (two) and Tonk (one) in Rajasthan; one each in Cuddalore, Sivagangai and Villupuram in Tamil Nadu; and at Medak (one), Rangareddy (one), Mahabubnagar (one) and Warangal (two) in Telangana. There were also programmes conducted at the block level. A total of 171 state level officials, 4230 district officials and 1229 block-level government functionaries were sensitised by the project during different meetings and interactions.

Developing capacities of community members

Based on the learnings from the DGMs and feedback from CRPs, there was a need to build capacities among the community members. The Training of Trainers (ToTs) in advocacy and RTI was organised in 16 districts across the seven states. The sessions included basics on understanding advocacy, advocacy methods and the issues for which the target community members can join

Capacity development, communication and advocacy were the factors that helped.



together to advocate. During the RTI sessions, the community members were given a clear understanding on the purpose and procedures to file an RTI application.

The advocacy platform has been utilised to advocate with and sensitise the government departments and Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRI) members. The advocacy agenda included rights of the transgender as per the Supreme Court ruling, known as the National Legal Service Authority (NALSA) judgement³; access to skill development

³ This judgement covers persons who want to identify with the third gender as well as persons who want to transition from one identity to another, i.e. male to female or vice versa. The Court has directed Centre and State Governments to grant legal recognition of gender identity whether it be male, female, or third gender.

training, increased quota in scheme allocation, revising eligibility criteria of various state and Central Government social security schemes, and prioritising the affected community members for accessing various schemes.

A total of 29 exclusive legal awareness camps were attended by 830 individuals (PLWHA, PLWHA-TG, FSW, MSM, TG, PWID). They were sensitised on the Supreme Court's NALSA judgement, five schemes for the transgender community members, and the various legal services provided by the District Legal Service Authority (DLSA), State Legal Service Authority (SLSA) and NALSA. A total of 56 family members of PLWHA, FSW, and MSM/TG were also benefitted from these camps. Around 76 legal cases were addressed as an outcome of the legal awareness camps organised in Manipur, Odisha, Rajasthan, Telangana, and West Bengal.

The outreach activities could connect with 33,171 persons, out of whom 24,989 new individuals were reached out through sessions on the scheme and legal literacy. This comprised 21,412 affected community members (direct beneficiaries) and

3,577 family members. In comparison with other demographic groups, women living with HIV/AIDS attended the highest proportion (46 per cent) of scheme and legal literacy sessions. A total of 5,484 community members (direct beneficiaries and family members) were trained to disseminate information on various entitlements, socio-legal protection services and application submission procedures through 144 DGMs and 29 legal awareness workshops. In addition, 366 leaders / members of the community of primary members were trained on advocacy and RTI Act through 16 trainings in Maharashtra, Manipur, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and West Bengal. The CRPs played a great role in outreach, and accompanied the beneficiaries to the government offices for submitting applications and follow-up.

MAJOR OUTCOMES

The project visibly impacted the lives of the final beneficiaries in many ways. It has increased the level of knowledge on the social protection schemes and legal services among the beneficiaries and their family members. Further, it developed capacity among the community members on the process of applying for schemes and entitlements. CRPs played an important role in disseminating information regarding the schemes, submitting applications and filling e-applications. Telangana, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, and Rajasthan had a higher reach than the other states of operation.

DGMs contributed most to the success of the project. It dispelled the misconceptions and biases related to community groups and enabled better understanding of the community needs. These built capacity among the community members on the process of applying and engendered trust in the government mechanisms. It ensured uptake of government schemes by the focal community by strengthening demand generation and consistent follow-up with the concerned stakeholders, and advocating for policy change with state-level authorities to make the existing schemes and services more accessible.

The structured interaction between the community members and various government officials, in a common platform, built mutual understanding and trust. It dispelled preconceived notions and facilitated non-stigmatised access.



Direct engagement with the SLSA helped the community members in accessing legal services. The comprehensive family-centric approach impacted the entire family and helped in reducing vulnerability and alleviating HIV-induced poverty. Interaction with the district and sub-district level government officials helped in dispelling misconceptions and enabled better understanding of the community. Some of these district officials became champions of the community and were instrumental to change the mind-sets of other officials and facilitate greater access. They, therefore, became the best practitioners who were later awarded. This was one of the major outcomes of the project in terms of sustainable service delivery for the community members.

The intervention with the families of affected persons received great response. The schemes that were accessed by the family members included child welfare, donor support, education, emergency relief, employment, food, nutrition, health, housing, hygiene, sanitation, insurance, livelihood support, pension, social assistance security, and travel. In total, there was a response from 4,554 respondents

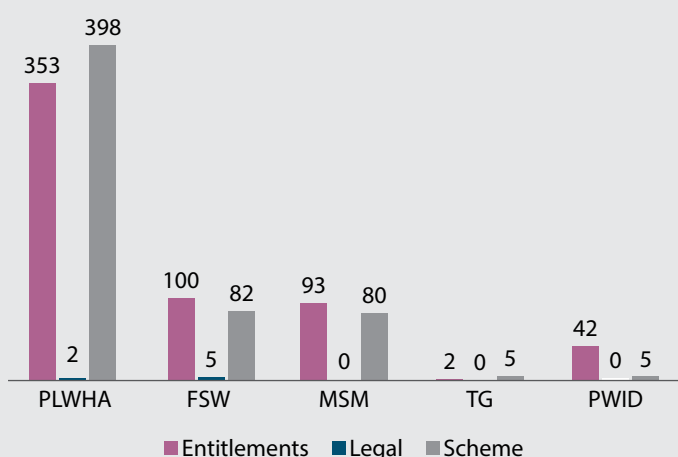
(this data is that of approved applications) and the monetary benefit received was more than Rs.13 crore. The scheme that received most application was for employment (1,332 respondents), followed by pension (576 respondents) and insurance (560 respondents). The least applied/approved scheme was hygiene and sanitation (four), emergency relief (nine) and donor support (15).

This data clearly shows that the project received a positive response as the family members were now aware of and applying for these schemes. Whether the applications were approved or not, the families were benefitted with information. This means that those who were facing difficulty or did not have government documents, to apply for the schemes, now had valid documents.

The project successfully advocated with the government department officials and PRI members for enhanced access to public schemes and programmes. This increased the quota in scheme allocation, leveraged linkages between the target community members to get trained and equipped in skill development. The trained members revised the criteria of the schemes and prioritised the needs of the targeted communities, and ensured that these schemes are accessible. The data, as presented below, shows the number of families of PLWHAs, FSWs, MSMs, TGs and PWIDs receiving benefits from the state.

A total of 13,927 applications were submitted to government departments, out of which, 7,329 target community members and 1,809 family members accessed schemes, entitlement documents, and legal services. This translates into a benefit of more than Rs.13 crore.

Figure 1: Number of Families Received Benefits



A total of 24989 people benefitted from the schemes and legal literacy activities. They included 13209 PLHIV, 2409 MSM, 1723 PWID, 3126 FSW, 945 TG, and 3577 family members. The entitlement documents and socio-legal protection services were accessed widely; the details are as following:

Entitlements-Socio Legal Services Accessed
Birth Certificate (Telangana)
Chronic Illness Certificate (Maharashtra)
Travel Cost for PLWHA-ART and Free Bus Pass (West Bengal)
Travel - Free Bus Pass and Bus Concession (Rajasthan)
Single Women Pension Scheme (Telangana), Financial Assistance for Poor Needy Widow (Manipur)
Social Assistance and Security - Madhu Babu Pension Yojana (Odisha)
Pension - ART Pension (Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Telangana)
Others - Pradhan Mantri Ujjawala Yojana -PMUY (Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Odisha)
Livelihood Support - Loan - Schedule Caste Corporation (Telangana)
Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyothi Bima Yojana (PMJJBY) - Life and Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY) - Accident (Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra)
Insurance - Bhamasha Insurance Card - Medical and Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) - Life (Rajasthan)
Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana - Gramin (West Bengal)
Saida Bainama (Telangana)
Housing - Biju Pakka Ghar Yojana and Mokudia Yojana (Odisha)
Kind/Cash Food and Nutrition Support (Manipur)
AAY (Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan)
Food and Nutrition - Special Government Resolution (West Bengal)
Employment - Labour Card (Telangana, Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan)
Education - HDFC (Maharashtra)
Private Donor Support - World Vision India (Manipur),
Child Welfare - Palanhar (Rajasthan)
Gender Identity Change Certificate (Odisha), Legal - Domestic Violence (Rajasthan)
Land Patta (Telangana)
Domicile/ Residential (Maharashtra)
Community Certificate (Telangana)

LESSONS LEARNT

The PLWHAs, sexual/gender minorities, female sex workers, and injecting drug users face marginalisation and discrimination based on the deep-rooted social and cultural taboos, stigmatisation, and stereotyping. The project intervention focussed on the affected people and the community as a whole.

The project addressed the unique vulnerabilities by focussing on the affected people and their families. The project strategised to work in collaboration with the local partners for wider and in-depth outreach in the communities. Identifying Community Resource Persons (CRPs) was one of the core strategies and building their capacities was given utmost priority as they were the face of the project and the communities trusted them with the information they shared. The CRPs played an important role in keeping these issues into account. This crucial process spread awareness on the disease and its consequences, the government facilities which could be availed by the affected members and the specific schemes that are related to HIV.

Earlier, the families did not accept PLWHAs and PWIDs due to lack of awareness. This lack of awareness about the disease was increasing a risk to those who are not affected yet. Livelihood was greatly affected but with this kind of intervention, the families were fully aware of the schemes and the entitlements of livelihood, nutrition, health, education, RTI, pension, shelter, maternal and child health, etc, which are important for survival.

The members learned to make good use of technology. The capacity-building exercises gave the community the power to negotiate with the stakeholders and co-create an eco-system where people with and without HIV can live in peace, minimising social stigmas and taboos and accepting the multiple identities. The affected community gained the confidence to express their identities without fearing judgement and compromises.

Twenty-seven advocacy workshops were widely used for advocating with the government department officials, and PRI members to advocate for rights of the affected groups. This interface with the stakeholders resulted in revising the

criteria of the schemes and thus prioritised the needs of the targeted communities. The schemes became more accessible. The state, district and block-level advocacy programmes generated a lot of appreciation for the project as this gave momentum to the service delivery and activated the implementation procedures with smooth and easy accessibility.

Organising DGMs as bridge meetings was a challenge initially especially because the intended beneficiaries were not educated and lacked social skills like how to talk to the government officials. With time, they gained confidence. On the other hand, as the officials were sensitised, they came forward to cooperate the beneficiaries leading to processing and approval of applications.

While receiving the applications, the officials usually did not give receipts. This project reversed the practice as they started giving the receipts. The applicants did not only demand and receive the receipts, they also started following up leading to better benefits. The beneficiaries showed their receipts to other people and advised them to demand their receipts, when they submit any papers in the government offices.

The project activism helped in issuance, by the government, of gender identity change certificate. It especially happened after the supportive NASLA judgement of 2015.

Because of the advocacy activities, the Para-Legal Volunteers (PLVs) of the project got trained by the government. The PLVs now have the knowledge and skills to contribute to the post-project solutions.

CONCLUSION

The project, Svavritti, was premised on the fact that HIV is perceived more as a stigma and refers to prejudice, negative attitudes and abuse directed at people living with HIV and AIDS. Rather than understanding the root cause of the disease, newfound gender and sexual identities and occupation of the affected people are looked down upon. This makes people vulnerable and marginalised in multiple contexts. MAPRs continue to face stigma and discrimination based on their actual or perceived health status, race, socio-economic status, age, sex, sexual orientation or



gender identity or other grounds. The project's approach was centred on rights as it worked with the marginalised communities, whose rights have been violated either because of their disease status or certain gender identity or profession.

The project worked towards empowering these community groups towards asserting their rights and at the same time working with the other significant stakeholders to uphold the rights of the PLWHA, transgender population, sex workers and people who inject drugs. The project ensured that the needs of the doubly marginalised communities, due to their HIV status or vulnerability to HIV, were recognised and prioritised in the social and legal protection service delivery. It consciously worked towards gender equality and the results of the project show that 46 per cent of those who accessed schemes were women. The project worked towards translating the recommendations of the Supreme Court Judgment of 2014 on transgender rights

in the project locations and ensured that the transgender persons are now able to change their gender identity as per the Supreme Court direction and access social protection services. This gave freedom to TGs to express their identities they have chosen and not be questioned on the life choices they made.

The project strategies brought huge changes in the behaviours of the affected and most at-risk members, their families, the community, and most importantly the stakeholders. The project gave a new perspective to understand the seriousness of HIV and the socio-economic consequences faced by the affected community. It shifted focus from people to the causes and consequences of the disease. These schemes and entitlements are brought into place so that it can give a chance to people to live with dignity, respect and co-exist in society irrespective of caste, gender, sex, colour, occupation and other identities.

LEAD PARTNER



CO-PARTNERS



FUNDING SUPPORT



INCLUSIVE CIVIC LEADERSHIP

for Social Accountability and Effective Service Delivery of Public Programmes in Rajasthan and Gujarat

A project implemented by UNNATI - Organisation for Development Education

“

I am from the nomadic Kalbeliya community. Few years ago, our community was able to buy some land and settle down. However, we lived atop a sand dune and there were no physical amenities, be it roads or sources of water. Our children faced discrimination and were not accepted at the local Anganwadi or school. We were not allowed to cremate our dead in the village cremation ground. Since we were unaware of our rights, we did not even demand for anything. When I came in contact with UNNATI, I started bringing information regarding different public programmes to the community and also helping them to apply for them. People started calling me 'Suchna Behenji' and I was in demand not only by the people of my community but others as well. My greatest moment of pride was when I was able to get the connecting road and cremation ground sanctioned for my community.

”

Shanti Devi Kalbeliya,
Citizen leader, Patodi,
Barmer, Rajasthan

THE CONTEXT

Citizen engagement is the defining parameter of success for any public service. Despite best efforts from the implementing agencies, there are bottlenecks hindering the programme delivery. Part of the problem is the delivery design, which creates constraints for the beneficiaries as they are unaware of where and how to interface with the system. This leads to an environment of apathy and gives an impression that the community is not interested in availing the benefits. This, in turn, hinders the last mile delivery, thereby depriving people of their legitimate rights and entitlements.

Against this backdrop, UNNATI with support from the European Union, undertook a five-year (2014-2018) intervention project on 'Inclusive Civic Leadership for Social Accountability and Effective Service Delivery of Public Programmes in Rajasthan and Gujarat'. The intervention aimed at improving access of the public schemes and programmes for the poor and marginalised with special focus on dalits (Scheduled Caste or SC), Scheduled Tribes (STs), persons with disabilities and women. It identified two blocks each at Barmer district in Rajasthan, with special focus on the dalit community, and at Sabarkantha district in Gujarat, where the selected blocks are dominated by the local indigenous, *adivasi* population. The project was implemented in 34 Gram Panchayats of the Poshina and Vijaynagar blocks in Sabarkantha (Gujarat) and 30 Gram Panchayats of the Balotra and Sindhri blocks in Barmer (Rajasthan). In total, the intervention



in terms of easy access, coverage and quality of 22 major public schemes and programmes under social protection and security, health and nutrition, and primary education to effectively reach the last mile. It was envisaged that the average benefit to poor households would triple through the project's interventions in a span of five years.

The intervention identified several reasons for poor access to Government schemes and programmes including the lack of information about public schemes and programmes, and system interface; design constraints in the programme delivery mechanism, wherein the targeted beneficiary is intended to undergo a complex, costly and time consuming procedure to prove eligibility and get the benefit. Furthermore, there is social exclusion and discrimination leading to loss of dignity, respect, and confidence to assert and demand the rights and entitlements; and a poor social accountability mechanism within institutions and implementing bodies of public services at the panchayat levels.

Thus, the strategy involved facilitating strong evidence-based demand articulation for quality public services and social accountability mechanisms by strengthening institutions and citizens among the excluded groups. Apart from ensuring access to appropriate and timely information through a variety of mechanisms, social accountability was used as an instrument for improving public programmes. The interface with the Government at all levels and capacity building of governance and service delivery institutions enabled these institutions to be responsive to the demand, to institutionalise inclusive practices and simplify the delivery mechanism to ensure last mile reach of public programmes.

THEORY OF CHANGE AND STRATEGIES

The intervention recognised that the cause of poverty was not dearth of resources, but poor governance and structural exclusion of certain categories of people. It was conceptualised on the assumption that improved access to public services will contribute to poverty reduction. Addressing the bottlenecks in programme delivery will lead to the community accessing their entitlements like pension, insurance, food security, employment

reached out to 64 Gram Panchayats and 52,337 households across four blocks in the two districts.

Gujarat is the sixth largest Indian state by area and the ninth largest state by population. The literacy rate here is 78.03 per cent, with a female literacy rate of 69.68 percent (Census 2011). The Human Development Index (HDI) is 0.527 (2007-2008) and is ranked 11 out of the 19 states¹ in the country. The Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) here is 30 and the Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) is 160. Rajasthan is the largest Indian state by area and the seventh largest by population. The Inequality Adjusted Human Development Index Value (IHDI) stood at 0.308 (UNDP, 2011) and it is ranked 13 out of 19 states in the country. The literacy rate is 67.06 per cent as compared to the national average of 74.04, while its female literacy rate is 52.66 per cent as compared to the national average of 65.46 per cent. The IMR is 41 and MMR is 388, one of the worst in the region. The chosen districts exhibited under-development with a low sex ratio, high malnutrition and low ranking on most human development indicators. The intervention aimed at improving service delivery

¹ The HDI data and ranking for the year 2007-08 is available for 19 states in India.

The intervention recognised that the cause of poverty was not dearth of resources, but poor governance and structural exclusion of certain categories of people.



and healthcare to improve their quality of life. Transparency and social accountability of the implementing agencies, established through public disclosure and monitoring of public programmes by the community, will contribute to citizen engagement and local action for improving public programmes. Capacity building of the community leaders and institutions was the key process to lead the transformation in these communities. The Government delivery system responds in a positive manner to factual information to address gaps and ensures the inclusion of the vulnerable and marginalised in the society.

The project strategy was primarily two-fold:

(i) Strengthen demand articulation by the community for quality and timely delivery of

public programmes by nurturing community leaders and institutions from marginalised and vulnerable groups, place authentic information and evidences regarding status of public programmes in the hands of the community and facilitating local action for improvement. The project proposed nurturing citizen leaders from dalit and local indigenous communities, persons with disabilities, with special focus on women, to take up leadership in the community processes.

(ii) Strengthen good governance and inclusive service delivery practices through capacity building of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and front-line functionaries, supporting Gram Sabha level planning and accountability, improved proactive disclosure of information, and making the delivery mechanism responsive. Collaboration with the Government was strengthened at all levels for redressing people's grievances and facilitating change in the administrative mechanisms of the programmes to enlarge the benefit coverage. Evidences from the field were taken up to facilitate administrative reforms with state-wide impact.

Information Clinics

Information Clinics (IC) evolved as a component of IRC for providing information to people on a case-to-case basis and addressing specific bottlenecks. The ICs operate for two hours every morning. During the five years, 11,738 people visited the ICs in Rajasthan and Gujarat. When people come to the clinic, their names, contact information and problems are all noted. Each individual is provided advice on the next steps including eligibility to specific schemes, provisions, application process and any specific bottleneck they may be facing. Simultaneously, the information put up on Government websites or portals is checked for the person's eligibility, entitlement, application or payment status. A print is given to the person with instructions on how to use it. When the person needs to go to the e-mitra, bank, service provider or administrative personnel for the next steps, a self-explanatory application/ note of the requirement is provided. The person is asked to come back to the IC and report what happened, and bring the receipt of application so that follow-ups can be undertaken. This process has four benefits:

- (i) A person running around for the right information finds hope (and presumably happiness) again.
- (ii) The person gains confidence to follow-up on the next steps with the assurance of support.
- (iii) Using the printed information and the explanatory note, the person is able to approach the relevant functionary and claim his/her entitlement. Many people were able to confront the PDS operator with the printout of their ration off-take information in the different months to demand the leakages.
- (iv) The beneficiaries understand the eligibility criteria and are able to identify other people in their villages, who are eligible but unable to access entitlements, and advise them to approach the ICs.

Today, the Government is endeavouring to reach all Government to Citizen (G2C) services through Common Service Centres (CSCs), a web-enabled, front-end distribution system to serve as the access points for citizens). However, they only make applications. The role of ICs can be main streamed with that of the CSCs for last mile delivery. In Rajasthan, UNNATI collaborated with the Department of Information Technology (DoIT) to orient all CSC operators in Barmer district on the provisions of different public programmes and navigating websites and portals to ensure entitlements to the people. About 447 operators were oriented in 17 block-level events. The CSC might be strengthened through an agreement between the Gram Panchayat, Community Based Organisation (CBOs) and the operator. The Gram Panchayat Standing Committee on development can regularly monitor events. Systematic capacity development of CSCs on the provisions of schemes and navigation of Government websites and portals will enable them to be more adept at ensuring access to entitlements for citizens at a nation-wide level. The CSCs need to take on the added role of pro-actively identifying eligible beneficiaries, ensuring that eligibility criteria is fulfilled before making applications, following through on applications till payment, ensuring annual verifications of beneficiaries and helping with grievance redressal.

Improving Access to Information was the key strategy for empowering the marginalised to claim their entitlements. Information campaigns and camps were organised at the community level to enable people to understand the benefits under each scheme, noting the eligibility clauses for making applications to receive such benefits and the mechanisms available for grievance redressal. The campaigns helped to identify individuals, who needed support in the application process, and captured the community needs and demand vis-à-vis the public services. The Information Resource Centre (IRC), at the block level, was the nodal point for addressing information required by the community regarding access to public services. Information packages including details of schemes and programmes, Government notifications and procedures were published in regional languages as community resources. A news letter, entitled *Vichar*, was published every quarter in Hindi and Gujarati, which served as a point for consolidating the learnings and debate on the issues and concerns regarding the implementation of schemes and programmes.

Social Accountability tools and mechanisms were used as key instruments for improving the public programmes. Community Based Monitoring (CBM) was facilitated using pictorial charts that provided information to people on available entitlements and recorded the status of access. This provided the community with authentic data and evidences of the status of public services so that they can demand social accountability. It facilitated local action for improvement and supported evidence-based advocacy for redressal of grievances. In the course

of five years, five rounds of CBM were undertaken in 587 villages with the participation of 21,687 people. The members of the community, along with the 506 citizen leaders, undertook 21,343 local actions for improving the delivery of the public programmes, promoting citizen participation in Gram Sabhas and popularising social accountability through public programme monitoring and information disclosure. Most issues get redressed at the local level, while some requiring administrative reforms need to be taken up at the district or the state level. It was observed that when the community starts monitoring public services, the front-line workers automatically become vigilant, resulting in improvement of delivery. For example, in all the project blocks, attendance of children in Anganwadis increased to around 54% from around 5%. In project blocks of Gujarat, the attendance of students in primary schools increased to 63% from 28%. In project blocks of Rajasthan, observance of Mother and Child Health and Nutrition (MCHN) days or Mamta Diwas increased to 88 per cent from 47 per cent. Thus people must keep 'watch' for effective delivery of public programmes and the project was successful in leaving behind a 'vigilant community'.

The intervention developed citizen leaders among the SCs, minority communities, persons with disabilities and women. They were made aware about the different public programmes and were trained to fill up forms, write clearly worded applications and grievances, gather information from digital sources, etc. Their actions were backed by the members of their community. Villagers feel empowered in the presence of citizen leaders and vice-versa. They have successfully removed exhortative middlemen out of the scene. The legitimacy of citizen leaders is established at the level of the community and the Government. The citizen leader's actions proved effective, when they were backed by and were accountable to community organisations at the village level.

Pro-active disclosure of information was systematically used to make information available to the community. It is obligatory under Section 4.1 (b) of the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005, for any public authority to pro-actively disclose information. Placing information on Government functioning, policies and programmes contributes to transparent and accountable governance. Effective display of information by the village-



“

I am a person with disability. I attended one of the information camps put up by UNNATI in my village. I thought that I should first try to obtain some benefits for myself and then if the response was positive, I could try for others like me. I applied and was able to get my bus pass. In this way, I was able to get over 100 bus passes, aids and appliances for around 60 persons, disability pensions for three persons, disability certificates for around 50-60 persons, three cases of Palak Mata Pita and over 100 old age pensions for the elderly. The pending cases of Indira Awas Yojana from 2013-2014 were resolved by negotiating with the Government officials. Over 100 people have received the benefits of Swach Bharat Abhiyan.

”

Kanubhai Rawal,
Poshina block,
Sabarkantha district, Gujarat

level institutions can help beneficiaries access entitlements. Gram Panchayats were facilitated to make 1,346 improved information disclosures in terms of content, format and placement. These included details of services, category-wise list of beneficiaries, programme-level committees, enrolment and attendance of children, works and expenditure, MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) and Gram Panchayat plans, and list of private hospitals affiliated under the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY), etc. The community was encouraged to demand explanation and take action on the basis of disclosed information. Studies were conducted in Gujarat and Rajasthan on pro-active disclosure of information practices. They covered a thorough analysis of department websites and portals and those disclosed physically at the service points and Gram Panchayats. The web-based information on the beneficiary list under the National Food Security Act 2013, Palanhar Yojana, social security pension benefit payments and ration ledgers, and families eligible for Bhamashah Insurance Scheme are some of the important information disclosure practices of the Government of Rajasthan, which proved very useful in redressing issues of access. For placing these information in the public domain and removing the administrative login restricting information availability, several rounds of dialogues were undertaken between the DoIT and CSOs of Rajasthan. On many occasions, inputs were shared with the departments for improvement of websites/portals in terms of content, format and placement of information needed by people for improving access to the programme.

Capacity building of the PRI members was undertaken to help them take informed decisions, pro-actively disclose information and execute social accountability principles for the development works, thereby creating transparency and enhancing demand articulation at the village level. The project enabled the practice of participatory planning and social audits in all the 64 GPs. During the project duration, 537 Gram Sabhas were facilitated.

Effective resolution of grievances is necessary for any public programme to effectively reach the target beneficiaries. The issues that came up during the various rounds of CBM, campaigns and information camps, etc., were represented to authorities at the block, district and state levels. In Rajasthan,

a web (IT)-enabled mechanism (Rajasthan Sampark) was extensively used for grievance redressal. The project facilitated and successfully redressed 5,876 grievances across the project blocks.

Interface with Government is a key strategy to address the design and delivery bottlenecks for access to public services. Interactions were made with Government officials at the taluka, district and state levels, exploring solutions to the issues raised through the CBM, information clinics, and inputs from the citizen leaders. In the process, the reforms that emerged could impact the entire state. In Gujarat, the bar code coupon given to beneficiaries of PDS prior to the implementation of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) was printed out in two pages for which Rs.10 was charged. A change was made in the format to reduce the coupon print out to one page bringing down its cost to Rs. 5 for the beneficiaries in the state. In Rajasthan, delivery snags were identified in the Palanhar Yojana, which supports the education of children from a specified vulnerable background. It was suggested that the need for annual verification of beneficiaries could be eliminated by linking the elementary school information portal and Aadhaar card. The project advocated easing the application process for land and water development works for the SC, ST and Below Poverty Level (BPL) communities in Rajasthan under MGNREGA. Beneficiaries had to expend extra time and money in getting the plot map verified by *Patwaris* (Revenue Department functionaries) and getting a 'no objection' certificate (NOC) from co-claimants to the land on a stamp paper. A Government order was made specifying that the beneficiary could draw the map of the plot and did not require verification from any functionary. Moreover, the NOC could be provided on plain paper. This order helped beneficiaries make applications immediately with no extra costs.

A policy brief was prepared on the eligibility and entitlements on pension schemes for the elderly, widows and persons with disabilities in various states, and a demand was made to review the eligibility and benefits in Gujarat. The Government decided to expand the criteria for social security programmes. The old age and disability pension criteria was expanded from a BPL score of 0-16 to 0-20, which increased the number of beneficiaries by twofold. The pension amount for the elderly,

destitutes and persons with disabilities was increased to Rs. 500 from Rs. 400 per month for 60-79 years, to Rs. 1,000 from Rs.700 for those above 80 years, the widow pension was increased to Rs.1,250 from Rs. 750 per month and the eligibility criteria of having a son aged 21 years and above was removed. The Palak Mata Pita scheme that provided financial support for only orphaned children was expanded to include children of widows, who have remarried due to which the number of eligible children increased by three times. This modification will help prevent child labour considering that the scheme condition necessitates children to be enrolled in Anganwadis or schools and the support amount was increased to Rs. 3,000 from Rs. 1,000 per month. The income limit for eligibility of schemes related to Social Welfare Department and the Social Defence Departments for SCs and STs was increased in rural areas to Rs. 1,20,000 from Rs. 47,000 and in urban areas to Rs. 1,50,000 from Rs. 68,000.

The project identified the need for streamlining the schemes and programmes anchored by the Government to enhance access for the persons with disabilities to ensure effective inclusion and mainstreaming in the community. The intervention helped in sensitising the Anganwadi workers of the intervention district Sabarkantha in Gujarat – for early identification of disabilities. Advocacy through evidence-based dialogue helped the Government to issue a protocol for disability certification camps resulting in better coordination between the Health and Family Welfare Department and the Social Justice and Empowerment Department. This also resulted in considerable ease for doctors as well as for the persons with disabilities and their escorts participating in the camps. In Gujarat, dialogue with the Social Justice and Empowerment Department and the Social Defence Department resulted in clarification on the criteria for issuing Antyodaya cards for persons with disabilities. In this way, all persons with disabilities having a disability certificate with 40% disability were entitled to an Antyodaya card (35 kg of grains per month) under the NFSA. The organisation also represented at the state-level committee for formation of the Rules and Disability Policy under the New Law, Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016 in Gujarat. At the behest of the National Human Rights Commission, an article on the need for reforming governance



for enabling persons with disabilities access their social security entitlements was contributed to their annual journal in 2015.

MAJOR OUTCOMES

The triple-effect: The project demonstrated how information access accompanied by civic action and appropriate grievance redressal can triple the average benefit to a poor household, accruing from public programmes, and impact the quality of life of the citizens. In Poshina and Vijaynagar blocks, the average household benefits increased to Rs. 56,181 from Rs. 6,342 and in Balotra and Sindhri blocks, it increased to Rs. 150,549 from Rs. 41,966. The increase is evident in all three sectors—primary education, health and nutrition and social protection. All demonstrated practices have potential for replication and dissemination in other parts of the country. The intervention encapsulated the idea that information acts as a catalyst to citizen’s participation leading to citizen’s action in claiming their entitlements. Social accountability and transparency mechanism can

further accelerate the process of citizen-centric development. The project demonstrated that if citizens are empowered with the knowledge of accessing public services, it serves as a motivation for them to interface with the system. Social justice can only be ensured if citizen’s participation is achieved, community-based participatory processes help to accelerate programme delivery, and ensure citizen participation in its true sense. The increase in benefits triggered families to further invest on household education and health, which translated into long-term gains for the community. Individual beneficiaries like the elderly were able to buy their monthly ration and enhance their status in the family by contributing to social occasions and at family rituals and events.

Increased access to public services: The baseline-endline comparison conducted in Gujarat shows evidence that continuous community engagement and rigorous capacity building of civic leadership helps in considerable gains on public service delivery. Access to schemes like the Palak Mata Pita Scheme, which had only two beneficiaries against 24 eligible applicants, saw a rise to 31 beneficiaries out of 32 eligible applicants. Schemes like Anna Triveni noted a rise from zero per cent coverage during the base-line survey to 100 per cent during the end-line survey. Welfare schemes like the Mid-Day Meal, MGNREGA, Old Age Pension, PDS/ NFSA, Janani Surakshya Yojna have all made significant gains.

LESSONS LEARNT

The intervention has been able to map a journey of change primarily through creation of community leaders and forums for citizen engagement and participation in the development dialogue.

Strengthening institutions at both Government and non-government level through capacity building of the functionaries and community leaders is an asset, which will thrive even when the project is over. The intervention is successful in demonstrating the use of community-based participatory processes and technology in addressing barriers in information access and inclusion by setting up process and forums for participation, transparency and accountability. The project demonstrated ways in which accountability and transparency can

be upheld by the implementing agencies and stakeholders by setting up a precedent through collective action. The experience that communities have weaved would outlive the project cycle and has sown seeds for better governance and citizen action as a democratic resolve to their problems.

A strong community will and robust facilitative environment can help in sustaining the impact of the intervention and can transform practice in interest of good governance. The intervention helped in realising that the approach and the values adopted by the communities will need handholding, facilitation and support from specialised non-partisan agencies to sustain the changes.

The initiative has demonstrated that the communities can effectively lead the change process provided they are extended support. The partnership between state and community can prove to not just expedite the change process but can help it grow exponentially.

The role of civil society organisations is of two-fold nature, where they are facilitators of the process and also help in creating bridges and partnerships between stakeholders. Their accountability and transparency, during the process, helps to establish credibility not just with the community but also with the state and the implementing agencies, which propels the process and helps in navigating policy reforms.

The role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Citizen Leaders (CLs) remain critical during the project for the continuity of efforts. They are also the assets and social capital, which the project leaves behind once the project cycle is complete to bring sustainability to the efforts.

The project has demonstrated that there is always room for evidence-based policy advocacy. The CSOs have the required skills and perspective to work with the community and are aware about the bottlenecks. However, through evidence-based research and data, they can advocate for the required changes. A partnership with the state can help in negotiating and expanding the change process and avoids duplication of efforts.

Finally, the most important asset the community owns is its knowledge and skills. Thus, an approach aimed at institutional strengthening can serve not just the immediate needs but can help prepare the base for long-term impact.

“

The Anganwadi in our village was not functioning properly and the staff was very irregular in attendance. The children were not given any snacks, which they were supposed to be served. As a result, even the children were not going to the Anganwadi. Many children and their mothers in the village were under-nourished. During a CBM conducted under the guidance of UNNATI, we obtained a lot of information. I opted to monitor the work of the Anganwadi! I took the children and mothers of my hamlet on a daily basis to the Anganwadi irrespective of whether the worker and helper turned up or not. After sometime, the worker started coming regularly and also started providing snacks. Soon the helper also turned up. On insisting to be served snacks as per the prescribed menu, they started obliging. Soon the institution started functioning normally. Even Mother's Day was celebrated properly!

”

Mangu Ben Khant,
Dantia Village, Poshinablock,
Sabarkantha district, Gujarat



CONCLUSION

The project was successful in demonstrating that citizen action can transform outcomes for local communities and help in successful delivery of public service schemes and programmes. A robust community engagement and participation in the

monitoring process can help the community in becoming vigilant and ensuring that quality services reach the last mile in an accountable manner. The increase in benefits accrued by the households demonstrates that in the long run, public schemes have a major role in eliminating poverty and contribute to sustainable living mechanisms.

LEAD PARTNER



FUNDING SUPPORT



INITIATIVE FOR TRANSPARENT and Accountable Governance Systems in Jharkhand

A project implemented by **Welthungerhilfe** in partnership with:
• Badlao Foundation • LEADS • NEEDS • Pravah • Ekjut

“

There are several government surveys and tasks we have to run every day. At times it's very hard to remember all the necessary information related to maternal health. The MfM app in our phones is like a walkable module, which offers step-by-step questions and answers that covers all the necessary inputs for a woman to follow during her pregnancy. This is very helpful and I feel relaxed that I can cover all points.

”

Rekha Devi
ASHA Worker,
Pakur District

THE CONTEXT

Jharkhand is one of the most vulnerable Indian states (ranking 16th out of 17 states in the Indian State Hunger Index) with more than 75 per cent of its population involved in agriculture, but the yield generated is only about 20 per cent of the state's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). While studies show that vital health indicators are slowly improving, the gap between Jharkhand and the more developed states of India continues to widen. There are critical gaps in the performance of National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) and Integrated Child Development Service (ICDS).

The primary education systems are weak and adult literacy is low. The Right to Education (RTE) Act 2010 is widely unknown in rural areas. The School Management Committees (SMCs) are not prepared to take on their prescribed roles due to lack of awareness and training. The implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) falls short due to corruption, lack of information, and community participation.

In the districts of Khunti, Sahebganj, Dumka and Pakur of Jharkhand, about 80 per cent of the population lives Below The Poverty Line (BPL) and suffers from food shortages for three to five months every year. Meeting the basic needs of a household is a challenge for a predominant part of the populace. Under-payment, under-employment, exploitative informal work, daily labour and seasonal migration are common problems that plague households. During an



Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) in the health sector. The initiative targeted 381,000 direct beneficiaries as well as service providers and self-governance institutions in the project districts.

THEORY OF CHANGE AND STRATEGIES

The over arching objective of the project was to contribute to social inclusion and reduce poverty through improved public services and programmes. The strategic actions included community organisation, information dissemination, knowledge and capacity development of government officials, empowerment and activation of the local self-governance institutions, etc.

With these strategies in place, the project tried to enable a transparent and flexible system, where local communities and the government would work together, with both being accountable to each other. This would enable the people to provide feedback for better service delivery and a corruption-free process. The people would get opportunities to lead a better and healthy life with increased livelihood options. The information provided would raise awareness about the rights and entitlements of the local communities, which in turn would ensure implementation of the schemes.

Community sensitisation and empowerment was crucial for the project to be successful. Raising awareness among the community was important for generating discussions, demand, action and follow-up for ensuring effective service delivery. The project focussed at broadcasting relevant information on various public schemes and designed mechanisms to coordinate and analyse the information. It developed contextually relevant practices to disseminate information to the local community. In the process, it developed 240 *Soochana Mitras* (Information Champions) from the community, who were taught about the Right to Information (RTI) Act and trained in filing RTI applications.

The project aimed at strengthening the Common Service Centre (CSC)/Pragya Kendra (PK), which is a part of the National e-Governance plan encouraging transparency and accountability to promote good governance. It provides a centralised collaborative framework for service delivery to citizens. Due to low literacy among people and

assessment of the needs and conditions in these four districts, major gaps were observed in information dissemination, awareness and accessibility to services.

In this context, Welthungerhilfe implemented a project, 'Initiative for Transparent and Accountable Governance Systems in Jharkhand', to address the critical service delivery gaps through awareness, access, and action. The project aimed to improve the quality, coverage and access to information regarding public services in education, health, nutrition and rural employment. It looked at successfully standardising, demonstrating and replicating innovative processes and best practices to address the key constraints in information delivery, service provision and empowerment of self-governance institutions by the state and district-level authorities or service providers.

This 60-month project (2014 to 2018) was implemented in four districts in partnership with Badlao Foundation (Sahebganj district, Barhait block), LEADS (Khunti district, Torpa block), NEEDS (Pakur district, Littipara block) and Pravah (Dumka district, Jama block). One of the partners Ekjut acted as a resource organisation for facilitating

Only 28 per cent of the Pragma Kendras have any type of sign board or description about its service delivery written on their walls. 95 per cent of the community were not aware of the existence of Pragma Kendras. The people who visited the centres for photocopy and other services, even they did not know the services to be delivered by Pragma Kendras.



lack of cooperation from the government, the CSCs/PKs did not function properly. The project prepared business plans and piloted them at the Littipara block in Pakur district to establish a practical model, where the e-Governance system would reach the masses by fulfilling all the information and various service requirements. A one-day workshop was conducted on CSC/PK with the Village Level Entrepreneur (VLE) from 17 Gram Panchayats of Littipara. The challenges were prioritised and a road map was developed to make the PKs functional. Intensive community awareness on Pragma Kendra in Talpaharii, Fulpahari and Bichamahal Gram Panchayat were conducted for model PKs in Dumka district. Continuous support and counselling to the VLEs were provided to work on the new business ideas.

The project incorporated Community Radio (CR) programmes, which broadcasted relevant information across 120 villages. Community volunteers were trained on the CR programme to work in their respective villages. The Manthan Yuva Sansthan provided technical support to other implementing partners, while monitoring the programme. The CR programme was extended from Torpa to the other three blocks of Littipara, Jama and Barhait. Thus, it was able to cover a large segment of the population from interior villages and highlighted public service schemes, which could benefit them. The CR programme, *Dahar Pahunche Khabar*, provided information on 10 different public schemes—MGNREGA, RTE, RTI, Child Cabinet (Children's Parliament), Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY), Pragma Kendra, Gram Sabha, Poshan Divas, Anganwadi and Khadya Suraksha Yojana.

The project facilitated discussions and capacitated the community members to demand better services. A total of 10 centralised capacity building programmes were organised for the partner staff, who, in turn, trained the community members on various relevant topics like MGNREGA, PLA, Village

In the five-day Barefoot Reporter's workshop, activists, functionaries, *Adivasi* students and women were trained on writing and photography skills. They learnt reporting and interviewing techniques, on-site coverage, photo coverage, formatting and layout designing of wall newspapers.

Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committee (VHSNC), barefoot reporters and CR. The project aided in the capacity building of socially excluded groups to access information, services and schemes such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme, the JSY and maternal health schemes.

The community-level participatory processes promoted social inclusion. For example; during the village-level micro-planning processes, the interest of the excluded community was given the highest priority. Community monitoring tools were developed and executed to observe and check government services related to health, nutrition, employment, education and other public service safety nets.

The project team initiated door-to-door interaction with the people and mobilised them to come for different meetings. It aimed at participation from the poor, marginalised and women citizens. The meetings were used to trigger discussion with the women on issues related to pregnancy and care for newborns.

The government-appointed officials often lacked knowledge and skills to fulfil their functions due to lack of prior and proper training to handle their roles and responsibilities. To strengthen the governance system, the members of the government and local self-governance institutions needed to be capacitated on their roles and responsibilities. It was reported that community-based organisations like VHSNCs were often non-functional and support from the Affiliated Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers was irregular.

Capacities of public service providers, through trainings and other methods of learning, were

enhanced for better service delivery so as to ensure transparency and accountability in the schemes on education, health, nutrition, and employment. The information about the Jankari Mela on RTI and community monitoring of services was spread widely across the block and district-level government staff as well as among Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) members. Collaboration with service providers was strengthened through joint supportive actions at the block level.

The Gram Panchayats needed to be aware and empowered enough to handle the development fund efficiently without any corruption. Although various local self-governance institutions such as Gram Sabhas, Gram Panchayats, various Panchayat Committees, SMCs, etc., existed, most of them remained ineffective. These institutions were activated and empowered with new knowledge. The project played a critical role in orienting Gram Panchayat members and the Panchayat Planning team. Partner staff were trained as State Resource Team (SRT), who in turn trained elected Panchayat members in the four project blocks. A total of 407 elected PRI members were trained on their roles and responsibilities along with the importance of RTI and its use. The trainings for PRI members included organising Gram Sabha, Participatory Planning, and budget tracking to track the allocated funds for better utilisation. During the project period, a total of 1,248 Gram Sabhas were organised. The youth and women were mobilised to garner higher participation in planning and decision-making, management, and monitoring of the benefits derived from different schemes.

The project developed effective linkages with the community volunteers, who worked under the erstwhile Bharat Nirman Programme of the Government of India and the Pragya Kendras. In turn, these volunteers and Pragya Kendras provided effective linkages between the community and services providers in terms of information dissemination, application and grievance redressal processes.

Health and Nutrition

The baseline study revealed that the Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) in the intervened districts was higher than the state average. The IMR of Sahebganj, Dumka and Pakur were 61, 46 and 59, respectively, with the state's IMR being 45. For addressing behavioural change

practices on health issues, improving maternal and child health, and reducing IMR and Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR), PLA sessions were conducted. The PLA process was facilitated by 20 field staff working for 100 villages through regular coordination with ASHA workers. More than 5,000 ASHAs were trained on PLA in 2015. EKJUT being part of the ASHA Mentoring Group of NRHM provided technical support. Mobile for Mothers (MfM) technology was developed and used for trend analysis.

The PLA sessions were organised in four stages: identifying the problems, planning for appropriate strategies, acting together to implement these strategies, and evaluating together for results. It was carried out in 140 villages. The PLA process saw participation from women groups in the beginning and later on, men were also involved. It provided a safe platform for women to discuss their health problems with ease and without any interruption from the male members. The women groups used the platform to discuss practices, which they had not prioritised earlier due to lack of awareness on maternal and child health issues such as birth preparedness and hygiene, understanding and implementing preventives, home care, emergency problems, measures and preparedness for maternal and newborn care, preventing maternal deaths, newborn survival activities /practices, identifying and classifying newborn infections and neonatal pneumonia, and the importance of postnatal care for the newborn.

Audits of Anganwadi centres were conducted by the women's groups in the project blocks. The audits found out the Anganwadi buildings were in battered conditions. There were no separate kitchens. The cooking places, adjacent to the classrooms were not ventilated, with smoke spreading to the main classrooms. Most Anganwadi centres did not have separate areas for anti-natal care (ANC) check-ups, which were conducted either in the main hall or the kitchen or even in store rooms. There were no curtains, doors or any screens for privacy for such ANC check-ups.

The VHSNC were not aware of their roles and responsibilities and had no information that some of the funds were used by Sahaiyyas. The VHSNC members were oriented on their roles and utilisation of funds. After the trainings, there was an improvement in mutual cooperation and coordination.

Convincing the others to feed colostrum to the infants immediately after birth was a challenge that the Sahaiyya's often faced. It was believed that colostrum was very thick and would be difficult to feed the newborn. After knowing the importance of colostrum through the VHSNC members, the women agreed for colostrum-feeding and exclusive breast feeding.

Awareness regarding the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY), Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) and Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram (JSSK) was found to be less than 30 per cent in all four districts. Nearly 37 per cent of the pregnant and lactating mothers did not attend Village Health and Nutrition Day (VHND) meetings mostly due to ignorance.

Education

The project developed a School Development Planning (SDP) manual for the SMC members. The manual was user-friendly and consisted of pictorial planning tools. The project used AKVO flow, a web-based monitoring and tracking tool developed by AKVO, in order to digitise the preparation and monitoring of SDP. In 2015, 182 SDPs were prepared and submitted to the concerned department via local authorities. Approximately 450 SMC members were trained to prepare the participatory SDPs. Towards the end of the project period, 10,000 government schools targeted to prepare SDPs and submit these plans. Partners facilitated this process with support from the Jharkhand Education Project Council (JEPC).

The Vidyalyaya Chale Chalaye Abhiyaan was organised to achieve the target of Universal





Elementary Education for 6-14 years of age. The campaign used meetings and mobilisation of communities on the issues related to regular school attendance and SMC meetings. The project launched a special 'Enrolment Drive'. While there was an improvement in enrolment, girls' enrolment was better than that of the boys. A total of 251 children were enrolled under the campaign alone, with the support of SMC, Bal Sansad and PRI members.

The children were mobilised to contribute to their development, to school, and to the community. The project enabled the school students/Bal Sansad members to discuss their problems on issues such as water and sanitation facility, sports and entertainment and quality Mid-Day Meal (MDM). They raised the issue through wall newspapers. The SMC members passed a resolution to use the schools' untied fund for purchasing a water pump motor, construction of hand wash stations, and running water facilities in toilets in a different school. A total of 150 wall newspapers were prepared by the barefoot reporters and children's groups with support from the field staff on the different social issues in the intervention area. For example, the

members of Bal Sansad in Shyampur village under Nachangaria Gram Panchayat raised the issue of not getting eggs on the mentioned date of MDM, Jhumarbad Middle School raised their demands for a sports programme, sports materials and uniforms. They hung wall newspapers in front of the school veranda and followed up the progress.

There were also charts, and other relevant flash materials in the classrooms, which was not done prior to the project implementation. The notice board displayed information about the children enrolled, attendance, social and cleanliness issues, and food menu chart for different days in a week. The menu was designed with a view to provide a balanced diet to the school children.

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)

The implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was found to be inadequate in all the project districts. A low level of awareness and access to the scheme failed to strengthen the livelihoods of people in these districts. The baseline survey revealed that only 9.3 per cent sample households in Sahebganj and 12.4 per cent in Pakur districts had a fair idea about MNREGA, while the situation was somewhat better in Khunti and Dumka districts (72.9 per cent and 64 per cent, respectively). However, knowledge regarding the provisions of the Act, apart from the 100 days of assured employment, was very low across all districts and ranged from 0.4 per cent to 25 per cent. Only 65 per cent of households in Pakur knew about the 100 days of assured employment provision, while only 17.9 per cent were aware about it in Sahebganj.

A campaign was launched in all the 28 Gram Panchayats of the four project blocks. This multi-thematic campaigns disseminated information on MGNREGA and RTI. Vehicles covered with MNREGA banner and speakers were used to announce MGNREGA-related information. Jaankari Mela provided different information including how RTI works. Nukkad Nataks were conducted, which spread messages on various provisions under MGNREGA. Several cases were identified including some women who were not paid their wages and

their cases were taken up. The State Advisor to the Supreme Court Commission, District Social Officer, MGNREGA Lokpal, and BDOs, among others, were present during the campaign. People submitted their complaints, which were forwarded to the concerned authorities.

A user's tool was developed and designed in consultation with experts on MGNREGA, agriculture, watershed and food security. The planning tool namely, 'Micro Planning Flip Book' was developed, field-tested and piloted in all the four project blocks. A total of 40 master trainers were trained, who, in turn, trained more than 600 community volunteers to facilitate the village-level micro-planning process by using the flip book. A total of 750 flipbooks were published and used in more than 800 villages of Deogarh, Latehar, Sahebganj, Dumka, Khunti and Pakur districts.

MAJOR OUTCOMES

The project targeted public schemes and programmes related to health, nutrition, education and employment. All these major thematic areas recorded success. At the end of the project, about 90 per cent of the targeted households were found to have basic knowledge of their rights and entitlements.

Among other factors, the efforts of 480 youth volunteers associated with the CR programmes, who acted as information champions, contributed to this community consciousness. With their efforts to enhance citizen participation in planning and monitoring through performance audits of public services, the project witnessed a lot of positive changes. The women became interested in the programme as they got information on their provisions under various schemes.

There was an increased participation by commoners in general, and youth and women in particular. During the Gram Sabhas, the number of community members ranged between 40 and 86 in each meeting. The community participated in the preparation of Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDPs), SDPs, monitoring of Mid-Day Meals, VHNDs, PLA sessions and VHSNC meetings. Trained community volunteers successfully supported the village planning processes. Women's participation increased significantly, and they clearly and

VHSNC members of Dondiya village Dumka District are regularly visiting the Village Health and Nutrition Days (VHND) to monitor the services provided by the ANM, Anganwadi Workers and Sahaiyyas. In one of the VHNDs, a member identified that the villagers were not showing interest in receiving the Take Home Ration (THR) packet for lactating mothers and children from the age six months to three years. On enquiring about the reason, they found out that the taste of the product (THR) was disliked by most of the villagers. They also found out that some of the beneficiaries were feeding the THR packets to their domestic livestock. Ms. Sarita Devi (Sahaiyya) and Ms. Siya Devi (Anganwadi worker) took this as a challenge and tried to cook the THR food in a tastier manner at their homes. After various trials, they came to the conclusion that the THR supplement could be added to wheat flour to make chapattis. Their experiment was a great success. Thereafter, they shared their experiences with the VHSNC members and beneficiaries. After this, others also experimented on their own and developed many other ways of preparing the THR. Someone prepared *paratha* out of the mixed flour, while another came up with a new version of *thekua* with the supplement. Now no THR supplements are fed to domestic livestock. They are now consumed by the children, pregnant women and lactating mothers in the form of *chapattis*, *parathas*, *thekuas*, savoury snacks and even desserts. This shows that THR distribution is indeed a solution for tackling malnutrition, but it should be properly demonstrated to the local communities.

confidently articulated their interest and needs. Increased participation brought benefits to the people from the MGNREGA and other social security schemes.

After the capacity building programmes, 60 per cent of the trained government staff and PRI members regularly applied the training content



It adopted by the state government and scaled up to the entire state of Jharkhand. Many behavioural changes were noticed. There were more institutional deliveries than ever before. However, many indigenous families did not prefer using the government ambulance “Mamta Vahan¹” the vehicle for carrying pregnant women to the hospital, as the contracted vehicle owner used to demand money from the community. The Sahaiyyas played the role of resolving this issue by informing that the Mamta Vahan is a free-service facility, and they cannot charge any money from anyone. The Mamta Vahan scheme was properly utilised and activated. The VHSNC members could now call the Mamta Vahan with the help of a Sahaiyya for any health emergency for free. This would not have been possible if both VHSNC and Sahaiyya were not working together on this. The project helped in regularisation and monitoring of the services through the Sahaiyyas and VHSNCs.

VHSNC members met regularly to understand more about the general health issues including newborn health and childhood nutrition. They also took initiatives to make the village clean in order to reduce diseases caused by stagnant water and flies spreading from the garbage dumps. The hand-pump stations were cleaned as also the village pathways, drainages, and road sides. The villagers cleaned their cowsheds to prevent mosquitoes. The water bodies and wells were chlorinated. Through development of mutual understanding, gaps were bridged between the VHSNC, people and the Sahaiyyas. The Sahaiyyas supported the VHSNC in organising PLA sessions regularly and this arrangement became the platform to discuss the problem not just related to health but other schemes as well. Meetings with the VHSNC and block health officials yielded positive result as ANMs started visiting the villages on VHNDs. Through community monitoring processes, there was an improvement in the quality coverage of the different services including those of health and nutrition.

The parents and SMC members started monitoring the mid-daymeal and teachers’ attendance in various schools. The continuous dissemination of information on the RTE Act helped in creating a free, fearless

¹ State Government of Jharkhand, UNICEF and National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), introduced the Mamta Vahan scheme in 2011. It’s an arrangement of vehicles for the smooth transfer of pregnant women to facilitate institutional child births.

to their work. About 75 per cent of the ASHA and ICDS workers regularly and systematically applied the PLA tools, while implementing the health and nutrition schemes and services.

Gram Panchayats were made aware that the 14th Finance Commission Development Fund would directly come to them rather than being distributed by the block. Using the knowledge of the volunteers, Gram Panchayats and Pragya Kendras, the project has enabled the community to access the services. The time to get the overall services was drastically minimised from the earlier ‘uncertain’ period to 10-15 days.

Model CSCs/PKs were strengthened with the Village Level Entrepreneur (VLEs). The VLEs were trained and authorised to deliver certain services on the government schemes. The citizens did not need to go to the government offices to get a death/birth/caste/income certificates. All these are now available in the Pragya Kendras. As an example, the PK/CSC in the Littipara block of Pakur district caters to the information need of people from 12 villages covering 10 km distance.

The PLA processes increased the community’s demand for services on mother and child care.

Through advocacy efforts, 10,000 schools have been taken up as a pilot under the leadership of LEADS in collaboration with State Education Department and Joint Education Project Council (JEPC) for preparing participatory School Development Plans (SDP), Following the SDP manual developed under the project in 2014.

learning environment. There was an improvement in the educational outcomes, wherein enrolment for both boys and girl in all the districts, except Pakur, increased to above 90 per cent. Enrolment in Pakur was 82 per cent for boys and 77 per cent for girls. The attendance against enrolment among boys and girls was more than 94 per cent in all the project sites. However, there are still gaps in school infrastructure and the services provided. Provision for free vitamins and corrective classes for weaker students are still needed.

The project used a web-based monitoring and tracking tool developed by AKVO, in order to digitise the preparation and monitoring processes of SDPs. Digitisation of SDP, using the AKVO Flow software application, was done across 1,227 schools, covering the entire four blocks and additional one block, i.e., Bengabad of Giridih district. This tool was used to monitor different processes and outcomes like regular attendance of school teachers, MDMs and infrastructures.

The MfM technology was intended to transform the age-old manual system of data tracking into a digitalised platform. This process noted the different stakeholders from the community to the officials. The MfM in Littipara benefitted around 90 per cent of pregnant women and children. It was adopted by NRHM for scaling up in at least one more block. The MfM application went through an intensive engagement for two years before being finally recognised by the Government as an effective tool to support the health extension workers in providing and following up on ANC and PNC services, thereby reducing the multiple formats of reporting and streamlining the Government MIS. 91 ASHA workers were trained to use the application. MfM proved to be the first effective technology-based programme on maternal health in Pakur. The m-health training added on to the digital skills of the community health workers. The Sahaiyyas referred to the app as a step-by-step counselling tool. It is a much handy method that made their tasks easy. Critical cases could be

tracked easily by referring to back-level facilities. The mobile phone, a part of the MfM, was used to reach out to Mamta Vahan and ANM during emergency.

LESSONS LEARNT

This project capacitated the community members and different stakeholders to demand better services, while engaging with various governance institutions. The participatory methods and intervention strategies resulted in bringing the community together through collectivisation and awareness of schemes and entitlements.

The changes could be effected by capacity building of the socially excluded groups to access health and nutrition schemes. Besides, the project worked with the other stakeholders including various village or Gram Panchayat level committees. For example, it was important to work with the VHSNCs to undertake community monitoring using a PLA tools to ensure that service providers were more accountable. The VHSNC members soon realised that it was extremely important for them to meet regularly and act on the issues that affected the community.

The collective effort of the community helped to change the attitudes of the government officials who were initially reluctant, and less sensitive towards the needs of the marginalised. The community members' participation in the monitoring of the different services ensured efficiency in accessing the schemes and entitlements.

The innovations were introduced at different stages of the programme with a bottom-up approach.



There were constant reminders that technology was for the common people and not a privilege for the selected few.

CONCLUSION

The project looked at the issues that affected the local communities of the intervention areas. The strategies adopted ensured that the populace understood their roles and responsibility. Community members soon started participating and monitoring of services related to school education, health, nutrition, wage and employment and were not afraid to hold the service providers accountable in instances of mal practises. It particularly focussed on capacity building of the socially excluded groups to access different public schemes and programmes.

It also empowered various concerned governance institutions with a long-term vision to sustain the outcome of the project. The VHSNC members were capacitated to improve their knowledge and roles including community monitoring using PLA tools. The emphasis clearly was on better service delivery, with accountability and transparency, on education, health, nutrition and employment provisions.

The different approaches and strategies resulted in creating a better organised and collectivised community, equipped with information and action that led to exercise of rights and entitlements, and emergence of a demand-driven, accountable and transparent service delivery. The project contribution towards ensuring transparency and accountability in the system helped in retrieving the community's confidence, voice, and vigilance.

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ABOUT UNNATI

UNNATI - Organisation for Development Education is a voluntary non-profit organisation. Established in 1990, it works primarily in the state of Gujarat and Western region of Rajasthan. It promotes social inclusion and democratic governance so that the vulnerable sections of society are empowered to effectively and decisively participate in mainstream development and decision making processes. UNNATI facilitates promotion of community based practices in the areas of social inclusion, decentralised governance, and disaster risk reduction. It takes up collaborative research, training, develops guidelines and policies in association with government, designs social accountability tools and engages in direct field implementation with Multistakeholder participation. UNNATI derives its inspiration from the struggles of the vulnerable people and strengths of the partners.

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