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# **MANY HANDS MAKE LIGHT WORK**

## **Reflections on the MGNREGA-NRLM Convergence CFT Project**

INAYAT SABHIKHI

*Seeking to transfer, in a sustained and well-designed manner, the knowledge of best practices and theoretical understanding of concepts from CSOs to frontline functionaries, the CFT project promises rich and multi-fold dividends from this investment in human resources, impacting all programmes at the block level*

The Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) is currently implementing an ambitious project, in collaboration with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), to deliver on the employment guarantee put forward in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

The Cluster Facilitation Team Project is intended to address a specific gap—the lack of adequate human resources to administer MGNREGA in backward regions, where it is required the most. MGNREGA is a difficult programme to implement. It has various processes—planning, registering workers' demands, initiating work, measuring the quantum of work, wage payments and community monitoring. It requires a wide range of expertise in administration such as engineering skills, information technology, planning methods and community mobilization. Often, the most backward regions with the weakest state capacity to deliver the employment guarantee programme require the programme the most. MGNREGA has been consistently under-utilized in these regions—much below its potential. Along with the primary concern of a weak state capacity, two other related concerns were also recognized as major gaps—that of the questionable quality of MGNREGA assets and the low awareness of workers' rights in the community.

On the other hand, there is encouraging evidence to show that whenever implemented correctly, MGNREGA has arrested distress migration. The programme has had a great impact on the consumption and the poverty of Scheduled Caste (SC) and the Scheduled Tribe (ST) households in lean agricultural seasons. Direct benefits exceed programme-related transfers and are most pronounced for households that supply casual labour.

To bring these benefits to all regions and to address the three identified gaps of poor state capacity, the questionable quality of assets and the low awareness of workers' rights, a single alternative was thought of—that of channelling the expertise of grass-roots organizations. CSOs that are willing and able to work in backward regions will be nominated by the state governments and will place teams of three people at the Cluster level—hence the term Cluster Facilitation Team (CFT). A Cluster is roughly congruent with one-third of a block. The three main areas in which expertise is expected from this team are social mobilization, agriculture and livelihood planning, and basic civil engineering technical skills. Given the task entrusted to the team, its main activities were to be participatory planning (to involve communities and plan for better assets), building capacities of the state (to strengthen its ability to implement the programme) and working with MGNREGA workers and women's collectives (to improve awareness of workers' rights).

Facilitation, in itself, is not a straightforward concept. It means 'to make easier or less difficult'. And given the multiple stakeholders involved in the implementation of MGNREGA, something that makes things easier for one

*CFTs are expected to keep the interests of workers at the heart of their work and engage with the administration and the gram panchayat in doing so.*

stakeholder could potentially make things more difficult for another stakeholder. For example, processes that are intended to strengthen workers' participation such as dated receipts for work demand applications are unpopular with

the implementing functionaries because this leads to pressure for time-bound performance. It is within this context that CFTs are expected to operate.

Envisioned as a Technical Secretariat to the *gram panchayat*, their role has been specified to help facilitate MGNREGA-related activities of the *gram panchayat* such as registration of demands, planning for works, worksite management and on-time payments. The focus within this cycle is participatory planning. Thus, CFTs are expected to keep the interests of workers at the heart of their work and engage with the administration and the *gram panchayat* in doing so. Their other major role is to build the capacities of all stakeholders involved—block-level functionaries, *gram panchayat* members, MGNREGA workers and women's collectives. By building capacities of MGNREGA workers and women's collectives, the intention is to increase awareness of their rights and entitlements, leading to the strengthening of the community involvement in the programme.

This article will first detail certain features of the collaborative aspect of this project and MoRD's consequent monitoring framework. It will then seek to place the capacity building role of CFTs in the context of developing a human resource base for development programmes as a whole. It will briefly focus on the role of planning for development programmes and, finally, it will deliberate upon a targeted strategy within a universal programme.

## TAKES TWO TO TANGO: LESSONS FROM COLLABORATION

This is the first-ever initiative undertaken by MoRD with respect to MGNREGA, and there are many lessons to be learned from this collaboration. The genesis of this concept lies in the Operational Guidelines 2013, wherein CFTs were thought of as part of the institutional architecture and human resources for the programme. The guidelines for the programme were issued in November 2013, introducing a convergence with the National Rural Livelihood Mission so that women's collectives could also be actively involved in the facilitation role. State governments took varying amounts of time to operationalize the project although, for practical purposes, the project duration was considered April 2014 to March 2017, which makes it, currently, about mid-term of the project.

The CFT project has 77 CSO partners in 207 blocks across 9 states. It is funded entirely by MoRD and is implemented through CSOs working with block-level officials and is overseen by state governments. By design, there are many layers to this collaboration. This article will highlight five such aspects—the role clarity of each stakeholder, distinction between implementation and facilitation, processes developed to achieve outcomes, various capacities within CSOs, and the establishment of a communication channel between CSOs and the Ministry.

First of all, there are multiple stakeholders, all with different and equally important roles. It took time for each actor to understand his or her own role and that of the other stakeholders. For example, whereas a CFT has to facilitate the registration of demands of workers, the task of accepting the demand

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applications and issuing dated receipts still remains primarily that of the Gram Rozgar Sewak. In fact, what has emerged as a by-product of over a year-and-a-half of active CFTs is a clear standard operating procedure for not just CFTs but also for women's collectives and block-level functionaries for each

of the activities involved in implementing MGNREGA.

The second challenge has been the joint responsibility of the administration and the CFTs for the project deliverables. The project has three clear deliverables at the end of a three-year period; 75 days of work for all Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) households in the block, all wage payments to be made within 15 days, and preparation of an integrated watershed plan with a focus on natural resource management, prepared through participatory methods in all *gram panchayats* of the block. Given that CFTs are not directly implementing the project but only facilitating the administration and the *panchayat* in the implementation, it is unfair to hold them solely responsible for the outcome. Thus, the monitoring of the project has now emerged as the responsibility of both, the Programme Officer at the block level as well as the CFTs.

This leads to the third aspect—of understanding the nuances of the process-oriented and the outcome-oriented roles of a CFT. To be able to achieve the outcomes, CFTs have to focus on putting in place complex processes to evaluate and monitor, as compared to straightforward quantitative outcomes. The encouraging anecdotal evidence that is emerging indicates that inroads have been made by CFTs into the process flow of the programme at their level. Informally, one CSO representative



from Maharashtra noted the reason for the low average days of employment per SC/ST household: "We are now watching every muster roll," thus reducing avenues for inflated figures. In several *gram panchayats* in Gumla and Raidih blocks of Jharkhand, the successful participation of women's collectives in the planning process ensures that water conservation works are taken up despite the pressure they face from contractors in the village to include material-heavy infrastructure works. The outcomes may not be immediately apparent but these processes are setting in place a system of external and community participation and monitoring.

The fourth aspect of this collaboration has been the diversity in the capacity of CSO partners. All CSO partners have been nominated on merit by the state governments. Some are established CSOs working in multiple states, thus giving them the advantage of working at scale. Some CSOs work in one district but undertake several government projects simultaneously, thus giving them strong local advantages. There have been cases of CSOs not being entertained by the Programme Officer at all as well as the other extreme of CSOs being handed over entire *gram panchayats* for implementation without any supervision by the Programme Officer. Neither of these scenarios is desirable for the efficient implementation of the programme, the responsibility for which ultimately rests with the *gram panchayat* and the administrative structure. Understanding the varying capacities of CSOs, arriving upon standards expected from them and enumerating certain non-negotiable activities has taken time.

Building upon this, state governments have begun to facilitate the capacity building of

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CSOs by arranging exposure visits and cross-learning among CSOs. This was first done in Maharashtra, where Junior Engineers of the block and the CFT technical personnel were sent on a joint exposure visit to the Samaj Pragati Sahyog in

Madhya Pradesh. Jharkhand too organized exposure visits for Block Development Officers of all the CFT blocks, to better-performing CFT blocks.

The fifth aspect of this has been the establishment of an information and communication channel between CSOs and the Ministry. The multiplicity of such platforms can only help the programme. In a recently concluded national review of the project, the Ministry communicated about the latest resources and programmes at the central level to the CSOs. This was very helpful for them. Congruently, CSOs bring ground-level issues related to the implementation of policies to the attention of the Ministry, providing a very useful input for the latter.

These aspects are to be kept in mind when the Ministry undertakes its primary role in this project, that of monitoring it effectively. The Ministry has a monitoring framework that aims to capture the role of multiple stakeholders, gives due weightage to processes as well as outcomes, and enforces non-negotiable expectations of CFTs. This involves a combination of a quantitative review (using the information available on NREGASoft), a qualitative review (through field visits), responsiveness to block-level issues and the periodic standardization of the learning applicable to all CFTs. Each one of the 207 blocks has an Annual Action Plan, to assess the existing lacunae in the implementation, and a detailed plan of CFTs to address these lacunae.

Progress on achievement against the deliverables for each block is monitored along with comparative analyses with state and national averages on the same parameters. MoRD reviews are held with CSOs as well as the concerned state MGNREGA Commissioners, making it clear that the task of implementing MGNREGA to its full potential is not outsourced to CSOs but is still very much the responsibility of the administrative structure.

### Capacity Building: Creating a National Resource

By examining a CFT's role as a builder of capabilities of stakeholders of MGNREGA, one can make a wider comment on the engagement of CSOs with the government for development programmes as a whole. There are two parts to building capabilities: that of the administration and that of the communities. CFTs have an important role to play in both.

The administration at the block level will typically consist of a Programme Officer, in charge of the overall running of MGNREGA, a Junior Engineer assisted by Technical Assistants and a Gram Rozgar Sahayak for every *gram panchayat*. There are wide inter-state variations in staff structure and strength. These officials may be permanent employees of the government or contractual personnel, both of which create their own dynamics. They may be dedicated staff for MGNREGA or may double up for other programmes as well. For the purpose of analysis, they are colloquially referred to as 'frontline functionaries'.

Several independent evaluations on MGNREGA have noted the deficiency in the capacities

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of frontline functionaries as a major gap. This operates at two levels: either the functionaries are unaware or uninterested, or are unable and untrained to carry out their responsibilities. Often overlooked is the need for investment in human resources, to administer and implement development programmes commensurate to the financial resources vested in them.

This is where a CFT has a crucial role to play—by setting a precedent in the successful building of capabilities of functionaries. Whereas training material is regularly prepared and disseminated to the blocks by the Ministry, this is the first time that an initiative has been taken to provide a block with a resource for building capacities of functionaries, with sustained support over a three-year period. It is not just a one-off, book-based training, but a consistent learning-by-doing that CFTs are expected to provide.

This is, in a sense, playing to each other's strengths and tapping into the natural symbiosis in the capacity building role of CFTs for the functionaries. Where the government has an advantage of scale, that is, mandated staff strength with fixed responsibilities, it has the disadvantage of, at times, untrained and uninterested personnel. On the other hand, CSOs have the advantage of a direct connection with the communities and expertise in concepts related to natural resource management, livelihoods, watershed, etc., essential for the development of a region. Their understanding of these concepts has emerged from decades of testing these through trial and error in their geographical areas and contexts. The flip side is the disadvantage of being localized; that is, being able to create islands of excellence but not being able to scale up due to a lack of

human and financial resources or geographic and cultural affinity. Herein lies the value of the CFT project: whereby the technical expertise of CSOs is sought to be imbibed by government functionaries, to enable them to deliver high quality work on a larger scale than can be achieved by CSOs working independently.

Thus, this arrangement works to the advantage of both.

This model of engagement is relevant not just to the functionaries of MGNREGA but for all development programmes. The CFT project is an arrangement that seeks to transfer the knowledge of best practices and theoretical understanding of concepts from CSOs to frontline functionaries, in a sustained and well-designed manner. The dividend from this investment in human resources will be multi-fold and will impact all the programmes at the block level.

Apart from strengthening the capacity of frontline functionaries, CFTs are intended to strengthen the capacities of *gram panchayats*, MGNREGA workers and women's collectives. This is, in essence, the sunset clause of the project. If communities and community representatives are suitably aware of the benefits and processes within the programme, they will themselves be able to claim their entitlements and act as watchdogs in the implementation of the programme.

Over the past decade, two factors have emerged with respect to MNREGA workers: one, awareness about wage rates and basic entitlements has actually decreased in many cases and two, back-end processes change frequently and become steadily more complicated, thus, hampering people's ability to peg accountability on local functionaries.

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The decrease in awareness about entitlements can be attributed to their non-enforcement. If workers are consistently paid less than the stipulated MGNREGA wage rate, knowing the actual wage rate may not be that important to workers. If worksite facilities are largely absent, the expectations of

entitlements such as crèches, drinking water and shade will also naturally decrease. In this respect, CFTs have their work cut out for them. Awareness generation is not merely printing of a flex or engagement in a single meeting; it is the constant reiteration of the lack of these requisites with the workers until they are not only aware of the entitlements but suitably empowered to claim these.

With respect to the frequently changing processes of MGNREGA, it becomes important to identify and groom people from the community, who can understand these processes for themselves, without dependence on a third party. Asymmetry of information and deliberate complication of procedures by the administration have to be countered by an empowered and informed community cadre. The task of a CFT is not to just simply communicate current processes to workers but to communicate to them how they can find out about these processes and use them. The knowledge of the sources of information on where a worker's wage is stuck is more important than providing the information itself. Thus, a CFT is expected to constantly communicate what workers can expect from a programme and the mechanisms of redressal if it falls short.

The Ministry guidelines for expanding the project are along these lines. In the latest conceptualization of the project, CFT- 2, there will be only one person placed by a CSO per



*gram panchayat*, who will then identify at least two people from the community. These people will be mentored on how to access MGNREGA entitlements and, thus, move towards building a community cadre.

Through these dual roles of a CFT in MGNREGA, one can comment on the institutional role of the CSO engagement with the government as a whole. Given the sheer scale of MGNREGA and its relevance to every aspect of the development discourse in the country, whether it is rights-based framework, participatory planning, natural resource management, financial inclusion, strengthening women's collectives, supporting agriculture and allied activities, transparency and accountability or social audits, a successful collaboration here will show the way for other development programmes. Thus, a continuous and effective communication channel with CSOs will only stand to benefit the government in receiving feedback from the ground and help it to act on relevant suggestions. The CFT project is a step towards doing this.

### PLANNING AS AN ENTRY POINT

One of the key roles of a CFT is to facilitate participatory planning. The concept of participatory planning is now part of the dominant strategies for both the MoRD and the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR). Last year, MoRD launched the Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise (IPPE) in 2,500 backward blocks of the country. Much along the lines of the CFT project, here also participatory methods were required to be used, to arrive at a plan for MGNREGA works for 2015–16. This year, MoRD has taken this a step forward as a convergent planning exercise not just for MGNREGA but all rural development

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programmes, including pensions, housing, and the skills and livelihoods planning of self-help groups. Concurrently, MoPR has initiated a process of preparation of a Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) on the basis of which it will spend the additional resources received as part of the 14th Finance Commission recommendations.

The benefits of participatory planning have been well documented. Although this is a mandated activity as per MGNREGA, that is, the *gram sabha* is to collectively plan for works and determine priorities, in actuality the decision-making is done behind closed doors. In this context, the role of the CFTs attains greater importance, given that participatory planning is often used as the entry point by them. Tasking the CFTs with preparing plans is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it gives them some locus standi in the *gram panchayat* to interact directly with the community and initiate a supposedly non-controversial activity; on the other hand, this makes them the face of the plan. Expectations rise and the CFT, justifiably or unjustifiably, is held responsible for the programme, in the eyes of the community.

So, planning by the CFTs was, in many cases, used as an entry point into the entire cycle of MGNREGA and, indeed, to rural development. Presumably if people were to participate in planning for the works, they would be more interested in the outcomes and would be more likely to participate in the works. They would also, then, become aware of the other works and their projected expenditure in the *panchayat*, and thus, begin to act as watchdogs for all development works. To deliver on the plans, it is paramount that these are honoured and works initiated. This would then trigger

the CFT's follow-up on the entire process from tracking the works being initiated, their eventual measurement and payment to workers.

When the CFTs prepared the first round of plans, they received the feedback that their plans were not accepted by the block administration and if the plans were accepted, these were not being sanctioned as per the priority decided upon in the *gram sabha*. Thus, it revealed that plans prepared through transparent methods and community participation, had difficulty in passing through the administrative structure. Consequently, this brought to light the implicit targets for the types of works set by the administration or the MLAs that were forced to become explicit within the participatory planning framework.

In this discourse, CFTs have emerged as an important resource to both guide the planning process in their own blocks and be available to state governments as trainers for the functionaries in other blocks as well. As the Ministry goes into the second year of IPPE, the expertise of CFTs is being sought as state and block resource persons, to bring in additional quality to this exercise.

#### **PARTICULAR STRATEGY WITHIN A UNIVERSAL PROGRAMME**

A legitimate concern of the CFT project has been the targeted strategy approach. MGNREGA, at the end of the day, is a universal programme, backed by legislation and is applicable all over the country. It has

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brought with it a paradigm shift to a rights-based framework in the implementation of other legislations as well such as the Right to Education and the National Food Security Act.

It is the universal nature of these programmes that ensures their scale and importance.

They lay the ground for a wide and robust development framework, within which certain aspects and regions can be given more focus. There is emerging evidence that even in states and districts thought of as conventionally developed, there are large inter-block inequalities and regional variations. It is in this context of additional support to backward regions that CFTs operate.

State governments selected 207 blocks for this project, based on the criteria suggested by MoRD: poor human development indicators, tribal areas, high percentage of population belonging to the Scheduled Castes, poor connectivity, and an active presence of civil society or community based organizations. A year-and-a-half into the project, the figures indicate that CFTs have worked to at least bring these backward blocks at par with the district and state averages of the region. Looking at the baseline of 2013–14, the average on key parameters in these 207 blocks was considerably lower than the national average; 4 days less for average days to a Scheduled Caste household, 5 days less for a Scheduled Tribe household and 9 percentage points lower for wages paid on time. However, as of October 2015, these blocks are more or less in sync with the national average (Table 1).

**Table 1: Key Parameters at a Glance (Figures for 2015, as of October 2015)**

	2015-16		2013-14	
	CFT 207 Blocks	National 6,849 Blocks	CFT 207 Blocks	National 6,849 Blocks
Average days SC HH	30	31	41	45
Average days ST HH	31	31	44	49
% wages paid on time	52%	48%	41%	50%

Source: www.nrega.nic.in

However, this extra support is of value only if the basics are in place and enforced all over the country. Unless MGNREGA operates as an employment guarantee in all blocks, this fine-tuning and additional support will be of little use. This needs to be kept in mind when undertaking targeted strategies. Strategies such as the CFT Project need to be time-bound and evaluated for their merit and consequently either discarded, or their learnings and strategies adopted universally.

## CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to convey the challenges of a collaborative approach between the CSOs and the government. This is to some extent captured in the monitoring framework of the CFT Project. Given the multiple stakeholders involved, the focus of the project is on processes rather than outcomes and the varying capacities of the CSO partners. It then argues for the development of capabilities of frontline functionaries, *gram*

*panchayats*, MGNREGA workers and women's collectives to be seen in the larger context of developing a human resource base for the nation as a whole. This includes investment in functionaries as a human resource commensurate with the financial investment in development programmes. It also focuses on institutionalizing the engagement with CSOs and the advantages of the government collaborating with CSOs. The development of a community cadre can be seen as the ultimate metric upon which to assess the achievement of the CFTs. Planning as an entry point into development was looked at, as well as the value of a particular strategy within a universal programme.

There is no doubt that the CFT project has the potential to be transformative for MGNREGA. It has already revealed what a successful collaboration of CSOs and the government can achieve and has shown the contribution this can make in delivering an employment guarantee for those who need it the most.



# CFTs in Maharashtra

ASHWINI KULKARNI, PRAGATI ABHIYAN

*Required to be run by the government and be embedded in the local community, Cluster Facilitation Teams need to provide the necessary impetus to generate demand, to create the right type of infrastructure for the people and the area, and to strengthen gram panchayats to take decisions for their communities*

“Maharashtra has 40 per cent of the country’s large dams and, yet, 82 per cent of the area of the state is rain-fed. We have moved away from our vision of watershed and conservation...We did not think about hydrology, geology and topography of the region before pushing large dams everywhere. But this has to change.” These are not the words of an activist or a water researcher. This was said by Maharashtra’s Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, during the monsoon Assembly session of Maharashtra on 21 July 2015.

MGNREGA assumes significance in this context in a state where 79 per cent of the farmers have less than 2 ha of land and this constitutes 45 per cent of the total cultivable area. (Agri Census 2011).

Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) data show that there are 35.26 per cent of landless households in the state. Almost 40 per cent of those that do have land do not have any kind of irrigation facility. Maharashtra has the lowest casual wages at Rs117.36; MGNREGA wages are Rs181.00 (The Rural Wage Boom, Livemint). If this is the scenario in all of Maharashtra, one can understand that the figures for the Cluster Facilitation Team (CFT) blocks will be all the more dismal because the criterion for choosing these blocks ‘backwardness’.

CFTs are being formed in 12 blocks across 8 districts in Maharashtra. The purpose of the teams is to provide support to cutting-edge functionaries.

At the outset, we, in Maharashtra, decided to come together as a Civil Society Organization (CSO) and form a group of co-learners. This has been feasible because we are a small group of 10 CSOs. We met four times in one year. We realized that most of the CSOs were well-versed in watershed and natural resource management but were not up-to-date with the aspects of MGNREGA. Our first meeting focused on that. We learned about the latest implementation mechanisms of MGNREGA in Maharashtra. We shared soft copies of Information Education Communication (IEC) material so that all of us are able to use these in the awareness campaigns.

In subsequent meetings, problems related to the field began to crop up. We were then able to understand these problems better and discuss strategies to resolve them. When there were severe problems such as non-acceptance of demands by government functionaries, we felt dejected; however, we also realized that many other blocks faced similar problems, and it became clear that this was more of a systemic problem and was not confined to any particular area.

We wrote a joint letter to the Commissioner, to address the problems faced by CSOs. The Commissioner's office has been forthcoming and we have had a few video conferences and three state-wide meetings.

After our meeting in January, there was gloom among CSOs because they thought that nothing was happening. There was no

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response to the demands we had put forward or to the works being suggested.

Subsequently, an initiative was taken by the National Consortium on MGNREGA and a state-wide meeting was organized on 27th February, 2015, which was attended by the Rural Development Department (RDD) Secretary and the NREGA Commissioner as well as the concerned officials and CSO representatives. This gave the necessary clarity of roles to the government officials at district and block levels as well as CSOs. This has given a fillip to the programme and the indicators have picked up since then.

The Revised Guidelines of MGNREGA mention the idea of a CFT for the first time. In a situation where the basic objectives of MGNREGA, namely, employment generation, productive durable assets and empowerment of *gram panchayats*, are not up to the desired levels, it becomes necessary to explore new ways of implementation. This means not only tweaking the present delivery mechanisms but also looking for more meaningful ways of changing the direction of the implementation. So far, implementation meant that the government was to deliver and the villagers were to receive, especially as MGNREGA is a demand-based programme.

The idea of involving local community volunteers to implement schemes effectively and to make the implementation mechanism more rooted is not novel to CSOs. Working in rural areas, and especially working on natural resource management programmes, CSOs have realized the necessity and significance of the participation of the local community volunteers in achieving objectives. However, this has not yet been integrated into the government's systems of implementation.

During our meetings, we realized that most of the CSOs, now involved as CFTs, have had a long and steady experience of working in watershed-based projects, and not merely as 'mobilizers' for MGNREGA or as agencies that put forward the 'grievances' of MGNREGA workers.

There were apprehensions that CFTs may be restricted to the role of being agencies for providing watershed-based technical plans and estimates. The arrangement would fit into the district-level administration's view of CSOs as agencies to 'outsource' watershed plans to, and not be seen as 'knowledge partners'.

The concept of a CFT demands that we be knowledge partners, facilitating the workers to get their entitlements, supporting them with capacity building and helping the local administration to prepare plans for creating durable and useful assets for marginalized, rain-fed farmers.

Because this was a pilot, and we had been chosen to implement the pilot, it placed an additional responsibility on each one of us. We needed to design each step thoughtfully and keep the aspect of replication, scalability and sustainability for each activity in mind when working with the government. CSOs work simultaneously with the *gram panchayat* Secretary and the Rural Development

*The concept of a CFT demands that we be knowledge partners, facilitating the workers to get their entitlements, supporting them with capacity building and helping the local administration to prepare plans for creating durable and useful assets for marginalized, rain-fed farmers*

Department (RDD) Secretary of the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD). This unique experience was meant to be captured by MoRD and utilized to make schemes work to full potential.

Clarity of roles was key to this pilot. Coordination among actors would ensure its success. The larger objective, however, was not just to make the pilot 'project' successful but to make the concept of the CFT into a

model that can be replicated. So, CSOs need to carry the responsibility of articulating the experiences of CFTs and put these together to produce a coherent image of a CFT.

CFTs need to be run by the government and be embedded in the local community. They need to provide the necessary impetus to generate demand, to create the right type of infrastructure for the people and for the area, and to strengthen *gram panchayats* to take decisions for their communities. This is possible if the members of the CFT are from within the local community and they get timely, appropriate and adequate training in the management of the programme and also in designing appropriate works for the area. There is danger, otherwise, of this becoming just another project for CSOs, rather than a new beginning with a different approach for the delivery of MGNREGA.



# The Impact of the MGNREGA–CFT Programme: Steps towards Transformation

DILIP KUMAR MISHRA

*Campaigning for the Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise and initiating village-level meetings, the Sarguja Gramin Vikas Sansthan, through MGNREGS and a series of effective interventions, has been successful in transforming barren, eroded lands to flourishing fields yielding different crops and fruit all year round*

'Gully plug' is a small structure in a watershed. When, however, made in hundreds in a series, these gully-plugs aptly illustrate two proverbs in Hindi: *Dekhan ko chhoto lage par ghaav karat gambhir* (It looks tiny but is capable of inflicting deep wounds) and *Jo kaam sui kar sakti hai vah talwaar nahi kar sakti* (A needle can do things that a sword cannot). Most certainly, one cannot understand the value of a 'gully plug' without visiting the field sites. The impact of these small, low-budget watershed structures prompts one to take a closer look.

In the foothills of Koti village (the area falls under the Tamor Pingla Forest Reserve), there is a 16 ha (40 acres) plot of land, which has been eroding incessantly over the years. The erosion has been so serious that it has led to the formation of big gullies in the area. The soil from these gullies and nearby regions flowed from these gullies into Banki river. The situation was so bad that 40 acres of land in the region saw no agricultural activity and the land lay barren. The villagers, understandably, were distressed and saw no way out of this problem, which has been a major cause of concern for many years.

In 2014, the Department of Rural Development, along with a team from Sarguja Gramin Vikas Sansthan (SGVS), began a campaign for Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise (IPPE) and initiated village-level meetings. In these meetings, the villagers brought up the issue of soil erosion and asked for it to be looked at as a priority. They requested the MGNREGA planning team to visit the site, investigate and provide technical guidance to find a solution to the problem.

The team planned a series of interventions in the form of gully plugs, field-bunding, land-levelling and plantation. Seeing the inclination of the villagers to solve the problem, the planning team, the Engineer and the Programme Officer made estimates and sent them for sanction to the district administration. The plans were cleared without delay, and the administration sanctioned the estimates for constructing 18 gully plugs and land-levelling 30 acres of land. The Gramin Rozgar Sewak (GRS) informed the villagers about the sanction, and the villagers took charge of the work in a united manner. Almost 200 to 250 labourers worked for 25 days to complete the work.

The result of the intervention was that soil erosion was checked and the land was almost levelled, which led to the successful rejuvenation of the entire area. The cost of one gully plug is around Rs 3,000 to 5000, and it harvests around 500 to 1,000 litres or even more, of rain water. The major success of this intervention is that not only are the farmers cultivating 25 acres of land for the first time but there is also an increase in the total cultivable land of the village. Converting unused, barren land into cultivable land is one of the positive interventions of MGNREGA.

## BACKGROUND

SGVS is a grass-roots organization based on Gandhian thought and principles, and was founded in 1991 by Shri Pratap Narayan Singh, alias Pratap Bhai. He was a colleague of the Late Shri Prem Bhai of Banwasi Seva Ashram Govindpur, Sonebhadra district in Uttar Pradesh, India. Pratap Bhai has a Diploma in Civil Engineering and is a Science Graduate (BSc) in Mathematics. He worked at the Banwasi Sewa Ashram, from 1976 to 1989.

*The result of the intervention was that soil erosion was checked and the land was almost levelled, which led to the successful rejuvenation of the entire area*

The problems of hunger, poverty, drought and malnutrition among the primitive tribes of the area drew the attention of Pratap Bhai towards Sarguja district. In 1989, Pratap Bhai came to Sarguja and established SGVS in the tribal village Rajkheta in Wadrafnagar

block, surrounded by dense forests. Pratap Bhai worked with the organization from 1989 to the beginning of 2009.

Pratap Bhai has been hailed by many as the 'Waterman of Chhattisgarh' and SGVS was recommended for the 'National Water Award' by the District Collector of Sarguja in 2014. SGVS has set up three model watershed-based projects in its 19 years of engagement, with the financial support of the Canadian High Commission, Action for Food Production (AFPRO), New Delhi, and Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology (CAPART), New Delhi.

## THE CLUSTER FACILITATION TEAM PROJECT

The Cluster Facilitation Team (CFT) Project of SGVS has been operating in 87 *panchayats* (119 revenue villages with 26,802 registered MGNREGS job cards) in Wadrafnagar block, Balrampur district, Chhattisgarh, since August 2014. The CFT Project was launched by the Ministry of Rural Development, (MoRD) as a 'pilot', to draw lessons on how to fill the gaps within MGNREGS.

When SGVS started working through MGNREGS in the area, it faced many challenges, including the lack of job opportunities as per the needs and free-time of job seekers, the timely payment of wages, the low priority accorded to individual works, the lack of priority works for the management of natural resources, etc.

The area also had challenges: the management of rainwater (the average annual rainfall of the area is about 1,200 mm), the lack of interventions for making agriculture sustainable and profitable, of convergence programmes, of awareness about MGNREGS among the rural communities, etc.

MGNREGS, meanwhile, faced an unpredictable future during the financial year 2014–15, which led to massive disappointment in the community and the bureaucracy. The CFT Programme was launched amidst a host of problems and challenges but SGVS took this as an opportunity and worked for the betterment of its clients.

### **INTENSIVE PARTICIPATORY PLANNING EXERCISE**

SGVS believes in making the rural poor capable through the management of rainwater. The block has an average rainfall of 1,200 mm, which needs to be stored and harvested. The earlier trend of selection and sanction of MGNREGS works did not reflect this need of the people. Rainwater harvesting, irrigation and agricultural development-related works were taken up by the department but without taking into account the needs of the people in a manner that would help them. The IPPE-I concept of MoRD gave hope to the clients as well as the CSOs-CFTs. It presented, to the villagers, an opportunity to make their 'Village Development Plan' as per their needs.

The organization ran IPPE in a campaign mode through organizing public meetings at various levels, launching massive awareness-generation activities, providing intensive

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training to stakeholders, showing movies, displaying posters and pamphlets, introducing wall-writing, etc. The organization trained three persons from each *panchayat*, to ensure awareness about how to prepare Village Development Plans. These trained persons created a positive environment for the planning exercise in villages; people came out of their homes for the purpose and took part in *gram sabha* meetings actively.

Villagers demanded the agricultural asset-building related works they needed in the *gram sabha* meetings. A trained team of barefoot engineers made a visit to the proposed sites, took measurements and noted other necessary details for estimate preparation. The planning team identified the plot numbers of each proposed work, with the active participation of the community. It became a plot-to-plot planning exercise, ensuring transparency in the work.

SGVS planned to converge various schemes and departments such as the Indira Awas Yojana (IAY), NRLM, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDUGKY), forestry, Agriculture-KVK (Krishi Vigyan Kendra), fisheries, etc. Accordingly, the community became sensitized and placed their demands in the *gram sabha*.

The above figures show people's needs, listed through the community-driven planning process. The planning process comprises the total agricultural development of a family, with a chain of activities such as small farm pond construction (MGNREGS), horticultural plantation on the bunds of the pond and in a separate land (convergence with the



**Table 1: Types of Work Demanded by the Community**

Type of Agricultural and Irrigation Works Demanded by the Community	No. of Works	Total Amount (Rs in Lakhs)	Ratio of Nature of Works	Ratio of Amount
Pond, earthen dam, small farm pond (5% model), farm bunding, land levelling, stop dam, gully plugging, boulder checks, gabion structure, staggered contour trenches, contour trenches, continuous contour trenches, road-side plantation, irrigation canals, renovation of rainwater harvesting structures, deepening of structures, social forestry, individual forestation, horticultural plantation in individual lands, nadep tank, goat-shed, cow-shed, pig-shed, poultry- shed, etc.	3,538	3130.24	74.57%	74%
Type of Non-agriculture Related Works Demanded by the Community	No. of Works	Total Amount (Rs in Lakhs)	Ratio of Nature of Works	Ratio of Amount
Toilet construction, aanganwadi building, panchayat bhawan, Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendra building, PDS building, mitti-muroom road construction, culvert construction, etc.	1,206	1100.37	25.42%	26%

Horticulture department), paddy, wheat, vegetables, millets, etc., the cultivation around the pond through SRI (convergence with the Agriculture Department), for the promotion of organic farming, support to the farmers in animal shed and nadep tank construction, fish farming in the constructed farm pond (convergence of the Fisheries Department). The planning process was meant to enhance the family income through sustainable agricultural development.

#### **STRATEGY OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CFT PROJECT**

The strategy for implementation of the CFT Project was very clearly determined by SGVS.

Massive awareness was generated among the rural communities, and frequent meetings and interactions were organized with the labourers, ensuring people's participation in the planning and execution. The process ensured capacity building of the stakeholders, easy access of MGNREGS-related information to the villagers and the smooth measurement, valuation and the payment process. This helped in increasing individual assets related to irrigation and agriculture, identifying major causes that defame MGNREGS and correcting them, encouraging digital monitoring practices, etc. Documentation of MGNREGS and the dissemination of best practices, a regular review of the progress, etc., were the prime strategies of the organization.

## FACILITATION IN EXECUTION OF THE MGNREGA

SGVS, with the help of the block administration and the existing manpower of MGNREGS, made the Village Development Plan based on the 'watershed' (ridge-to-valley approach of watershed) for 119 villages of 87 *panchayats* of Wadrafnagar block. According to the concept of watershed, SGVS, with the help of the block administration, started working at the ridge area of each village. The staggered contour trench, contour pal, continuous contour trenches, boulder check, gully plugging, gabion structure, farm bunding, plantation and land-levelling activities were majorly taken under the ridge area treatment. The implementation of the proposed activities by the *gram sabha* drew the attention and interest

*During the entire process, innovations were introduced to ease procedures and systems in MGNREGA*

of the people in MGNREGA. As MGNREGA began working on the ground, the villagers gave their active support and became involved in its implementation. The following Table shows the people's involvement in MGNREGA.

## INNOVATION IN MGNREGA

During the entire process, innovations were introduced to ease procedures and systems in MGNREGA. The first initiative was with the Village Development Plan, which was based on the ridge-to-valley approach of watershed and the convergence of the departmental schemes. More than 70 per cent of the work was in irrigation agriculture, and 80 per cent of the work planned was labour-oriented. The people participated in the planning and were involved in the execution. The needs of the

**Table 2: Works Sanctioned under MGNREGA**

No.	Type of Work Sanctioned under MGNREGA	No. of Works	Sanctioned Amount (Rs in Lakhs)	No. of Works Completed
1.	Boulder check construction	725	282.251	670
2.	Contour trench construction	25 (ha)	25.028	18
3.	Well construction	16	31.287	02
4.	Farm bunding	1,078(acres)	354.543	912
5.	Small farm pond construction	1,105	1087.482	732
6.	Land-levelling of FRA beneficiaries	29	11.550	23
7.	Pond construction	60	457.670	27
8.	Gabion construction	73	59.550	62
9.	Gully plug construction	145	73.613	145
10.	Plantation	205	504.227	205
11.	Individual toilet construction	816	97.922	585
12.	Earthen dam construction	10	136.879	02
13.	Pond deepening work	2	6.187	02
	<b>Total</b>	<b>4,289</b>	<b>3128.189</b>	<b>3,385</b>

villagers were assessed through discussions with labour groups and SHGs.

Site verification was made mandatory during estimate preparation, and the estimates were also made realistic and simple. Valuation and payments were made easier, and wage payments were done on a per day basis at the *panchayat* level through the Aadhar-enabled payments system and biometric bank accounts of the labourers.

Training was imparted to the CRPs, barefoot engineers, mates, other youths, active women and the *panchayat* on use of smart phones and operation of the MGNREGS website so that they could access information, as and when required. A Digital Monitoring System was created, using WhatsApp and Telegram mobile applications for easier, smooth and prompt monitoring. All stakeholders were added to the Cluster-level and block-level groups on the WhatsApp and Telegram apps.

Another major intervention was the linking of beneficiaries to a chain of activities related to MGNREGA and Convergence. The SRI intervention was done at a massive level, especially with the beneficiaries of the small-farm pond construction.

Tracking of labour budgets and person-days was done village-wise at the end of the month, as was the employment audit of each village. Tracking the muster roll, valuation, MIS entry, FTO processing and wage employment was done daily.

**Table 3: Person-days Achievement Status**

Approved Person-days Target and Achievement Status (Month-wise)			
November 2015		December 2015	January 2016
Target	Achievement	Target	Target
4,97,830	6,21,927	6,00,406	7,67,933

## ACHIEVEMENTS/OUTCOMES OF MGNREGA

Although a detailed situational analysis is required to quote the exact outcomes, some achievements and outcomes so far have been:

1. Increase in the number of families registered under MGNREGA
2. Increase in work demand
3. Increase in individual irrigation and agricultural assets of rural farmers
4. Improvement in the water table
5. Increase in irrigated land area
6. Increase in agricultural area due to treatment works
7. Assured continuous employment in each village
8. No migration due to lack of employment
9. Increase in gross family income
10. Satisfactory approved person-days achievement (Table 3)
11. Satisfactory employment to all categories of registered households (Table 4)
12. About 12,302 women were employed under MGNREGS; they generated 2,49,185 person-days.

## CASE STUDY: TRILOKI CHANGES HIS FORTUNES

Triloki Patel is a resident of Maheva village, Balrampur district, in Chhattisgarh. He belongs to a backward class and his family has been living in the village for the past 80 years.

**Table 4: Employment to All Categories of Registered Households**

Households registered under MGNREGS				Households employed till November 2015							Households completed 100 days of Employment			
SC	ST	Oth	Total	SC	%	ST	%	Oth	%	Total	SC	ST	Oth	Total
2,087	15,101	9,841	27,029	1,203	58	9,311	62	5,098	52	15,612	68	780	285	1,133

Triloki is a humble man and is open to doing something new. Currently, Triloki's family has seven members, including two sons and three daughters. His elder daughter got married two years ago and the rest of his children are studying. Triloki is supporting his second daughter to do a course in BBA, she is now in the third semester of the last year of the course.

His passion for his children's studies and future, in spite of his bare minimum resources and very marginal income from agriculture, is commendable. Triloki, himself, is a very hardworking and diligent person. On the 1.98 ha of ancestral land that he owns, he mainly produces rice and cultivates wheat in the part of the land that is nearer the water channel (*nala*). He also cultivates maize on his homestead land.

He has so far been dependent on rain for the irrigation of his land. Agriculture was his only source of income. When asked what attempts he had made to make it systematic and more resourceful, he informed us that he had had put in an application for a well on his land and but he had not yet been successful in getting it sanctioned.

"My family is dependent upon me and my children are still studying; I, therefore, am in constant tension. I decided to invest my savings in digging a tube-well, which cost me Rs 70,000. After digging for 375 feet, I was

totally disillusioned when I came to know that there was no water underneath and I was told to try somewhere else. I did not have the resources to try again. I was very disturbed. It was close to my elder daughter's wedding. If it rained well, I would get an income of Rs 50-60,000 from the paddy cultivation, otherwise, I would face huge losses, because the maize and the wheat production were very limited."

The extreme circumstances led him to look for wages in MGNREGA. He had heard about MGNREGA and the IPPE scheme through a campaign by SGVS, and became motivated. He says, "I heard slogans during the campaign: *Gram sabha mein aana hai, apna kaam batana hai, apna budget banana hai* (Come to the gram sabha, tell your plan, make your own budget) and *Khet ka pani khet mein, gaon ka pani gaon mein* (The field water remains in the field and the village water remains in the village). I went to the *gram sabha* meeting, where I heard about the scheme in detail and understood how I could be helped. I learned that vulnerable and needy families were to bring their plans of development to the next *gram sabha* meeting, in which these would be prioritized and approved. I decided to present my problem at the next *gram sabha* meeting and hoped for a solution."

"I also presented to the *gram sabha* a plan for a farm pond, a nadep tank, an animal-shed and a fruit tree plantation. All got approved. A few months later, Gram Rojgar Sewak (GRS)

told me that the farm pond that I had asked for had been sanctioned. The sanction was for a 25 x 25 x 3 ft farm pond at an estimated cost of Rs 2.07 lakhs. After the sanction, the work on my farm pond started immediately. My wife and I worked along with the other labourers for eight weeks and completed the work on 8th July 2015 at a cost of Rs 1.82 lakhs."

He said that he was elated when he got the wages for his work within 15 days of completion of the first week of work. "I thought it was by chance that I have received the money on time, but it was not so. The system is so strong that all the labourers were paid within 15 days. My wife and I earned Rs 15,000 for labour work."

He says further, "Earlier MGNREGA was known for late payments; however, now with timely payments, labourers have become hopeful and are more enthusiastic to work under MGNREGA."

Triloki's farm pond is now ready as per the estimated sanctions and it is flush with rain water. He thinks he should have made a bigger farm pond. He knows that with his profits from agriculture, he will increase the size of his farm pond.

Under convergence with MGNREGA, the Agriculture department organized training on the SRI technique, in which Triloki participated actively. He also learned about organic farming

and prepared *jivamrit* and *handikhad*. Before the arrival of the monsoon, Triloki had already selected the land for SRI, prepared it, prepared the bed for the nursery, selected the seeds, and treated the seed using the organic technique.

Once the monsoon arrived, Triloki prepared the nursery with the treated hybrid seed, which was ready in 19–21 days. During the plantation time, however, the rains failed; however, Triloki was relaxed because he had adequate water to irrigate his crop from his newly-made farm pond. At the time of weeding, SGVS provided him with a weeder machine as well as instructions on how to use it. After seeing the impact of SRI, he says he is going to cultivate SRI paddy in more land the following year.

Triloki approached the Horticulture department, to plant fruit trees on his land. He got free saplings of mango, lemon, guava and other fruit trees. He planted the mango trees on the bund of his farm pond and the rest of the saplings in his homestead land. He planted the tree on the farm bund so that the trees would prevent the soil from erosion and because the trees would be watered by the seepage from the pond, which would help them to grow. He has also sown sesame seeds and planted grass on the farm bund at the beginning of the monsoon to prevent it from eroding. He is a happy man now. Because of his farm pond, he has a good yield and also has fruit trees for extra income.



# NREGA: From Government Programme to People's Programme

DEBANJAN GHATAK

*Bringing alive the spirit of MGNREGA as being a legislative guarantee that the citizens have from the government, a collective effort is being made in Gumla to change it from a programme doled out by the government to one that is owned and run predominantly and successfully by the women in villages*

In Gumla district, and possibly in all of Jharkhand, the most common slogan used by the community about the National Rural Employment Generation Act is 'NREGA marega', meaning that anyone who works with NREGA is doomed. However, the walls of the district administration office, the block campus or the *panchayat* building have a different message painted on them, "NREGA *mein avaa, kaam paava* (Join NREGA and get work)"; "*Har haath ko kaam miley, kaam ka pura daam miley* (Every hand will get work and every worker will get payment)."

The administration, the bureaucrats and the NREGA functionaries say that there is no need for employment and that the people are no longer interested in NREGA. The community and the labourers believe the scheme failed because of untimely payments, lack of clarity, influence of the contractors and the middlemen, and the inactive and corrupt *panchayats*. The elected representatives of the *panchayat* have a different perspective. They say that they are powerless. They want to implement NREGA but are impeded by frontline functionaries, who are dishonest and not at all supportive.

With time, the community became so frustrated that they avoided any discussions on NREGA. Women Community Based Organizations (CBOs) would not discuss NREGA as they considered it beyond their scope.

In 2006–07, the PRADAN team in Gumla was involved in demonstrating how NREGA (or Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act—MGNREGA—as it is called now) funds could be utilized in a more productive way. The main activity introduced with 196 families on 110 acres of land was mango plantation. The objectives of this were to establish mango plantation as an activity under MGNREGA and to provide livelihood options for poor families.

In this programme, PRADAN gave technical support to establish the mango plantation prototype to the government and to the beneficiaries. Earlier, PRADAN was mainly helping execute mango plantation under MGNREGA; there was however, no recognition of MGNREGA as a people's programme.

Gradually, PRADAN's stance changed. The focus began to shift towards how to become a facilitator engaged effectively with MGNREGA. PRADAN wanted to articulate a role whereby MGNREGA would be owned by the community and not by the government or PRADAN. The spirit of MGNREGA is that it is a legislative guarantee that the citizens have from the government. That spirit had to come alive.

PRADAN realized that this would happen only if it played the role of facilitator and the community became the change agent for its own development agenda. From 2012, PRADAN became involved in MGNREGA with two blocks—Raidih and the Basia—in Gumla, with this new understanding. This article highlights PRADAN's efforts to make MGNREGA a people's programme in Raidih block.

*In 2006–07, the PRADAN team in Gumla was involved in demonstrating how NREGA (or Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act—MGNREGA—as it is called now) funds could be utilized in a more productive way*

## **AWARENESS GENERATION ABOUT MGNREGA**

PRADAN has been working in Gumla district for more than 15 years. Huge social mobilization has taken place through its engagement with the tribal community, and the organization has collectivized more than 40,000 households through the promotion of six women's Federations. PRADAN started

engaging in MGNREGA by building a vision of the Federation around the Act and also by building the confidence of the people in it. The critical missing link was that the people were mostly unaware about the Act and this led to corruption and malpractices in the system.

Thus, the first initiative of the Federation was to generate awareness among villagers so that instead of maligning MGNREGA, they start asking for it.

First of all, awareness needed to be created that MGNREGA was an Act and not a Scheme. The slogan that the Federation members raised and which became very popular was, "*Ham apna haq mangte, nahi kisi se bhik mangte* (We are demanding our right, not asking for alms)." If a person demands work under MGNREGA and does not get work, it is a violation of MGNREGA. The affected person can then claim compensation allowance for the same. Similarly, if there is a delay in payment for the labour, a person can claim compensation.

Next, the Federation members initiated discussions among SHGs and village organization members. The discussions provided the initial spark to understand MGNREGA. The people became aware that they were losing their rights by staying silent and that they were promoting corruption by pulling themselves back from MGNREGA.

With efforts from the Federation, the community started showing some interest in MGNREGA and began to participate in the awareness rallies actively. Conducting workshops, campaigning, promoting MGNREGA and setting up entitlements-related book stalls, etc., were the initiatives taken by PRADAN and the Federation to generate awareness in the community.

A big event was organized in the Raidih *panchayat* where almost 5,000 people participated. Federation members set up book stalls selling books written by eminent persons working on MGNREGA, to help people understand the Act. The books distributed were *Apna Haq Jano* by NREGA Watch; *Rojgar Guarantee Kanon—NREGA—Majdooron ke Haq* by Ritika Khera, Gurjeet Singh and Jean Dreze; NREGA by Nikhil Dey, etc. A total of 1,300 books were sold at this one event.

Alongside, street plays were performed, and songs and slogans were created on MGNREGA. Training programmes were organized in many *panchayats* and villages by the Federations and PRADAN, to make the community aware about MGNREGA. This was the first time that the Panchayati Raj Institute (PRI), Federation, administration, civil society and the common people came together to discuss MGNREGA and explore ways to make it successful.

Following this, events such as 'NREGA Mela', 'Majdoor Diwas', 'Haq ki Lada', etc., were held for creating awareness. Another big step was to motivate women to make MGNREGA an agenda item in their SHG-VO (village organisation)-Federation meetings so that they could study the Act, identify issues and prepare plans to resolve them.

*This was the first time that the Panchayati Raj Institute (PRI), Federation, administration, civil society and the common people came together to discuss MGNREGA and explore ways to make it successful*

## REGULARIZING THE GRAM SABHA

Another important area where PRADAN worked was in regularizing the *gram sabha*. The proceedings of the *gram sabha* were a document prepared by some powerful persons such as contractors, *panchayat* staff, PRI representatives, etc. The wall paintings of the villages or the

block office say, "*Naa Lok Sabha naa Vidhan Sabha, sabse bada gram sabha* (The *gram sabha* is more powerful than the Lok Sabha and the Vidhan Sabha). However, the *gram sabha* was not functioning on the ground. There were no meetings. In fact, it was a vicious cycle. Because the majority of the people did not benefit from the *gram sabha*, they (especially the women) did not attend the meetings; and because people did not participate or raise their voice in the *gram sabha*, they did not get any benefit from it. The intervention point into this cycle was to ensure people's participation.

The Federation took the responsibility of making the villagers aware that participating in the *gram sabha* was the only way to strengthen the institution. They discussed it in the SHG-VO meetings and in all the other gatherings. When the Federation started engaging directly in the *gram sabha*, the participation, especially of women, increased. In most of the *gram sabhas*, the meeting register was found missing.

PRADAN, along with the Federation, started encouraging villagers, especially the SHG women, to attend the *gram sabha* to help regularize it. Slowly, in a few *panchayats* such as Sikoi, Parsa, Upar Khatanga, Silam and Kansir, the *gram sabha* found a place in the lives of a large number of people. From October 2012 onwards, the *gram sabha*

became regularized in these *panchayats* and people also found their meeting registers. The SHG women and the other villagers collectively pressurized the *panchayat* representatives and staff to participate in the *gram sabha* regularly.

It continues to be an issue, however, that what the *gram sabha* decides does not get implemented. For example, if the *gram sabha* took a decision that a few structures need to be constructed under MGNREGA, the plan would not get sanctioned. The plan that would get sanctioned was usually different from the plan prepared by the *gram sabha*. The district administration is meant to give the final approval to the plans of the *gram sabha*. Some of the reasons given for the plans not being approved are:

- ◆ The plans were not recorded in the original *gram sabha* minutes.
- ◆ The plan budget is much higher than the labour budget.
- ◆ The villagers do not furnish a priority list of the plans, so sanctioning happens on a random basis.
- ◆ The district or block administration always prefers making big structures rather than small structures.
- ◆ The villagers do not keep a copy of the *gram sabha* minutes and, therefore, cannot challenge the sanctioned plan.
- ◆ Every individual family thinks only about getting sanctions for its own plan. Nobody thinks about the total village plan.
- ◆ The community believes that the plan can only get sanctioned by giving bribes.
- ◆ The administration is unwilling to sanction plans.

To deal with these issues and to make MGNREGA more people-oriented, PRADAN

became engaged in the NRLM-MGNREGA-CFT Convergence Project.

### **NRLM-MGNREGA-CFT CONVERGENCE PROJECT**

In 2013, PRADAN signed the NRLM-MGNREGA-CFT (National Rural Livelihood Mission-Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act-Cluster Facilitation Team) Convergence Project, and became involved in MGNREGA as a facilitator.

Under this Project, PRADAN and the Federation began working in six revenue villages in three different *panchayats* of Raidih block. PRADAN groomed a team of two social mobilizers and an INRM consultant dedicated for MGNREGA. This team was meant to help villagers in their planning as well do other administrative work in MGNREGA. Trainings, workshops and exposure visits were conducted for the villagers, the PRI representative and the *panchayat* staff. Coordination Committees were formed at the district, block and *panchayat* levels, to discuss the issues and challenges at each level. The Committee would meet at regular intervals. Discussions were held at the *panchayat* level on Plan preparation and prioritization. PRADAN articulated the following action steps:

- ◆ The team of two mobilizers and one consultant, groomed by PRADAN, would help villagers in planning as well as in the administrative work of MGNREGA. The role of the INRM consultant was to educate the people in forming estimates and budgets, and in providing hand-holding support to MGNREGA Mates for measurement. The consultant's additional responsibility was to support block engineers, when required. The role of the social mobilizers was to provide training on MGNREGA/INRM and to help the villagers in accessing their rights and entitlements related to MGNREGA.

Resource persons, called the NRPs (NREGA Resource Persons), from the SHGs were groomed to support the community in processes such as opening bank accounts, training and workshops. Exposure visits were also conducted for villagers, the PRI representative and the *panchayat* staff.

- ◆ INRM training programmes and exposure visits were conducted for all the hamlets under the selected revenue villages. Workshops were conducted for the block and district functionaries.
- ◆ Hamlet-level discussions were held on plan preparation and prioritization, and *panchayat* representatives were involved in the planning process and plan prioritization.
- ◆ Coordination Committees were formed at the district, block and *panchayat* levels, to discuss the issues and challenges at each level. The Committees would meet at regular intervals. In the District Coordination Committee, the members are the Deputy Commissioner, the Deputy Development Commissioner, other district administrative officials, BDOs of the CFT Block, and CFT and Federation representatives. Similarly, in the Block Coordination Committee, the members are the BDO, other block administrative officials, the CFT, Federation representatives, PRI representatives and the *panchayat* staff.
- ◆ The *gram sabhas* were organized for plan prioritization and sanctioning of the works planned in NRLM.

*After the implementation of this Project, some clear changes were observed: there is improved village governance, better engagement of the PRI, a sense of ownership among the villagers of the MGNREGA plan, higher women's participation, seriousness on the part of the administration and little interference of middlemen*

- ◆ A booklet, which included the Baseline Survey Report, photocopies of the social and resource maps, well-being ranking plan consolidation, plan prioritization, and a photocopy of the *gram sabha* minutes, was printed. This was distributed in the villages, *panchayats* and Federation so that it would be accessible to all.
- ◆ Barefoot engineers and a Mate were selected in the *gram sabha* (interestingly, all the Mates and the barefoot engineers selected by the *gram sabha* were SHG women)
- ◆ A weekly Rozgar Diwas was organized at the Panchayat Bhawan, in which labourers would put forward their demands and raise issues. These issues are either solved in the Rozgar Diwas or are taken to the Coordination Committee at the *panchayat*, block or district levels.
- ◆ Labour groups were formed to help labourers collectively put forward their job demands, raise issues and work jointly by helping each other.
- ◆ Efforts were made to strengthen the monitoring process of all stakeholders through the SHG-VO-Federation.

After the implementation of this Project, some clear changes were observed: there is improved village governance, better engagement of the PRI, a sense of ownership among the villagers of the MGNREGA plan, higher women's participation, seriousness on the part of the administration and low interference of middlemen.



Initially, it was a great challenge to bring all the stakeholders on to one platform with a common agenda of MGNREGA because there were many who had vested interests, and corruption was the main reason behind this. Some were completely against these initiatives. They started threatening PRADAN executives, Federation leaders and also began spreading rumours against PRADAN and the Federation.

In one incident in Hesag village of Upar Khatanga *panchayat*, an old person's plan for constructing a well was not approved for two years. Everybody—from the *panchayat* office to the block staff—told him that it was because of PRADAN that his name had been dropped from the list. Similarly, the labourers were told that their payment was delayed because of PRADAN's interference with the system and that they should go to PRADAN's office for their queries or problems.

The objective of the CFT was not to establish a parallel structure at all but to strengthen the existing system. In the initial stages, however, MGNREGA and CFT became two different schemes. The administration regarded PRADAN to be a competitor.

The strength of PRADAN was in its well-articulated vision, huge social mobilization, strong Federation and, most important, the trust the community had in it. Frequent workshops, the formation of the district-block-*panchayat* Coordination Committees, the collective pressure from the community and the support from the state administration played a vital role in changing the mentality of the *panchayat*-block-district officials. Slowly, they started working actively and jointly with the Federation and PRADAN.

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PRADAN then made it clear that this was not PRADAN's programme but the responsibility of the *panchayat*-block-district administrations. PRADAN was there just to facilitate the process.

With the PRI and the administration becoming more pro-active and with awareness in the community, the presence of the middlemen reduced considerably. Initially, in some areas, there were threats from powerful persons; slowly, community participation sidelined all these persons.

The Federation also involved the *panchayat* representatives when organizing events such as awareness camps and workshops. This gave PRIs a sense of ownership of MGNREGA and made them accountable for it. The weekly Rozgar Diwas in the Panchayat Bhawan provided the space for *panchayat* representatives and staff to become the solution providers to people's problems. This enhanced their self-confidence and, from then on, they were more willing to be a part of the change.

Earlier, the PRI would work as per directions from the block; soon they began working independently. The process of participatory planning by the community at the hamlet level, facilitated by the Federation-CFT-PRADAN, resulted in a sense of ownership of the plan. The most important feature in the planning process was that it was a plan prepared collectively. It was not any one individual's plan but an INRM Livelihoods-based Village Development Plan.

Each plan was prepared keeping in mind factors such as participatory methodology, labour budget, prioritization list, possessing a copy of the plan, etc. Thus, no plans were

cancelled by the administration. In this process, women were in the forefront in all aspects—from attending *gram sabha* meetings to the selection of the Mate. Women proved that they could do all the work, maybe even better than the men could.

### **MGNREGA SAHAYATA KENDRA (NREGA FACILITATION CENTRE)**

To get employment in MGNREGA, a labourer needs a job card. However, s/he does not know how to and from where to get this job card. A labourer wants timely payment but does not know why the payment gets delayed and where to complain about this delay.

The Act says that if a labourer does not get employment within two weeks of a job demand, he or she is entitled to an unemployment allowance. Villagers, however, have no idea where to claim this. At a state-level MGNREGA workshop, we came to know that in Manika block of the Latehar district, an innovative concept of the 'NREGA Sahayata Kendra' (NSK) had been working successfully.

This was an initiative introduced by Mr. Jean Dreze, a social activist, and Mr. James Herenz, a local person from Manika, to generate awareness on MGNREGA and its entitlements, to help villagers raise their voice against corruption or any malpractices, through village-level institutions.

The experience of NSK in Manika motivated Federation leaders and PRADAN professionals to establish an NSK in Raidih block. In 2013, the Federation started an NSK without any financial support. It began in one of the Federation's office rooms, with a few volunteers from the villages, who worked for a very nominal honorarium.

NSK pays its staff through collections received as donation from the villagers. The staff received training from the NSK in Manika block and PRADAN. NSK helps in educating workers about MGNREGA, in generating demand for work and for job cards. NSK helps form labour groups at the worksite and makes workers aware of their entitlements in MGNREGA; it also helps to monitor corruption and other malpractices that exist.

Other than this, NSK stocks forms and formats such as application forms for job cards, employment demand forms, unemployment allowance forms, and forms for the interest for delayed payment, so that workers can easily access these forms according to their requirements. NSK then helps them to fill up the forms and forward the applications to officials from the *panchayat* to the district level, seeking solutions to their issues.

It also helps the workers in getting information from the MGNREGA-MIS website, to identify the cause of some of the issues raised by the workers. For instance, if somebody has not received payment for their labour, NSK helps them to find out the reason for non-payment, which could be late muster roll submission, wrong muster roll entry, delay in 'fund transfer order', delay in the bank payment, a mistake in the name in the job card, etc.

This information can easily be accessed through the MGNREGA-MIS. If there is any mismatch in the physical work and what is uploaded in the MIS, NSK raises the issue with the villagers and the PRI. For example, MGNREGA-MIS may say that the work has been completed but maybe the work is still under progress.

NSK also helps the workers in other entitlement schemes such as social security, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) or the Indira Awas Yojana (IAY).

Table 1: Some Cases Resolved by NSK

Complaints Received in NSK	Present Status
<p>Some labourers from Pibo (Pibo <i>panchayat</i>) complained that they had not received their payment. NSK did a primary enquiry and found that the labourers, who had worked for road construction under MGNREGA, had not received payment because it had been made to some other labourers who had not worked on that road.</p>	<p>First, NSK made a field visit and interviewed the MGNREGA Mate and all the labourers, who had worked in the road construction. They used the field-visit data and cross-checked with the MGNREGA-MIS, and found that the names of labourers had not been registered in the particular work number, and that the names of some other labourers had been registered instead. NSK took the issue to the BDO, who began a joint enquiry with NSK. The enquiry brought to light that the MGNREGA Mate had put the wrong names in this work number. Finally, the BDO instructed that the muster rolls be rectified and payment made to the actual persons. The Mate was reprimanded.</p>
<p>In Hesag village (Upur Khatanga <i>panchayat</i>), NSK presented the MIS data entered in MGNREGA for the previous financial year. In more than 15 cases, the beneficiaries did not know that they had been chosen. Meanwhile, work had started, material had been purchased and the labour payment had been made in their names.</p>	<p>NSK, along with villagers, made a complaint to the BDO, who conducted a joint enquiry with NSK. The case was that in more than 15 poultry sheds, the beneficiaries were not aware that their schemes had been sanctioned. The MIS, however, showed that the material had been purchased and the labour payment had being made. Although the work had not started, the booking of the amount was initiated by the <i>panchayat</i> staff. Finally, action was taken against the <i>panchayat</i> staff and the work on the poultry sheds actually started.</p>
<p>In Turidih village (Sikoi <i>panchayat</i>), a complaint was made by the villagers about the use of a machine in the construction of a MGNREGA well.</p>	<p>NSK reported it to the BDO, the machine work was halted, and action was taken against the Rozgar Sewak.</p>
<p>In Turidih village, a well had been sanctioned in the name of one person and the work was going on in another person's plot.</p>	<p>NSK reported the issue to the <i>Rozgar Sewak</i> and the work was started on the correct work site.</p>

NSK has helped more than 400 families to get their job cards on time. NSK put the job card application form along with the receipts; therefore, not providing the job card on time would be a violation of the Act on the part of the block administration. The block administration took its responsibility seriously and provided all the job cards on time. Earlier, villagers were apprehensive about making complaints but because they know that they can approach NSK, they now are confident about raising issues. And because the issues are resolved promptly, it has led to people believing in the system, and they have begun raising their voices against the malpractices.

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However, this also led to serious threats to NSK staff from contractors and the *panchayat* staff. Because NSK had the backing of women's collectives, it not deterred by such threats.

### **ENHANCED ROLE OF PRI IN MGNREGA**

In Raidih, the role of the PRI was negligible, especially in MGNREGA. PRI representatives worked as mere support hands of the block administration. They had no decision-making powers on MGNREGA. *Panchayat* offices existed but always remained locked. For every small work, villagers had to go to the block office. The block administration took the credit for any achievements but passed on the onus of failure to PRIs. PRI representatives became the contractors for the block.

After going to Kerala for an exposure visit, to understand the convergence of PRIs and the community based organization, Kudumbashree, PRADAN, along with the Kudumbashree resource persons, conducted

a PRI-CBO convergence workshop for Federation members. This helped the Federation understand that they need not compete with PRIs but could build linkages with them and support them for the holistic development of the village or the *panchayat*. The Federation also realized that a shared vision with the PRI would help in the overall development and lead to less conflict between the two. To work jointly, the first step would be to strengthen the PRI. The concept of PRIs was completely

new to Jharkhand; it was only as recent as in 2010 that a PRI election was held in the state for the first time.

To strengthen the PRI, the institution had to first become active. To have an active PRI, it is required to have a working *panchayat* office where people can access services. The most vibrant and important initiative was the Rozgar Diwas, for which the *panchayat* office had to open at least once in a week for MGNREGA-related works.

Initially, the hurdles were that the villagers were not coming to the *panchayat* office, the PRI representatives were not giving time in the *panchayat* office, etc. The Rozgar Diwas changed all that. It brought so many people to the *panchayat* office that the staff had to work hard and late into the night on that day. The success of the Rozgar Diwas forced the BDO to make it compulsory for every *panchayat* to have one. In a recent meeting of the BDO and the PRI representatives, a discussion was whether to have the Rozgar Diwas twice a week.

The advantages of holding the Rozgar Diwas are that villagers have direct access to their

*panchayat*, there is no need to go to the block office for each small issue; PRI representatives have found a space to work; villagers have access to and can question their own people easily and they do not need to interact with the BDO or other officials of the block; and although initially meant for MGNREGA work, other issues are also being addressed on the day.

Other than this, *panchayat*-level workshops and meetings organized by the Federation have increased the interaction between the villagers and the PRI. Through this, a collective effort is being made in Gumla. This is the endeavour

to change MGNREGA from a government programme to a people's programme.

The success of the CFT Programme and the MGNREGA campaign has infused new energy, passion and approach to the Scheme. This year, PRADAN, the district administration, PRI and Federation have decided to expand this approach to the entire block. The villagers are now planning the successful implementation of the 'Integrated Participatory Planning Exercise—IPPE' (*Yojna Banao Abhiyaan*), a central government's programme, to add a new dimension to the development of Jharkhand.



# Joining Hands for MGNREGA

JYOTIREKHA ROY PRADHAN AND BABURAM PATRA

*Realizing the need to have women participate in the governance of their villages so that they can contribute more effectively to their own well-being and the society they live in, Sampurnna and PRADAN take on the responsibility of unleashing the immense power of people at the grass roots for development action*

“Independence must begin at the bottom. Thus, every village will be a republic or *panchayat* having full powers. It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world. It will be trained and prepared to perish in the attempt to defend itself against any onslaught from without. Thus, ultimately, it is the individual who is the unit.” These words of Mahatma Gandhi demonstrate the idea of democracy at the grass roots very well. As development professionals interested in creation of a just and equal society, we have to promote strong decentralization of power and democracy at the grass roots. There lies immense power with the people, and our role is to trigger its unleashing in a desired direction. PRADAN, for very long, has realized the power and importance of women’s collectives in bringing social change. Women have a pivotal role in their own development and that of their village. The time is now ripe for a greater order of solidarity among women’s collectives, in order to harness their citizenship and make *panchayati raj* institutions (PRIs) the governance nodes for accelerated growth and development of villages.

## SAMPURNNA—A COMMUNITY BASED ORGANIZATION

PRADAN started its work in the Karanjia block of Mayurbhanj district, Odisha in 2000. Initially, its focus was on the formation of women's SHGs around savings and credit; these eventually became platforms for promoting livelihoods. Slowly, villages became saturated with SHGs, and Clusters were formed during 2003–04. Although Clusters did discuss SHG issues, they also took up women's issues and, in some instances, confronted PRIs on issues of entitlements such as PDS. There grew a felt need to interconnect these Clusters so that these forums could learn from each other, and address their issues and needs in systematic ways. Thus the concept of Sampurnna (a block-level Federation of women) was seeded in the community. Sampurnna was born in 2005. As more and more SHGs were linked to it, Sampurnna grew as an organization of women; and the needs and aspirations of members connected to it also swelled. During a visioning exercise, it was clear that it did not want itself to be restricted with only the members of Sampurnna (the women who follow the weekly SHG norms) or some limited activities carried out by PRADAN. At first, PRADAN was tentative about including all SHGs under one fold; however, it was evident that a significant number of women were not aware of the issues of poverty and gender discrimination. To counter these issues, there needed to be total solidarity.

Sampurnna and its members realized the need to participate in the governance of the village so that they could contribute more effectively to the well-being of women as well as society. However, they did not have any forum where they could interact at the

*As more and more SHGs were linked to it, Sampurnna grew as an organization of women; and the needs and aspirations of members connected to it also swelled*

*panchayat* level. Sampurnna, therefore, underwent a process of restructuring, in order to address the current requirements and carry out its role and responsibilities, to ground its vision. The Federation focused on decentralization of powers by delivering more responsibilities

to village organizations and the newly formed *gram panchayat*-level Federation (GPLF). The basic objective of GPLF is to have a vision around the *gram panchayat* (GP), motivating clusters (village-level forums) for development of their villages, and establishing linkages with relevant stakeholders at the GP level, to be in a GP-level alliance, where women's collectives will influence stakeholders and bring about their own development.

## PRADAN'S INTERVENTION

In 2012–13, on the initiative taken by District Collector Rajesh Prabhakar Patil of Mayurbhanj district, Odisha, 10 NGOs of the district, including PRADAN, participated in a workshop for implementation of Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM) under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

That year, PRADAN trained the local resource person in the INRM planning exercise, and completed the planning for 20 villages of two GPs with active participation of SHGs at the village level. INRM plans were also implemented with officials of the GP and block administration. PRADAN and the block administration played a major role. The major challenge faced in the process was that the PRI had less ownership and they did not participate in the process and were not in the favour of the process. The following year, in 2013–14, PRADAN signed an MoU for the MGNREGA-NRLM-CFT (Cluster Facilitation

Team) convergence project for three GPs—Kerker, Batpalsa and Patbil of Karanjia block.

CFT focuses on using funds from MGNREGA, to create sustainable livelihood assets for the rural poor so that along with providing direct employment to people, it will also create infrastructure for them, which they can harvest for further enhancing their livelihood. Another highlight of this programme is that it also has the scope for people to participate in the planning process. A CFT was supposed to be a block-level body of administrative officials and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), which would play a pivotal role in the whole programme. PRADAN influenced the government and formed a CFT at the GP level, comprising representatives from CBOs, PRIs and GP officials. PRADAN believed that CFT, at the GP level, will be more instrumental in ensuring participation of people directly. The CFT project was taken up in 3 GPs; the presence of Sampurnna was a boon and it decided to engage six other GPs in the same way, to have a greater impact, and thereby herald change.

Through CFTs, PRADAN has engaged in following ways:

### 1. ENGAGEMENT WITH THE PRI

Sampurnna realized the need to collaborate with the PRI, to create a large-scale impact in the block. The idea that all the women of the block should know about MGNREGA and the need for a *palli sabha* (village-level meeting of all voters) in actualizing their aspirations was the cornerstone of this strategic engagement. Sampurnna and PRADAN came together to prepare the village development plans of almost all the villages of Karanjia block and to design the strategy. The idea of preparing a village development plan was seeded at each tier of the Federation (BLF—block-level

Federation, GPLF, Cluster and SHG). The idea was shared with block-level government officials, who also extended support in grounding this one-of-a-kind initiative. GPLFs took the lead role in influencing members of the PRI by sharing the concept, pursuing it to get involved and preparing a holistic plan. The purpose of influencing the PRI was also a process by which the whole village community comes together to put forward a holistic development plan and the voice of women gets political recognition in the *palli sabha* and *gram sabha*.

### 2. FORMATION OF AN INFORMAL TEAM AFTER CBO AND PRI CONVERGENCE

The purpose of this convergence is to create a team to review, monitor and execute the plans prepared at each village effectively; to monitor which plans are being executed and how they are executed; to discuss problems the villagers face in MGNREGA and resolve the issues. The weekly meeting of the team was expected to boost MGNREGA work by tracking which work is being carried out by a particular Mate and by checking with a stakeholder whether his/her assigned role is being carried out. This team, comprising CBO, PRI and executives, is in the full charge of the development of its *gram panchayat* and is called the Cluster Facilitating Team (CFT). The CFT comprised the *sarpanch*, two ward members, *panchayat* executive officer, *gram rozgar sahayak* (GRS), two leaders from GPLF, two *gram sathis* (mates), one technical staff such as the *gram panchayat* technical assistants and a local resource person from Sampurnna. The team meets on a fixed day of the week. It formulates some norms for itself for smooth conduct and functioning. With the encouragement and help of Sampurnna, such CFTs were formed in 9 *gram panchayats* of Karanjia block.

CFT was a new initiative for PRADAN as well as other stakeholders. After various rounds of discussions with stakeholders, all agreed to support the formation of a CFT. A formal meeting was organised at each *gram panchayat* and the purpose of a CFT was shared with all the villagers. The responsibility of GP staff, PRIs, CBOs and CSOs was discussed at large and was agreed upon.

### 3. THE PLANNING PROCESS

A systematic plan prepared by the villagers is essential for development. The plan prepared in 2012–13, with support from district administration, Sampurnna and PRADAN, was to engage in Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM) in around 90 villages. However, its shortcoming was that it was not a holistic plan because it focused only on the natural resources of the village and not on the other needs of households. In 2013–14, Sampurnna's objective was help formulate a holistic plan for the villages. This took place in the same year as the Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise I (IPPE I) by the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD).

The women leaders of each village mobilized the villagers for the planning process. Some local resource persons (from the villages) were trained at the block level to assist the women leaders in the planning process (3 to 4 resource persons per *gram panchayat*). The dates for planning at each level was decided at the block level, and circulated through letters to each SHG by Sampurnna. PRI members such as the *sarpanch* and ward members also motivated the villagers to join in the planning process. The trained women leaders and resource persons in different groups took on different responsibilities to execute the planning process smoothly. The training event for the planning exercise was conducted in such a way that the planning pool could collate and consolidate

almost every detail without much transactional loss.

The planning process was a four-day event. The process of analyzing the existing situation (including livelihoods, health, and educational status of the village etc) was by social mapping, resource mapping and wealth ranking. The real issues are then identified and plans are prepared accordingly. The plans have two components—individual plans and the community plan. There is also space for planning for utilization of assets that will be created or have been created. The plans are then prioritized at the *palli sabha* and approved. The plans also focus on including all the families of the village from all sections. Of the 150 villages in the Karanjia block, the plans for 100 villages of 9 *gram panchayats* were prepared. The planning exercise was completed in two months and the plan was consolidated by the trainers in 15 days. The consolidated plans, in booklet and file format, were kept in the village organization (VO) for approval in the *palli sabha*.

#### Uniqueness of the Plan

**Recognizing women as beneficiaries:** The planning process is itself unique in nature. It started with the work division of men and women in the village. During whole planning process and in the *palli sabha*, the names of the beneficiary women were read out loud, and villagers asked each other who each woman was. It was a step in recognizing that women too are beneficiaries, and the *palli sabha* approved the shelf of project along with name of women beneficiaries.

**Village development plan:** This included a holistic plan of all resources of the village, and included plans for health, education, housing, sanitation, social security, fuelwood plantation near the household, making cement concrete

platforms for cleaning utensils to avoid water logging near the wells and handpumps, etc. It also included the agriculture plans of the villagers.

**Consolidation of village plans into *gram panchayat* development plans under MGNREGA:** The plans were prepared under MGNREGA at the village level in such a way that around 100 per cent works are related to agriculture or allied activities, maintaining a 60:40 labour-material ratio at the *gram panchayat* level, and the *gram panchayat* will be the implementing agency.

#### 4. THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

Project approval: After the plan is prepared at the village level, it is approved by the *palli sabha* and then by the *gram sabha*. The shelf of projects is prepared at the block level and technical and financial approval is sought at the respective levels. Initially 50 per cent of the projects were issued by the *gram panchayat*; however, this year (2015), due to the intervention of the district administration all the projects were issued by the *gram panchayat*. This is again another move for decentralisation and enhancing better participation.

#### 5. THE GROOMING OF WOMEN MATES

Mates play a major role in implementation of the programme because they organize labour groups and maintain records. The work of Mates includes helping in the the layouts, inspecting the measurements and maintaining the muster roll at the work site. This is usually considered to be technical and masculine work. PRADAN's approach to development is not only creation of infrastructure but also equal involvement and opportunities for all. It was, thus, necessary to break stereotypes prevalent in society. PRADAN trained 36

women as Mates directly, and trained and provided handholding support to many more at the ground level. This has not only equipped women to work as Mates but has also enhanced their confidence and helped them to create an identity of their own. Due to the selection and working of women Mates in nine *gram panchayats* such as Kerkeria and Kuliposi, the percentage of women who worked under MGNREGA has also increased.

#### 6. OBSERVING ROZGAR DIWAS

The essence of MGNREGA is the demand-driven process for wage employment and sustainable assets creation. To foster that spirit, SHG members observe Rozgar Diwas. On the day of Rozgar Diwas, SHG members of the *gram panchayat* go to the *panchayat* office seeking employment as per the Performa. On some occasions, the *panchayat* office was closed. The women would then go directly to the BDO to complain about the closed *panchayat* office on Rozgar Diwas. Initially, it was a tussle between the women members of Sampurnna and the *panchayat* officials. The latter would not give the women an acknowledgement slip on the pretext that they are very busy, they do not have the stamp, etc. The women have understood the importance of the acknowledgement slip for the work demanded and now refuse to leave the office without it. And nothing could make them budge from that stand. Finally, the officials would give them the acknowledgement slip. Once they had the acknowledgement slip, the women had the confidence to carry on the fight for justice. They knew they can now access their rights as citizens. Observing Rozgar Diwas brought with it the ability to demand what is their right. It also signaled to the *panchayat* officials that they need to respond to the demands of the women.



## 7. GRIEVANCE REDRESSAL SYSTEM

The major objective to set up a grievance redressal system at Sampurnna was to provide a support mechanism so that people could voice their complaints easily to the duty bearers.

Grievance redressal within a specified time is an important aspect of any good programme. MGNREGA has provisions to redress the grievances of its citizens. PRADAN, along with the Federation and Sampurnna, took over the responsibility of creating awareness on the process of registering grievances. To help women in the process, Sampurnna has set a system whereby they can easily send their grievances to the Sampurnna office; the grievances are then submitted to the concerned programme officer. If the programme officer does not resolve the grievance within 15 days, the grievances are uploaded on the Internet to be addressed by the higher authorities.

### OUTPUTS

The participation of people, especially women, has led to intensive plans being prepared in each village; we, thus, see a rise in the labour budget in the three direct CFT groups, in comparison to the others. We also see that the labour budget is higher than the national

and state average, indicating that the quality of plans has increased over the years in CFT GPs (Figure 2). There has been a rise in the level of awareness among people and they have demanded employment. Earlier, rural connectivity was the focus under MGNREGS; this has shifted to land development and drought proofing measures, which will secure the livelihood options of small and marginal farmers as well as positively impact natural resources. We can analyse some of the quantitative data, to assess the impact of programme.

This shows that there has been increased focus on land development, and water conservation and water harvesting measures in the CFT *gram panchayats*, in comparison to other *gram panchayats*.

### The Case of Jhalkiani Village

Jhalkaini is a tribal-dominated village in Karanjia block of Mayurbhanj district, Odisha. It comprises of 150 households. The population of the village is 858.

The village was like any other village three years ago, but things started to change with Sampurnna's and PRADAN's initiative. The women of the village came forward to bring the change in their village.

**Figure 1: Different Types of Grievances Lodged under MGNREGA**

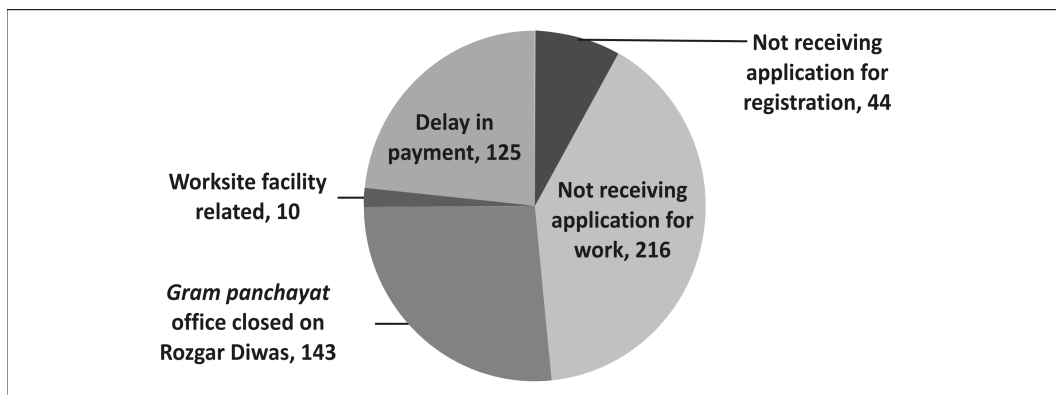
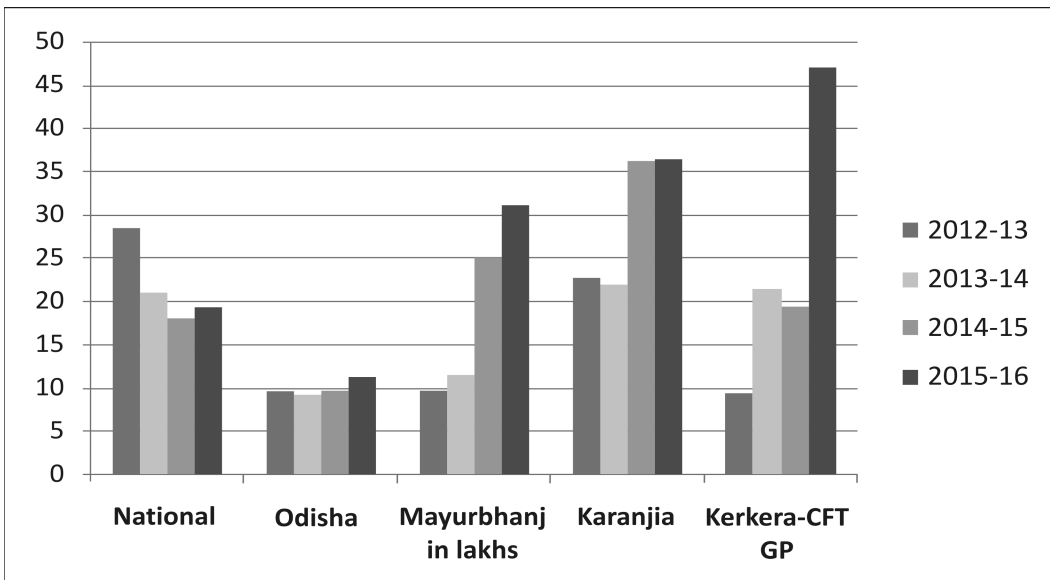
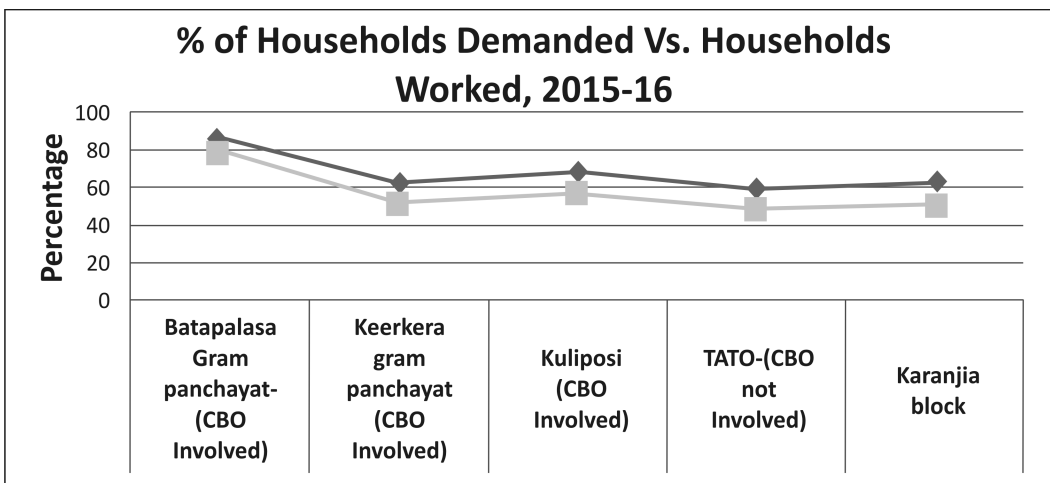


Figure 2: Approved Labor Budget (2015-16) under MGNREGA



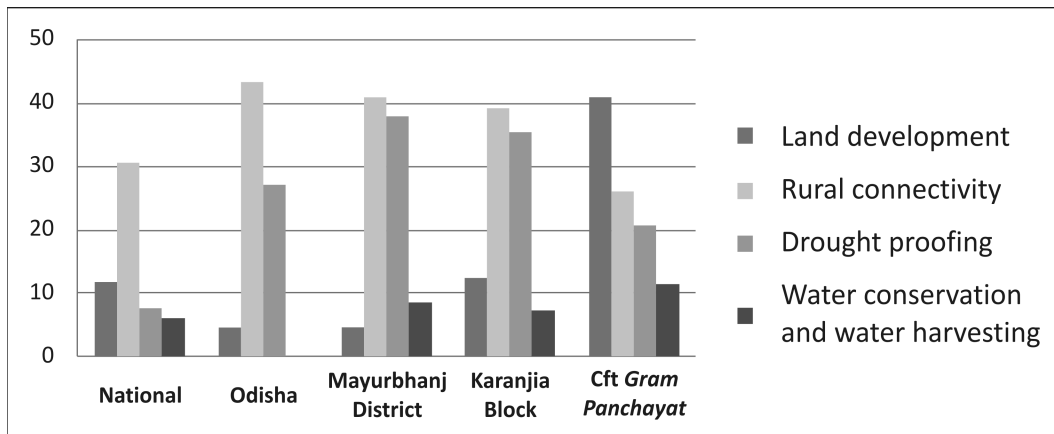
Source: www.nrega.nic.in

Figure 3: Demand vs. Work participation in CFT and Non-CFT Area



Source: www.nrega.nic.in

**Figure 4: Work Category-wise Expenditure in 2015–16 (%)**



Source: www.nrega.nic.in

Sampurnna took an active role in creating the village-level plans for assets creation under MGNREGS in 2013–14. The members of Sampurnna moved from village to village to mobilize SHG members and other villagers to participate in the process, and get the plans approved at the *palli sabha* and *gram sabha*. The village has planned assets, with a special focus on assets for women. Of the 478 assets planned, 310 are in the names of women. The *palli sabha*, in which the plans were approved in 2014, had 107 participants, of which 86 were women.

SHG members interested in working as Mates under MGNREGA were trained on the technicalities of work execution. Malati is one such SHG leader. She was the first woman to start INRM work in the village, after which others followed.

Women leaders have also been able to influence the ward member of their village. Initially, he was very indifferent to developmental issues. But the members called him to all meetings and demanded that he carry out his duties. There is now a perceptible shift in the behaviour of ward member. During the planning for INRM in the village, he supported the women in the

planning. In addition, during implementation, he convinced those people who were hesitating to implement INRM plans. In two years, 28 lakhs has been spent in this village on various infrastructure related to land development and water conservation.

The villagers are more aware of their rights now under MGNREGA. Jhalkiani village has registered around 60 complaints in two years. Registering complaints has not only solved their problems but also activated the government machinery to stay alert to the demands of the people.

At present, the village is busy preparing the village development plan for IPPE 2. The joint endeavours of Sampurnna and the SHG members of the village are propelling it forward and the hope is that in the coming days, the village will continue to tread the path of success.

### **The Case of Sunamani Tudu, a Woman Mate**

Gopalpur is a tribal village under Mayurbhanj block in Odisha. The village is small, comprising of only 25 Santhal families. Gopalpur is not an

extraordinary village but is now well-known because of Sunamani Tudu.

Sunamani Tudu is a resident of Gopalpur village. She has a small family—her husband and two daughters. The family owns a small piece of land, cultivated by her husband. Their house is made of mud and has a thatched roof. She used to brew *hadia* (liquor prepared locally by rice) and sell it in the weekly markets. She was just like any other tribal women doing all the household chores, selling *hadia* and managing her family expenses.

Life took a turn for her when she was selected as a Mate under MGNREGA in the October 2012 *palli sabha*. She was one of the choices of villagers because she had studied up to and passed the tenth standard. Her husband and villagers, however, were doubtful about her competence in being able to do technical work as well as measure the work done under MGNREGA and make the calculations.

PRADAN organized a three-day residential training for Mates. She attended the first day of the training but could not attend the last two days because her husband opposed it. Her husband was of the view that the work of Mate is a difficult task, the labour does not get timely payment, and Sunamani would not be able to manage it and, therefore, she should not venture into becoming a mate.

The PRADAN professional and INRM expert, Laxman Soy, had a challenging time in supporting her during the initial days of work for generating demands, filling up the muster roll, etc. Sunamani too had a difficult time but she was deeply interested in the work. Hence, she persisted and acquired the knowledge and

skills to carry out such work, slowly gaining more and more confidence.

Initially, only 10 villagers came forward to work with her; with time, when they observed that they were getting their payment on time, other villagers also came forward to work with her. Currently, 30 villagers are working with her. She gets Rs 170 per day remuneration and earning about Rs 5,100 per month. She plays a pivotal role in INRM planning in her village. Prior to her involvement in MGNREGS, the village did not have any plan or work around its natural resources. But with Sunamani's efforts, the village has its own plans; already—20 ha of cashew plantation is being done in her village.

She had earlier saved Rs 15,000 from *hadia* business; after becoming a Mate she has saved Rs 60,000 in her own bank account. She has also built a *pucca* house made of brick walls and asbestos. Earlier, she did not have any say in her family. But now her family is being recognized because of her. One day her husband went to the nearby village to purchase bamboo but the villagers said they will not give him bamboo until his wife comes and asks for it!

Sunamani is the symbol of change. She is a living example of how women can achieve whatever they want once they are convinced. This simple yet inspiring story shows us many facets of life: that women do not want to prepare *hadia* and sell it, but are doing so because they do not have any other lucrative alternative; that women are capable of doing paper work and management if provided support; that women are self-sufficient and can sustain themselves and others through life.

## CHALLENGES FACED

Two decades have elapsed since the enactment of 73rd amendment of the Constitution and the enactment of provisions of (Panchayat Extensions to Scheduled Areas Act , 1996) the state Govt. were supposed to provide functions, finances, functionaries pertaining to 29 subject listed in the eleventh schedule of the constitutions to the *gram panchayat*. But the real situation in ground in a state like Odisha, subjects like agriculture, horticulture, fishery, livestock, etc., are with the line dept. of the state government, wherein the *gram panchayats* have no role to play. Those working in the above subject areas are not accountable to the *gram panchayats*. There is, therefore, deficiency of skilled staff in the *gram panchayats*.

Even the staff such as the GRS, the *panchayat* executive officer and the GPTA (*gram panchayat* technical assistants), who work for *gram panchayats*, are not accountable to them. They are accountable to the block administration.

Lack of funds: During implementation of the project, the flow of funds for MGNREGA from the centre to the state was stopped or

got delayed, causing the community to stop working and making it frustrating for the PRI, CBO members and the community.

Due to lack of funds at the *gram panchayat* level, it could not fulfill some of the local needs such as supplying pipe-water to each household.

## CONCLUSION

The beauty and strength of democracy at the grass roots is evident in the intensive planing around land and livelihoods, which cannot be thought of without the participation of people. The proactiveness of the administration and the involvement of CBOs like Sampurnna helped the *gram panchayats* and the block to make plans of such a magnitude. Besides, the support system for CBOs and the community to claim its entitlement and lodge grievances allowed the community to experience the power of the citizen. This is just the beginning and is a bright example to follow. India is a country of villages, and we need to experiment and innovate ways to involve the rural community in planning and implementation. Only then can India be a self-sufficient republic in a true sense.



# **THE NRLM-MGNREGS-CFT Convergence Project: A Weapon for Change**

SUDIP GHOSH

*Providing a platform for women's collectives to collaborate with PRIs and the state administration, and to actively design appropriate plans for the social and economic needs of their communities, the CFT project is slowly transforming the face of not only MGNREGA but also of other ailing social schemes as well*

Holistic development requires a consistent focus on all the elements of long-term processes. A community can only develop if it takes charge of its own progress. PRADAN has an unwavering belief that a community can be strengthened by facilitating women's institutions. Social and economic change is very important, to establish democracy at the grass roots, and create a just and equitable society.

PRADAN concurs with the Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM) approach for sustainable livelihoods promotion among communities in deprived areas. The 'National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM)–Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS)–Cluster Facilitation Team (CFT) Convergence Project' is an attempt at ensuring technical soundness of the many bio-physical activities in rural areas, by tapping into the knowledge and experience of INRM.

PRADAN took up this project, seeing it as an opportunity to facilitate better interplay between the communities (women's collectives), the Institutions (PRI, Administration, etc.) and resources in Ranibandh block.

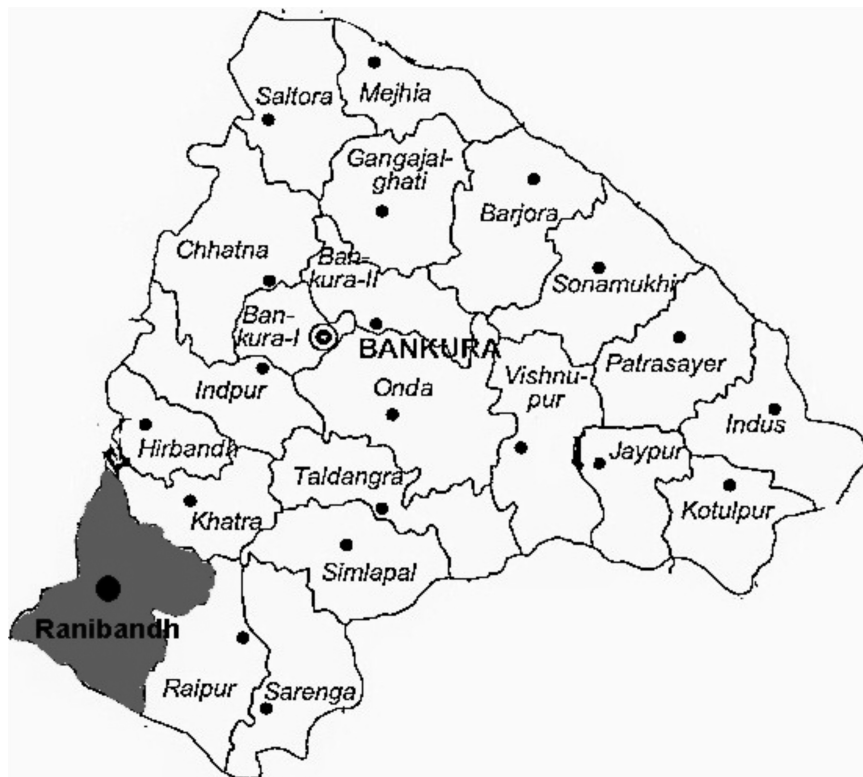
## RANIBANDH

**Social and economic profile:** Ranibandh block is dominated by communities (47.28 per cent) belonging to Scheduled Tribes (STs); almost all of them are rural populations. Of these, 49.7 per cent are below the poverty line (BPL). All the poverty indicators for this area depict an inferior picture as compared to other parts of the district.

The health of the people is also quite poor, mainly due to lack of proper health facilities and because of their low awareness of preventive

measures. To add to the aggravation, the area has almost become isolated in the last few years because of Left-wing extremist (LWE) activities. Clear from our many discussions with the community is the fact that people are still trying to recover from their troubled past.

**Geography:** Situated in the south-western part of Bankura, the Ranibandh Development Block comprises eight *gram panchayats* (GPs). Among these, Routora and Barikul are the two most-deprived and poverty-stricken GPs. The area is surrounded by forests on all sides. In this block, 28 per cent of the total land is forest (7,239 ha) and 17.2 per cent is fallow up-land. This restricts the scope for agriculture and causes high dependency on Non Timber Forest Produce (NTFP). As a result, people often migrate to Tatanagar, East Midnapore, Bardhaman, Hooghly, etc.



## THE CFT PROJECT

Ranibandh area languishes in extreme poverty and vulnerability despite being blessed with valuable natural resources. A major reason for this is that there is no planning for optimum utilization of these resources. The villagers lack technical know-how; the plans proposed by the community often do not get incorporated into the official Annual Plan of the Block. This is a failure of the PRI and the block administration and has led to a major loss of faith in the government machinery amongst the villagers.

The NRLM-MGNREGS-CFT Convergence Project has been introduced at such a time, promising some hope to the exploited community. In July 2014, PRADAN signed an MOU with the state government to work in

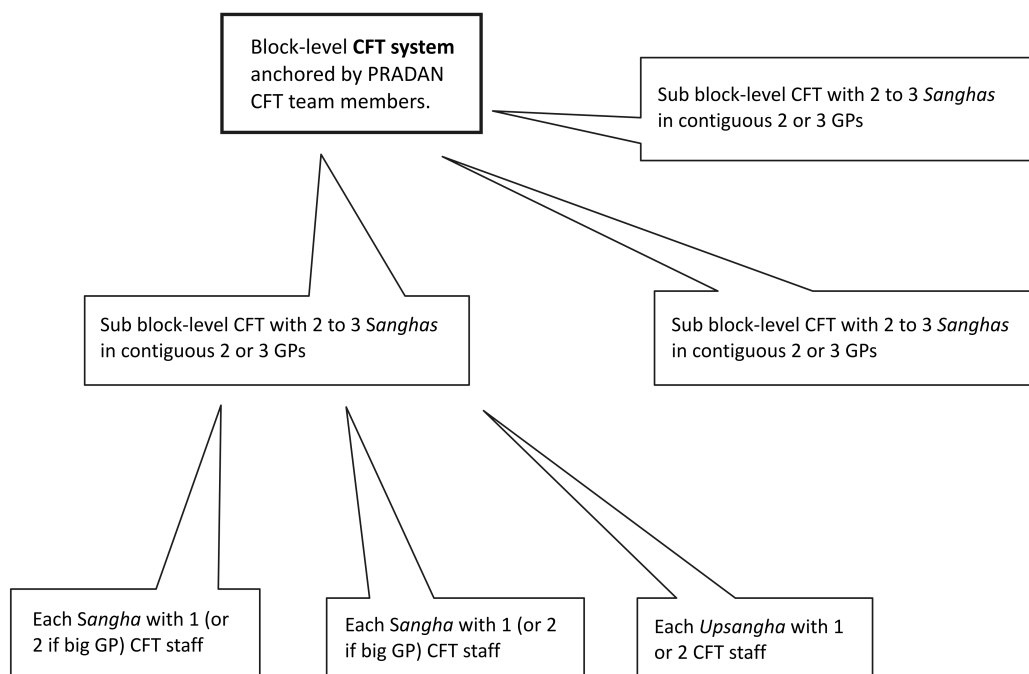
*Ranibandh area languishes in extreme poverty and vulnerability despite being blessed with valuable natural resources. A major reason for this is that there is no planning for optimum utilization of these resources*

five blocks of Purulia, Bankura and Paschim Medinipur districts in West Bengal for three years.

## ROLE OF PRADAN IN THE CFT PROJECT

### PRADAN's role is to:

1. Identify, train, place and operate CFTs and, at the same time, help the *Sanghas* (Community based organizations, CBOs) to identify, train and host local CFT members, and to be responsible for their functioning and delivering developmental outputs. CFTs will address the gaps in MNREGA planning and implementation processes, thereby resulting in the creation of sustainable livelihoods.
2. Work for the desired convergence of MGNREGA, NRLM and CFT, in order to achieve people's participation, improve



the quality of assets and energize the delivery system in a manner that will have a positive impact on the limitation of poverty in the rural areas.

3. Hand-hold and help CBOs (SHGs, *Sanghas* and Federations) and train them so that they are able to take over the project after the three-year period.
4. Assist and support the GPs to effectively discharge the functions laid down under MGNREGA.

### CHALLENGES

PRADAN has been engaged with this community in Ranibandh since 2010 and is trying out different methods for its social and economic upliftment. The CFT Project provides PRADAN with an opportunity to synchronize its knowledge and experience with the community's needs. It does this by providing space for villagers to come up with ideas to solve their problems and create sustainable livelihood generating plans. An efficient realization of such an endeavour necessitates end-to-end engagement with the people by civil society.

Because PRADAN works by facilitating women's collectives, the major challenge before it is to organize these women as rights-based groups. Awareness needs to be generated among them so that they can fearlessly assert their rights at various forums. For example, a village with 100 families can get at least Rs 28.2 lakhs (16.9 as wages and the rest as material support) per year for developing its land and water resources under MGNREGA. A well-organized community will ensure that this money gets allocated and is used for building useful assets in the village.

*The CFT Project provides PRADAN with an opportunity to synchronize its knowledge and experience with the community's needs*

Realizing the importance of an organized force in the village, PRADAN facilitated women's collectives to collaborate with other stakeholders of society such as PRIs, the bureaucracy, civil society and citizens at large.

### A. Engagement with stakeholders

#### I. Orientation at the Sub-divisional level:

An orientation programme was conducted to create a shared understanding of the issue at hand in the community and other stakeholders. The main objectives of this orientation were:

- To root out traditional, obsolete perceptions among PRI leaders and the administration that indicted the 'ignorance' of the community for every failure.
- To make PRI leaders and the administration come to terms with the potential and the needs of the community.
- To communicate the centrality of women in the project, in order to come up with genuinely inclusive plans.
- To build mutual trust and understanding between the PRI and the community so that they can jointly make plans for the betterment of their villages.

#### II. Block-level orientation: This was organized with the block administration, the PRI leaders and the Clusters of all the GPs in Ranibandh block. The objectives of the programme were:

- To enhance the self-confidence of Cluster members
- To help PRI leaders and the block administration to understand the

potential of women's collectives in the CFT Project.

- To ensure the active support of PRI leaders and the block administration to women's collectives, in formulating and executing plans.

III. **Cluster-level orientation:** This was organized in each GP; representatives of the Sub-Cluster, members of the *sansad* and the GP staff attended. The objectives were:

- To help the community take charge of its development and formulate village plans.
- To instil a sense of unity and empowerment among villagers by inviting them to participate in the decision-making process actively for the development of their village.

## B. Planning

I. CFT member's placement: The first step in preparing an effective plan in a participative way was to lend to the community all the technical support that it required. PRADAN helped the Cluster recruit Community Resource Persons (CRPs) as staff (CFT member) of the community institutions, and provided them with technical and financial backing to train CRPs. This partnership between PRADAN and the Cluster was made official through a formal agreement.

II. Women taking charge in participatory planning: Women's collectives have repeatedly proved in the past that given the right initial guidance, they can become a vehicle for social change in the village.

In Ranibandh block, some of the SHGs facilitated by PRADAN, were formed earlier by the *panchayat*, as per the norms of Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar

Yojana (SGSY). Being the most basic form of social organization at the village level, it is not surprising to see that the enhanced participation of SHGs has led to the drafting of effective village plans. The knowledge and understanding that these women have about their natural resources is truly remarkable and was, it seems, just waiting to be capitalized upon. Bearing in mind the pressing water problem in the region and the simultaneous opportunity offered by the CFT programme, it was decided to facilitate these SHGs for the preparation of the INRM-based plans. So, PRADAN helped in creating an enabling environment, wherein women could take charge of the participative planning process in the villages. To this end, motivational training was also organized for Cluster members, to motivate them and generate in them awareness about the optimum utilization of natural and human resources.

III. Mapping and survey (planning at ground level): The local PRI plays a vital role in the decision-making processes in villages, both inside and outside the formal system. Owing to this, leaders of the ruling as well as the opposition parties were oriented and taken into confidence for participatory planning with SHGs in villages.

A committee was formed at the *sansad* level, comprising two members from each SHG. The committee prepared social and resource maps to estimate the actual human and natural resources available within the village. SHGs and CFT members informed the village about the on-going planning and discussed their needs with the community. By lending technical guidance and organizing participatory rural appraisal (PRA) exercises and land transects, involving representatives from all individual plots, CFT and SHG members



succeeded in mapping the precise area to be brought under treatment. In the coming years, all these plans would be implemented under MGNREGS.

- IV. **Prioritization:** The consolidated plan, prepared at the end of the exercise, comprises submissions from almost every family in the village. Because all plans cannot be executed in a short span of one year, the community had to prioritize its plans. Top priority was given to the most deprived families within the community, which includes households that are landless, headed by women, are handicapped, etc. Surveys were conducted in the village, the resource tally of the most deprived families was cross-checked, and plans were prioritized according to their needs.

The second consideration for prioritization was the optimum usage of available natural resources. Plans aimed at converting fallow land into cultivated land, and increasing crop efficiency to 200 or 300 per cent. The surveyors, that is, SHG and CFT members went with the

villagers to every field and met with the respective families to collect their plans.

- V. **Priority list and the seasonal matrix:** The next step was to decide the timing. This would depend upon the total labour force available in the village and the amount of time the labour would be able to invest in MGNREGA works. Additionally, natural contingencies are a major factor. For example, no land development works can be undertaken during the monsoons and no plantation work can be done in winter. Therefore, a second priority list had to be prepared, to decide the implementation month of each plan. Based on these lists, the final labour budget and the seasonal matrix were made.

### C. Approval by the *gram sabha*

The concept of a *gram sabha* is the epitome of a democratic practice. Every villager has a direct say on every important decision regarding any development in the village. Unfortunately, this platform has not been used to its full potential in our areas. From the very beginning, PRADAN has been trying to enable

#### **PRADAN as a facilitator**

The absence of democracy at the grass roots leads to an implementation process in which the community does not have any say. Every year, a large amount of public money is invested without taking public opinion into account. The entire decision of funds' allocation is taken by the administration and the PRI leaders. Under the CFT Project, PRADAN brought PRI members, bureaucrats, SHG members and citizens on to one platform, in order to create space for women's collectives (Sub-Cluster) at par with the government functionaries. PRI leaders were convinced that it would greatly help their reputation if they were to support initiatives such as the CFT Project and the Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise (IPPE). They also agreed that backing women's collectives in the project would help PRI leaders revive the long-lost trust of villagers.

The main reason for stressing on women's collectives to take charge is because PRI leaders are often biased, along the lines of politics or plain self-interest. The idea of a democratic practice suffers as a consequence. Women's collectives are open groups, the workings of which can be easily monitored by the citizens; therefore, we encouraged them to become the primary movers of the project.

women's collectives to become active participants in the *gram sabha* and the GP. As mentioned earlier, PRI leaders would decide on village plans without taking into consideration the actual needs of the people. The biggest sufferers of this apathy are the poorest sections in the village, who need the most help and who end up being the most sidelined during planning. An active *gram sabha*, therefore, is crucial for the purpose of formulating a truly representative Village Development Plan.

The introduction of the CFT Project has brought change in the political dynamics of the village. Women are now major stakeholders in the decision-making process and are ready to break the monopoly of power that had always rested in a few hands.

### **PACIFYING THE PANCHAYAT**

A natural reaction of PRI leaders at the rising stature of women's collectives in the village was to oppose them. The leaders were openly critical in an attempt to deter women's groups from doing their work. To deal with the situation peacefully, SHG leaders and PRADAN engaged with PRI leaders on a regular basis and attempted to create mutual trust and, thereby, jointly work towards the good of the village. SHG members made it clear that they had no intention of creating a parallel system to the *panchayats* and informed PRI leaders regularly about the status of planning. The SHGs were instrumental in convincing *panchayat* leaders, and their interactions with the officials boosted their self-confidence greatly.

In the earlier days, party members always tried their best to sabotage the entire planning

*The introduction of the CFT Project has brought change in the political dynamics of the village. Women are now major stakeholders in the decision-making process and are ready to break the monopoly of power that had always rested in a few hands*

process. The opposition party invariably opposed any suggestions from the ruling party and vice-versa. The power struggle within the party, the vested interests, and favouritism towards some families created a big mess. The issue of development was just a masquerade for everyone to push for self-benefitting plans. However, ever since the CFT Project became operational,

women's collectives have taken charge of the planning and the implementation processes. This has brought about a change in perception among *panchayat* leaders. SHGs comprise citizens from their own electorate; therefore, PRI leaders have understood that supporting these women is of mutual benefit. The perseverance of these women has reaped results by significantly enhancing the efficiency of MGNREGA in their village. As a consequence, PRI leaders are now genuinely much more respectful of them.

By the end of the year, all plans were approved by the GP, and the consolidated GP plan and GP resolution were submitted to the block. The NRLM-MGNREGA-CFT Convergence Project was implemented in eight GPs of the Ranibandh block...a total of 189 revenue villages in 87 *sansads*.

### **THE SUCCESS STORY OF KHAMARDANGA**

Khamardanga is a *sansad* of Haludkanali GP under Ranibandh block of Bankura. PRADAN has facilitated the CFT Project in two villages—Khamardanga and Jamda—under the Khamardanga *sansad*. There are 226 families living on 130.2 ha in this *sansad*. Of these, 45 families are landless (Table 1).

**Table 1: Demography of Khamardanga *Sansad* (Khamardanga and Jamda)**

No.	Name of Habitation	Number of Households (Caste-wise)				No. of SHGs	Small and Marginal Farmers	BPL Households	Total Arable Land (ha)	Land-less Families
		SC	ST	OBC	GC					
1.	Khamardanga	86	16	31	11	6	138	97	82.83	26
2.	Jamda	29	37	16	0	5	77	64	47.37	19
	<b>Total</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>215</b>	<b>161</b>	<b>130.20</b>	<b>45</b>

(\*Source from household survey)

**Table 2: Land distribution in Khamardanga and Jamda**

Land Type	Area Covered (Ha)
Fallow upland	36.5
Some cultivated upland	7.4
Undulated medium upland	10.5
Cultivated medium upland	29
Medium lowland	32.8
Lowland	14
<b>Total Land</b>	<b>130.2</b>
<b>Net Planned Area</b>	<b>102.30</b>

The majority of the population here belongs to the SC and ST categories and the land is highly undulating. Land distribution in these two villages is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that lowlands only form a small portion of the total land. This is the biggest constraint on agriculture in this area and, therefore, a major reason for poverty.

The communities have taken charge of the planning process and a planning committee has been formed, with two representatives each from 11 SHGs. The planning committee has prepared a list of vulnerable families by conducting a survey. A sample survey has been presented below.

The surveyors interacted with all 226 families and collected plans from 222 families for 102.3 ha of land. Of these, 97 vulnerable families were identified and given priority in the planning (Table 3). Some of the plans were:

- ◆ 36.5 ha fallow land to be converted to cultivated land.
- ◆ 28 ha to be converted from 100 per cent crop efficiency to 200 per cent crop efficiency.
- ◆ 17 ha to be converted from 200 per cent crop efficiency to 300 per cent crop efficiency.
- ◆ 5 ha to be converted from 100 per cent crop efficiency to 300 per cent crop efficiency.

**Table 3: INRM Plan***Sansad:* Khamardanga

Village: Khamardanga and Jamda

Name of the Scheme	No. of Schemes	Families Benefited	Area Benefited (Ha)	Expected Expenditure (Lakhs)	Labour Cost (Lakhs)	Material Cost (Lakhs)	Person Days Needed
New pond	12	32	9.2	25.19	23.99	1.19	14201
Social forestry (with glaricidia)	23	69	36.8	41.43	25.19	16.23	14911
Orchard	6	13	9.1	19.53	13.15	6.37	7785
Drainage line treatment	8	27	3.2	4.26	3.25	1.00	1928
Irrigation channel	18	103	12.5	15.57	15.57	0.00	9218
Water harvesting structure	32	36	12.8	28.86	17.52	11.33	10368
Renovation of old water bodies	4	82	20.8	8.5	7.50	0.99	4438
Land levelling	22	36	6.45	23.47	22.67	0.79	13420
Dug well	10**	27	13.4	20.2	7.10	13.09	4203
Road improvement	3	246	--	9.8	2.80	6.99	1657
Vermi-compost bed	26	26	--	2.34	0.58	1.75	346
Goat shed	21	21	--	7.35	1.83	5.51	1087
Cow shelter	29	29	--	10.15	3.04	7.10	1801
Poultry shed	9	9	--	36	0.71	35.28	426
Latrine	10	10	--	1.09	0.06	1.02	40
<b>Total</b>	<b>233</b>	<b>766</b>	<b>124.25</b>	<b>253.74</b>	<b>145.05</b>	<b>108.69</b>	<b>85829</b>
<b>Net</b>	<b>233</b>	<b>222</b>	<b>102.30</b>	<b>253.74</b>	<b>145.05</b>	<b>108.68</b>	<b>85829</b>

\*\* Including orchard dug well.

Regular meetings were conducted in the village, in which the community was made aware of their rights under MGNREGA and IPPE. *Panchayat* representatives (*Pradhan*, *Nirman Sahayak*, the Executive Assistant and

Secretary) also supported the villagers in their work. The community and the *panchayat* collaborated to make a consolidated plan of Rs 253.74 lakhs.

**Table 4: INRM Plan for 2015–16 (As per labour budget)**

Total no. of families: 226	Active job card holders: 198	Demanded working days: 18782*
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\*  $(156 \times 100) + (43 \times 74) = 15600 + 3182 = 18782$

Name of the Scheme	No. of Schemes	Families Benefited	Area Benefited (Ha)	Expected Expenditure (Lakhs)	Labour Cost (Lakhs)	Material Cost (Lakhs)	Person Days Needed
New pond	3	9	2.3	6.3	5.99	0.30	3550
Social forestry	3	12	4.4	5.1	3.01	2.08	1783
Orchard	2	11	2.8	5.4	3.46	1.93	2053
Drainage line treatment	8	27	3.2	4.26	3.25	1.00	1928
Irrigation channel	7	62	4.3	5.4	5.35	0.04	3171
Water harvesting structure	4	5	1.6	3.61	2.19	1.41	1296
Renovation of old water bodies	2	49	10.1	4.6	4.19	0.40	2485
Land levelling	1	2	0.14	0.51	0.49	0.01	291
Dug well	2	11	2.4	4.1	1.41	2.68	835
Road improvement	1	82		3.5	0.94	2.55	561
Vermi-compost Bed	16	16		1.44	0.35	1.08	213
Goat shed	6	6		2.1	0.52	1.57	310
Cow shelter	4	4		1.4	0.41	0.98	248
Latrine	10	10		1.09	0.06	1.02	40
<b>Total</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>306</b>	<b>31.24</b>	<b>48.81</b>	<b>31.72</b>	<b>17.09</b>	<b>18764</b>
<b>Net</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>31.24</b>	<b>48.81</b>	<b>31.71</b>	<b>17.09</b>	<b>18764**</b>

(\*\*There is difference in available man days (18,782) and the required man days 18764. So an extra 18 man days is stored, if required in some other works.)



Of the 226 families in these two villages, 198 families have job cards now for which they demanded 18,782 days' work. After many struggles, a *gram sabha* was held in which it was found that the government could bear the expenses of the plans but they were not be able to create the 85,829 man days as per the INRM Plan. So, a conclusion was reached that a priority list of the plan would be made on the basis of two factors—the labour budget under which 18,782 man days were available and the list of deprived families (data from survey). The plan will be implemented in the financial year 2015–16. In the next financial year, 31.2 ha of land plans will be implemented, which will cost Rs 48.81 lakhs. Of the 45 landless families, the plans of 36 families (such as a vermi-compost bed, a goat shed, a cow shelter, and a latrine room) will also be implemented (Table 3).

This matrix has been prepared by the community with the help of CFT members. It will help the community as well as the administration to track how many labourers

*The CFT Project is a unique opportunity that provides a platform for women of the community to assert themselves and claim their space in public life*

can get work each month, through MGNREGA.

## CONCLUSION

The CFT Project is a unique opportunity that provides a platform for women of the community to assert themselves and claim their space in public life. The operation of the entire project is centered on women's collectives, which were given charge of one of the most important social security schemes in the world.

Not only women but also deprived families stand to benefit through this project because an inclusive planning process is one of the key foci of its operations. Increased participation in decision-making will boost people's self-esteem and motivate them to become an active and vigilant citizenry. In the past, MGNREGA has operated as a purely arbitrary service of little community value. The collaboration of SHGs and PRIs has the potential to transform the face of not only MGNREGA but also of other ailing social schemes as well.

# A Tale of an Untold Fight

ASHUTOSH NANDA AND KUNTAL MUKHERJEE

*Challenging the lobbies of contractors, influential people and others, to break the nexus around MGNREGA, the women's collectives of Barethinbahara persevere, amid great opposition and political muscle, to eventually get the village to work together for its common good and welfare*

Ever since its inception in 2005, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has always been the subject of debate over its ineffectiveness, mostly because of rampant corruption in the system. In 2014, the Scheme was publically denounced by the central government and there was serious talk of curtailing the budget for MGNREGA. One of the major arguments raised against it was that MGNREGA had become an inefficient Act and that people were not demanding work from it because the wage rate was much higher in the market and also because the needs of rural India were changing.

However, amidst all these controversies, the women's collectives of Barethinbahara village of Bhansuli *panchayat*, Narharpur block, Chhattisgarh, challenged the lobbies of contractors, influential people and others, to break the nexus around MGNREGA. What became clear from their struggle was that the people need MGNREGA not only as a source of work as labourers but also to build quality assets to increase their livelihood portfolios; they want equal opportunities for poorer families to be able to create their asset base.

Barethinbahara is a backward village. More than one-third of the Narharpur block is covered with forest. Barethinbahara is 15 km from the block headquarters and 46 km from the district headquarters in Kanker. Agriculture is the main source of livelihood and the per capita land-holding of the village is about 2.5 acres with 28 per cent of the households (HHs) having scattered land-holding of less than 2.5 acres. Only 30 per cent of the families manage to have round-the-year food sufficiency in the village.

The rich forest surroundings, however, provide the HHs the second major source of livelihood from Minor Forest Produce (MFP) collection. People also depend on the forest for fuel wood. Migration, after the harvesting of the crop, to the plains of Chhattisgarh is high to sustain family needs and aspirations. Very few irrigation facilities, the undulating land, low productivity, soil run-off and erratic rainfall make these villagers very vulnerable.

*In 2014, the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) drafted a Project for the convergence of MGNREGS and National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), with an objective to synergize the functioning of both, so as to substantially enhance the quality of assets being created and, thereby, ensuring better sustainability of rural livelihoods*

Energy Development Agency (CREDA) and the Department of Agriculture for income generation activities, drudgery reduction, and productivity enhancement of the villagers. The villagers were, therefore, able to associate with these stakeholders. This provided an opportunity to the community to do the work it envisaged. The villagers were able to focus on quality and needs-based assets creation by planning, monitoring and participating in the process in a more organized manner.

In 2014, the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) drafted a Project for the convergence of MGNREGS and National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), with an objective to synergize the functioning of both, so as to substantially enhance the quality of assets being created and, thereby, ensuring better sustainability of rural livelihoods. The Narharpur block of Kanker district was among the 250 blocks identified by the state government for the Project, and PRADAN was selected as the Cluster Facilitation Team (CFT) for the block. PRADAN, then, selected one-third of the *gram panchayats* (GP) for implementing Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM)-based MGNREGA work. Barethinbahara village was among the selected panchayats.

After the launch of the CFT-NRLM Convergence Project and under the guidelines specified by MoRD, PRADAN and the members of the women's collectives got a formal space to participate in the MGNREGA programme. Through the CFT/Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise (IPPE) projects, MGNREGA assets such as farm ponds, Azolla tanks, poultry-sheds and cow-sheds were linked to the Department of Animal Husbandry, the Chhattisgarh State Renewable

PRADAN initiated a process in Barethinbahara and nearby villages to facilitate a change in the conditions of the disadvantaged communities, especially women. The initiatives would ensure access to and control over improved production technologies and practices. The first step was to form a village-level organization for grass-roots decision-making, with emphasis on women's participation. Regular visits, discussions, rapport-building and screening of video shows in the community helped form seven Self Help Groups (SHGs) in the village. This brought 80 per cent of the HHs under one umbrella. Continuous engagement and trainings (membership training, group process training, visioning exercises, basic accounts maintenance and bank linkage training), helped SHG members and other community members to appreciate and believe in individual, as well as collective, strength.

The second step was to understand the problems of the village and to map out the probable solutions for these problems. After discussions, field visits and interactions with SHG members, it was understood that, round-the-year food sufficiency was the major challenge in the village. This stemmed

from low production and low productivity of the land, which, in turn, were largely due to lack of irrigation options, the undulating land pattern and low residual moisture.

MGNREGA provides for strategic intervention to resolve these issues. It directly promises creation of assets (on individual as well as collective lands) and gives wages to the villagers for working to create these assets in the village. Discussions were initiated in the village about how the INRM-based planning of the village could be carried out and how MGNREGA could support that plan. PRADAN, as the CFT, helped the community to understand its resources (land/water, labour, livestock and forests), its potential and how these were inter-linked. PRADAN helped to build the capacity of Community Resource Persons (CRPs), *gram panchayat* functionaries and SHG members on how the participatory plan of Natural Resource Management (NRM) worked.

Awareness was generated in the community through mass campaigning at the village level, and exposure visits to already developed areas for *panchayat* representatives, villagers and SHG members. Community meetings were held to create awareness about the CFT Project guidelines, and in-house knowledge building workshops were also organized.

The women's collectives provided strong leadership in IPPE. With the help of CRPs, SHG members prepared a social and resource map of the village and became actively involved in site selection, and technical supervision of activities such as constructing water harvesting structures and supervising soil conservation measures. With the help of the elderly and other villagers, resource mapping was done to assess

*MGNREGA provides for strategic intervention to resolve issues. It directly promises creation of assets (on individual as well as collective lands) and gives wages to the villagers for working to create these assets in the village*

the available natural resources. Resource mapping helped the community understand the physical resources in the village.

From the resource map, an up-land patch was selected for a transect walk and for INRM treatment. Taking into account the slope and continuity (INRM-based), a plan was made, with the help of CFT members and

the Technical Assistant, and presented before everyone in the village. A seasonality mapping was also done, in order to estimate the work openings in the *panchayat* versus the labour availability in the community. There was a special focus on involving women in the work.

Earlier, the process was different. All the decisions, then, were taken by the cartel group (*panch* and some government officials) and the implementation was monopolized. There was no patch selection nor were there any field visits or transect walks. Plans came to the *panchayat* from different patches of the village and were forwarded to the block without any discussion by the villagers. The villagers were not even aware about the work sanctioned or who the beneficiaries were for that financial year. They usually came to know about it while working at the worksites. No one was able to challenge those systems and women were more vulnerable due to the social structure. Transparency was low at the *panchayat* level and only some *panchayat* members took the decision to implement the MGNREGA programme. In the process, they took bribes from the tribal community for planning assets and for sanctioning them under MGNREGA.

According to Category IV of MGNREGA, tribals are entitled to have individual assets (ponds, wells, land-levelling, cow-sheds, NADEP, etc.) from the Scheme without any

charge. However, in the name of documentation, the tribals were asked to submit an average of Rs 300 to 1,000 per person to the *panchayat* to prepare their file for MGNREGA work. They were not given a receipt that their file had been submitted and also there was no guarantee that the file would go to the block for approval.

The tribals also had to bribe the officials (*sarpanch*, *gram rozgar sahayak*—GRS, Technical Assistant—TA) to approve the plans within the same financial year. The rate of the bribe was fixed at 2 per cent of the work sanctioned. Moreover, a powerful person's plans were sanctioned every year whereas a marginalized, poor person's files were lost in the offices. If the work was sanctioned, it usually did not pertain to the watershed approach. Assets created under MGNREGA could also not be utilized optimally due to the kind of assets created and, sometimes, because of the sporadic construction.

Over time, and after continuous involvement with the *panchayat*, through meetings and trainings and simultaneously conducting awareness activities with SHGs, an environment was created at the grass roots in which agencies could work together, to identify the bottlenecks that existed in the planning and implementation of the MGNREGA programme. Action was then taken to bring transparency and equity in the village.

The major bottlenecks identified by the SHGs were:

1. The planning of works was not participatory and was not discussed in the *gram sabha*.

*Over time, and after continuous involvement with the panchayat, through meetings and trainings and simultaneously conducting awareness activities with SHGs, an environment was created at the grass roots in which agencies could work together, to identify the bottlenecks that existed in the planning and implementation of the MGNREGA programme. Action was then taken to bring transparency and equity in the village*

A group of four or five (usually the *panch*-Ward members) made a resolution on behalf of the *panachyat* and approved the work and sent it to the block for further action.

2. Some influential people had their plans sanctioned every year by improper means whereas many people in need were excluded, even after submission of all valid documents.
3. Payments were not regular. The major reasons for this were discrepancies in the account numbers of the beneficiaries and delays in the submission of muster

rolls. The delay in payments varied from one month to six months. In some cases, payment was delayed for more than one year. This happened because the Account number of the person was not registered in the MIS, and the Mates entered it in the muster roll manually, which led to errors. Approximately 30 to 40 per cent of the problems in payments were due to wrong Account numbers, leading to the whole fund transfer order (FTO) being rejected.

Having experienced all these hurdles, SHG members decided to take action to implement the programme better. The first point of action to be taken was that families that had not got any individual work benefit for individual asset creation since the inception of the programme would be given a chance first. The second was that those families that had received repeated benefits from MGNREGA would be given less priority and their works could be considered in subsequent years. The third point of action was that one family could take only one benefit in



one year. They could avail of another work the following year.

These restrictions were only on the asset creation of an individual tribal family and not on working as a labour or Mate for MGNREGA work. The logic behind these action points was to provide the benefits of the entitlement to the marginalized and the most vulnerable, taking into consideration the labour budget (the maximum cap of the labour budget for one *panchayat* is fixed based on the number of job cards multiplied by the number of days (150) multiplied by the wage rate) and the funds available for the *panchayat*.

The fourth point was that all the Account numbers would be registered with the help of the GRS and the Block Programme Officer. It was also decided that all the plans would be forwarded to the block after discussion and being passed by the *gram sabha*. The *gram sabha* resolution would be attached to each file (instead of the *panch* resolution) for technical sanction (TS) and administrative sanction (AS).

Earlier, the *sarpanch* and the *panch* would pass the resolution and forward only prioritized files to the block; in other words, they forwarded files in which they had a vested interest or where the tribals had paid a bribe. All decisions were taken behind closed doors and the process was not at all transparent. Following the involvement of women's collectives and CFT members, there has been a shift and decisions have begun to be taken with all the villagers present, including PRI representatives, MGNREGA officials, TA, Mates, *sarpanch*, *sachiv* and GRS. Plans are now prioritized and passed in the *gram sabha* by the community and are sent to the block for TS and AS from the *zilla panchayat*.

CFT-NRLM Project guidelines clearly mention that all plans will be sanctioned, in totality, within one month from the date of submission,

if the *gram sabha* has passed them. This year, SHG members and CRPs submitted all the plans in the prescribed format by 24 January 2015, and were passed in the *gram sabha* with the help of the CFT. Unfortunately, however, no action took place and TS and AS were received for six months .

Meanwhile, in May 2015, MGNREGA works were opened once again, and its cell decided to complete the spillover works of the previous year. If any work had been sanctioned and had not been completed, it was given priority. And in those *panchayats* where there was no pending work, 30 per cent new files, planned and submitted through the CFT were sanctioned, thereby generating work for the labourers. SHG members and the villagers participated with great enthusiasm in the works that were started.

SHG members started monitoring the works. When they found a violation in work implementation at the worksite, they brought it to the notice of the PRI members. The violation was mainly in two people's work—Jagnu Ram Tekam and Gandeo Tekam, who had initiated work on their land without consulting the villagers. They had had work done on their land for three consecutive years (making a pond, land-levelling and bunding) under various schemes (twice MGNREGA and once IWMP and MGNREGA convergence). The SHG members had passed a resolution not to include the plans of those who had already benefitted in the last couple of years; they were, naturally, unhappy with the situation.

Every year, Gandeo Tekam, Jagnu Ram and their relatives used to get their work sanctioned and executed by using political power and unfair practices. SHG members demanded that their works be stopped because it was not aligned with the very first point of action decided upon during the IPPE planning at the worksite.

Gandeo Tekam and Jagnu Ram Tekam were politically backed and had bribed some of the stakeholders (the GRS, TA and PRI members), the local administration was afraid to take any action against them. The authorities played their role diplomatically and decided that silence was the best policy.

SHG members of the village, however, were determined to oppose the matter strongly. Jagnu Ram and Gandeo Tekam told the SHG members categorically that they would not abide by any decision taken by the SHG members or the villagers. They also misguided the villagers through various means (liquor, rumours) and also spoke ill of the SHG members. They filled a demand form and started work on the disputed worksite, without taking the consent of the villagers and, particularly, the SHG members. They threatened the villagers working for them that if they did not continue working with them, their earlier payments would not be made, their job cards would be cancelled and they would not get any further entitlements.

Many villagers stepped back. They did not want to take the risk of fighting with these powerful men when their livelihood as wage-labour was under threat. The SHG members and CRPs brought the issue to the notice of the PRADAN CFT team. PRADAN professionals and the SHG members organized a meeting in the village to discuss this issue. The initial discussions were attended by only a few participants. People hesitated to raise their voice against such influential persons.

The women, however, were determined to take action. If they had not, they would have lost confidence and self-esteem. The SHG members and CFT raised the issue with the Programme Officer (PO)-MGNREGA at the block Level. The PO assured them that he would look into the matter and promised to

stop the work. Even after one week, however, no affirmative action was taken. Again the Mates and the GRS demanded work on the same people's disputed land.

Gradually, this impacted the SHG members. Some of the families advised their wives and daughters-in-law not to participate in SHG meetings. Many SHG members began behaving defensively due to family pressure. Things became very complex. Two SHG members, Sashikala Markam and Sita Netam, took the lead and, with the help of the CFT members, decided to fight against the unjustified actions of the influential people of the village. They started organizing the SHG members again. They visited each household and knocked at each door. They spread awareness and educated the villagers about MGNREGA. Sashikala said, "We women labourers will not go to work in the field of those people who are not abiding by the resolutions made in the *gram sabha*." In spite of these efforts, some SHG members were unable to take a stance, fearing repercussions from their families.

Simultaneously, the CFT worked on influencing other stakeholders in the village such as the *ex-sarpanch*, the village Headman or Patel, the Sians (the respected members in the tribal Gondwana *sama*) and a group of active youth. They were made aware of the purpose and realities associated with the Scheme and its violation by some people, including the GRS, the Mate and some PRI members. They were informed about the communication about this to the PO.

These efforts paid off and another village-level meeting was organized on 2 June 2015; all the villagers were invited. However, owing to their apprehensions, fears and nervousness, only half the village turned up. The SHG leaders and PRADAN-CFT explained the issue to the villagers and assured them that such rumours

were baseless. This meeting had one good result. The SHG members again became united and decided to take this matter to a higher level. They mobilized 100 women workers and formed pressure groups. Some were members of the SHG and some were not.

They decided to take the issue to the PO and the CEO of the block (*Janpad panchayat*, Narharpur). Their efforts paid off. SHG members submitted the application to the *panchayat* and the *Janpad panchayat* office, to stop assigning works to the politically powerful persons. They wrote in their application about the violation of the *gram sabha* consensus.

"We are demanding proper distribution of sanctioned work in the village, as per the resolutions agreed upon in the *gram sabha*," said Sashikala. She told them that it had been decided in the *gram sabha* that the benefit of creating assets should reach the persons, who have had less opportunities in the Scheme, and that those who had received the benefits the previous year should be given less priority.

After conducting an inquiry and assessing the facts, the CEO of the Narharpur block, Kanker district, issued an order to stop the work on 3rd June 2015. Even after getting the order from the CEO, the GRS and the *sachiv* did not stop the work. Instead, they claimed that they had not yet received any letter in this regard. The SHG members showed them the letter and had the work stopped by agitating at the worksite.

However, the real test was yet to come. The beneficiaries, whose work had been stopped, began creating more problems. They influenced the labour as well as other powerful persons against this movement. The *sarpanch* of the *panchayat* also took this issue negatively. The *sarpanch*, the *sachiv* and the

GRS became very disturbed by this movement led by women. The order sent by the CEO of the *Janpad panchayat* (Block) was directed in favour of the SHG members. The CEO's orders to stop the work not only created a legal barrier but also questioned the *panchayat*'s monopoly. Other PRI members were also misled by the *sarpanch* and the *sachiv*, and said that the women's SHGs were challenging the decisions of the *panchayats*. The *sarpanch* and the *sachiv* along with other influential people started a campaign against the SHG-led movement.

Gradually, it became a matter of prestige between members of the PRI and the women's collectives. The labourers were told by the GRS that they would not get wages owed to them for the work that had been stopped by the SHGs.

This created chaos and more than 100 male labourers started shouting at the SHG members because they were worried about the payment for the work they had already done. Those labourers were the husbands and relatives/family members of the women from the SHGs. The men began to shout at their women and started controlling their movements. They had more faith in the *panchayat* functionaries' statements than the voice of the women's collectives.

Rumours were spread that the CFT Project was only for a year, and that the villagers would have to go back to the earlier system after that. The villagers were threatened that the next year the *panchayat* would restrict the demand of those families supporting these women-led activities. They were also told that the files would not be forwarded to the *Janpad Panchayat* and the *Zilla parishad* for sanction. The Mates would refuse to take the demand from the HHs supporting the movement.

The issue created disturbance in the village politics, in families and among relatives. The women were vulnerable because they had a limited role in decision-making. They also had restricted mobility and most suffered from low self-esteem, making it even more difficult for the women. The problem lay on the intersection of class, gender and politics. This time, however, the women were not deterred. They started creating awareness, with the support of the CFT, about the rights, entitlements and benefits available to villagers under the Scheme. They visited the block office and discussed the issue with the MGNREGA-PO and the CEO of the *Janpad Panchayat*. The block officials assured them about the demand rules and the payment systems.

SHG members then visited each household again and called a meeting of all the SHG members in the village. They visited all the Ward *panchs* and convinced them about the rules listed in MGNREGA. They were able to convince them and show them how to demand jobs under MGNREGA, which guarantees 100 days of unskilled wage work to every village household.

Again a meeting date was fixed with all the villagers, PRI members, GRS and *sachiv*. Before the meeting, the SHG collectives asked the block CEO, the concerned site engineer and the *panchayat* functionaries to be present at the meeting.

On the scheduled date (8 June 2015), the participation of the villagers in the meeting was quite high. The SHG leaders explained the problems, the possibilities and the importance of transparency and accountability. All the members present in the meeting became convinced and showed faith in the SHG collective and appreciated its efforts. The social capital, thus generated, resulted in enhanced knowledge development of its members.

Each rumour related to payment, to starting new work, to cancellation of job cards, etc., was discussed and the problem analyzed. After much debate, confrontation and negotiation, many villagers recognized the value of collective movement. The politically powerful persons, who had created all the problems, were absent from the meeting. The GRS was also not present in the village meeting, for which his credibility was questioned. This created a favourable ambience for the women's collectives. The matter was resolved and it was decided that no work would be done if the beneficiary's land development work had already been done the previous year. Those who had not got any benefit would be given work on priority.

After this meeting, the labourers who had done the work for Jagnu Ram Tekam and Gandeo Tekam received their wages, even though the work had been stopped. Work on others' lands was initiated.

SHG members are now fighting a new battle, which is to resolve the issue of delayed payments from MGNREGA in their village. Thus, women's participation brought about a double benefit. Whereas it has made for greater transparency and accountability in the running of government programmes, it has also transformed the women and given them a stake in the future. The bribe system, for sanctioning the work in the *panchayat*, has stopped completely.

MGNREGA is designed to increase the access of the villagers to quality assets and to take care of the livelihood needs of the community. The reality, however, is that often, the poorest are unable to derive the benefits meant for them because of their own illiteracy and lack of information as well a corrupt system. Times are changing, however, thanks to the tireless efforts of the SHG members, like those in

Barethinbahara village, where the women have spread awareness about schemes and have stood up against corruption in their village.

Systemic arrangements such as the CFT and the IPPE help women bring their issues to the fore and encourage them to find solutions to it and act upon them. The participatory planning exercise has given the villagers confidence and has brought about a sense of equality amongst them; as a result, most of the vulnerable section have got work. Women look at this opportunity as economic freedom. More than wage parity, women's collectives have focussed on land and water conservation, and farm improvement. It allows the communities belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to take up work in their own fields and get paid for the assets created. Women participating in the programme are making their degraded farms suitable for farming, which is ultimately helping create round-the-year food sufficiency.

Increasing women's participation in MGNREGA can lead to a more effective implementation of the programmes, which will then create quality assets for long-term sustainability. Programmes such as CFT and IPPE ensure participation of the villagers in the development of their lands and their community. They lead to capacity building amongst them and enhanced confidence. There is increased co-operation between women's collectives and *panchayat* representatives, both of whom play nodal roles in the programme's implementation, including in preparing the Village Development Plan.

Across Chhattisgarh, there are several women like Sashikala and Sita Bai, who are raising their voices to assert their community's rights and entitlements under various government-run poverty alleviation schemes. In fact, women, organized under SHGs, have emerged as a strong force against corruption and malpractices at the village level and in the local governance. Continuous training and capacity building of women's collectives, not only helps them realize their strength but also helps them establish their identity in the outer world.





The NREGA Mela, organised by Federation members in the Raidih panchayat, Gumla district of Jharkhand to create awareness about MGNREGA. Federation members set up stalls selling books written by eminent persons working on MGNREGA, to help people understand the Act. Alongside, street plays were performed, songs sung and slogans created about MGNREGA. About 5000 people participated in the event.



# PRADAN



**PRADAN** is a voluntary organization registered in Delhi under the Societies Registration Act. PRADAN works through small teams of professionals in selected villages across eight states. The focus of PRADAN's work is to promote and strengthen livelihoods for the rural poor. It involves organizing the poor, enhancing their capabilities, introducing ways to improve their income and linking them to banks, markets and other economic services. The professionals work directly with the poor, using their knowledge and skills to help remove poverty. *NewsReach*, PRADAN's bimonthly journal, is a forum for sharing the thoughts and experiences of these professionals working in remote and far-flung areas in the field. *NewsReach* helps them to reach out and connect with each other, the development fraternity and the outside world.

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