

## A Journey with the Birhors in Hazaribag

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*An invisible community, shunned by the world around it, becomes the focus of intervention, leading to inclusion for the first time and the beginning of change. Lasting social transformation, however, can only come about with long-term empathic engagement*

Birhor literally means the forest man. The word 'Birhor' is derived by combining two Mundari terms— 'Bir', meaning forest and 'Hor', meaning man. Birhors belong to one of the 75 Primitive Tribal Groups (PTG) Listed by the Government of India. They belong to the Proto-Australoid stock and, linguistically, they originate from the Austro-Asiatic group. The Birhors believe that they are the descendents of the Sun and that they are related to the Kharwar tribe that also descended from the Sun.

According to the 1991 Census, the population of the Birhors in Jharkhand is 8,038 and they live mainly in Palamu, Garhwa, Singhbhum, Giridih, Lohardaga, Ranchi, Hazaribag and Gumla. Only 15 per cent of them are literate. Traditionally, they are a food gathering and hunting community and their economic activities have been closely linked with the forest. Rope making, by collecting the bauhinia creeper has been their major source of income. Their economic activities are, however, undergoing a change. Driven by survival strategies, they are pursuing whatever activities are immediately available. The degradation of forests has affected their traditional economy and has introduced a certain level of instability.

The Birhors are nomads, who move from one jungle to the other, practising shifting cultivation; when the food supply of a particular forest is exhausted, they move to another forest. The Birhor settlement is known as a tanda, which comprises several huts. The huts are conical in shape and are erected with the help of leaves and branches. The houses of the more settled Birhors are made of mud walls, bamboo and wood, thatched with phus (grass and straw) or handmade tiles, which they have learnt to make from their neighbours.

The economy of the Birhor tribe largely depends on forest resources, labour and agriculture. For the Bihors, the forest is the main source of food and income and their agricultural land is divided into two major types—Tanr and Don. The degradation of the forest, coupled with restrictions placed on their access to the forests, has forced them out of their traditional occupation although many of them are still engaged in rope making. The forest resources for the most part gathered by them are from the bauhinia creeper that grows copiously in these regions. Numerous kinds of ropes and rope-products are made from the bark (chhakkam) of these creepers. Various other minor forest products are procured and exchanged in the neighbouring communities. With the introduction of forest laws, their access to these resources has also severely diminished. A major shift occurred in the workforce structure and the importance of the traditional occupation of rope making declined because they could no longer call the forests their own. The intensity of the change in the workforce structure of these people has been greater in the post-independence period.

However, a sizeable segment of agricultural labour are reverting to their traditional occupation of forest gathering and their share, therefore, declining whereas the share of workers in forestry and related activities has increased. This clearly indicates that either they could not adjust to agricultural labour or that the opportunities to work as agricultural labour have declined. Their labour is now being used for timber felling and forest management.

Thus, with the introduction of various forest laws, the change in the means of livelihood among the Bihors did see a significant shift of workforce engaged in traditional activities to the agricultural sector. Although people moved to a settled form of cultivation as farmers or agricultural labourers, the supply of labour force, in general, also saw a significant increase.

### SITUATION OF BIRHORS IN JHARKHAND

Table 1: Distribution of Birhor Workers by Industrial Categories in Jharkhand (Per Cent)

**Table 3: Distribution of Birhor workers by Industrial Categories in Jharkhand (Per cent)**

Category	1961	1971	1981	1991
Cultivators	19.67	18.36	11.99	43.1
Agricultural labourers	12.16	31.25	23.13	30.74
Livestock, fishing, etc	6.22	9.02	15.97	4.19
Mining and quarrying				1.08
Household industry (rope making)	53.51	37.49	36.18	11.3
Other than household industry	2.00	5.43	9.44	7.23
Construction	-	-	0.11	0.15
Trade and commerce	-	-	0.21	0.33
Transport, storage and communications	-	-	0.21	0.30
Other services	6.44	0.22	2.71	1.57

Notes: (1) The workforce data for 1961 Census is not comparable with later ones due to change in the definition of workers.

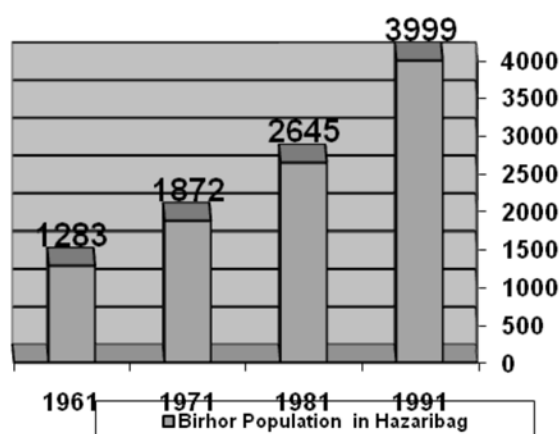
(2) The data presented for 1991 is for Bihar. The workforce data for different tribal groups is not available at the district level. However, as the Bihors are concentrated in Jharkhand, this data can be considered to represent Jharkhand.

Source: Computed by author from Census of India Special Tables for Scheduled Tribes for the respective years.

With the degradation of forests, the Birhors have become deprived of their traditional sources of livelihood, resulting in instability in their economic activities. They have been continuously moving in and out of their traditional economic activities. Although the alternative economic activity for them has been agriculture, ignorance of agricultural practices and the low quality of the land have been the major hindrances in their adopting it. Studies suggest that they have not been able to adapt to agriculture and have gone back to rope

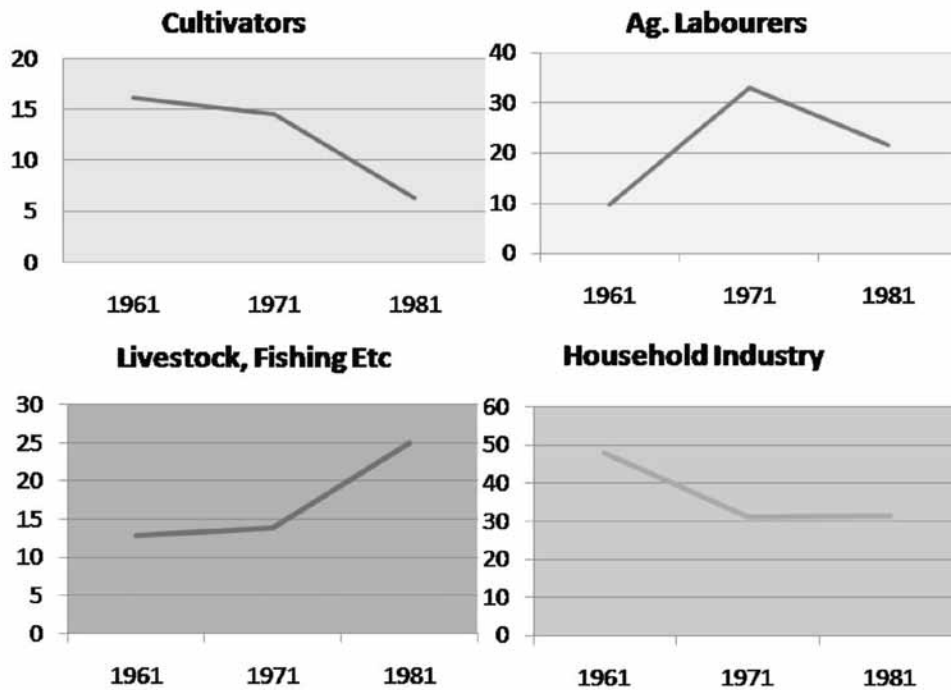
making. Insecure livelihoods have compelled them to move out of the district to where there is scope for occupation. In Jharkhand, the commonly held view is that the population of the Birhors has been diminishing but, in fact, studies show that their population is being redistributed as a result of the dismantling of their traditional modes of economy, according to Ayon Sarkar and Vijayta Mahendru in their 'A Study on the Santhal and Birhor Tribes of Jharkhand' say/mention.

**Figure 1: Birhors: Population Growth**



*Source: Census of India, Bihar: special tables for ST of respective years*

Figure 2: Birhors: Occupation



Source: Computed by the author based on Census of India: Bihar, Special Tables for Scheduled Tribes for the respective census years

#### DISTRIBUTION OF BIRHOR WORKERS BY INDUSTRIAL CATEGORY (PER CENT) IN HAZARIBAG

Hazaribag is considered one of the oldest habitations of the Birhors and, over the years, this area is where their population has increased marginally. Since independence, a significant change has been observed in the economic activities of this tribe. They are now involved in various industrial activities as shown in Table 1. The tribal population of Hazaribag, as well as Jharkhand, has consistently experienced a slower increase in population than the non-tribal groups during the entire post-independence period. This is in sharp contrast to the tribal population growth (both in relative and absolute terms) in many other states (especially outside eastern India),

as well as at an aggregate all-India level. Although the tribal population as a whole has been experiencing a slower rate of growth, the population of a number of smaller tribal groups is reported to be stagnating or declining. In this context, the study of the population dynamics of the Birhors would be interesting and would verify such arguments and throw light on some of the influencing factors.

#### PRADAN'S INTERVENTIONS IN HAZARIBAG

PRADAN initiated work in this area in 1992, with a focus to improve the socio-economic life of the poor. Promotion of Women's Self Help Groups (SHGs) became the first area of focus because this would bring both the social and economic issues on to a single

platform. The women, considered the most disadvantaged section of the society, started organizing themselves to address poverty and other social evils. In 1992, PRADAN actively participated in pioneering the SHG-Bank linkage model within the framework of the NABARD-RBI guidelines for financing SHGs. In due course, the SHGs gained a legitimate space in the system and began to receive mainstream bank finance. The SHGs were a vehicle of empowerment and mutual support, thus enhancing the self-image and confidence of the members. The need for collectivization is not only restricted to the group level but it is also demonstrated at the *panchayat* level, in the form of clusters, and at the district level in the form of federations. These collectives give the members significant recognition in society and there is a visible movement towards newer ways of living.

Today, PRADAN is working in five blocks of the district, that is, Padma, Barhi, Barkatha, Churchu and Chouparan with 13,546 families organized into 932 women's SHGs. These groups have weekly meetings in their own hamlet and have an accountant to maintain the books of accounts. There are around 67 SHG clusters at the *panchayat* level. Through these SHGs, the women find an opportunity to express their needs, not only as members but also as representatives of a primary group.

PRADAN later initiated a livelihoods promotion initiative, with an objective to enhance the food sufficiency of a family and at the same time ensure vibrancy in the village economy through regular cash flow. The SHG members are today linked to various financial institutions for credit and government agencies for grants so that they can take up different livelihood and income-generation activities. PRADAN also developed a few livelihood prototypes suitable to the community in this area.

## NAWAGARH—THE VILLAGE

Nawagarh is a small village under Rampur panchayat of Chouparan block in Hazaribag district, Jharkhand. As per the 2001 Census, the village had 117 households with a total population of 649 with a sex ratio of 1041 males to 1000 females. Of the total population, 175 persons belong to the Scheduled Caste (SC) community with a sex ratio of 966 males to 1000 females. The population of the Scheduled Tribe (ST) community is 42 with a sex ratio of 1625 males to 1000 females. Of the 94 ha of the total land in the village, 69.47 ha is forested with almost 74 per cent forest coverage. The Birhors, who belong to the ST category, dwell against the backdrop of the forest at the extreme border of the village, out of main settlement of the village. The dwellings of the Birhors go unnoticed because their habitation is not connected to the road and one has to cross vast stretches of fallow and forest lands and ponds to reach where they stay.

There are 32 Birhors in Nawagarh; their number has decreased by 10 since the 2001 Census, mainly due to migration and a very low rate of life expectancy. The main factors for the latter are a lack of a nutritious diet and a disease-prone environment.

The main occupation of these people in the village is rope making, hunting small animals such as rabbits, gathering firewood and *datwans* (wood of *neem* and *babool* traditionally used for cleaning teeth), collecting medicinal herbs and selling them in the local markets. The only literate person in the community is Birju Birhor, who is now a tractor driver; the other Birhors look up to him for advice and guidance. Until a few months ago, there were 10 to 12 small hutments (difficult for a full grown person to enter), in the fringe stretches of the forest. These small conical-shaped hutments, eight

feet in diameter and a height of five to six feet and an entrance with a height of two or three feet were the only rooms where the families used to sleep, cook, eat and keep their belongings, including a pair of goats. Now, there are well-built concrete two-room houses for the 12 families of Birhors; the journey has been splendid and satisfying.

This journey started in 2008 when PRADAN began working in the village as a watershed project with financial help from Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC). As per the project, PRADAN formed a Village Development Committee (VDC), representing people of all castes, categories and hamlets. But the poorest of the poor still seemed to get left out because PRADAN was unaware of the existence of the Birhors in the village and the people of Nawagarh never mentioned them. The planning exercise went on and many plans were discussed to improve the land and water situation of the village—an earthen check dam, a homestead well and others. When moving through the village, one of PRADAN's professionals happened to come across the dwellings of these lesser known people. The issue was raised in the VDC meeting of Nawagarh. At first the VDC did not show much interest because the Birhors were not treated as fellow villagers. The arguments that they put forward were, "The Birhor keep changing their place and, a few years ago, the community settled here, but they don't have their own land. No one can keep track of them because the families of the Birhors never stay in one place permanently." But there were a few people in the VDC—Kameshwar Bhuiyan and Sanichar Singh, the Secretary and the President of the VDC—who had other plans in mind. They strongly advocated a need to do something for the Birhors because they were the most deprived of all. PRADAN, with

the help of the Nawagarh VDC, incorporated a residence for the Birhors in the annual implementation plan of the village.

A day-long meeting was conducted with all the Birhors to identify what their idea of a home was. We, as part of the PRADAN team working in the area, used chart papers and drawing pens, to create a first sketch of the building, with inputs from both men and women. The drawing was made, based on their perception of a dream home, and estimates prepared. The proposal was then sanctioned by DVC but the path was not smooth for the VDC and PRADAN. The first hurdle that came up was that the Birhors did not own the land on which they lived. After detailed discussions, it was decided to approach the block office of Chouparan to allot some government land to them so that the construction could begin. Within a month, the block and circle office allotted land to 12 families—1.12 acres almost 10 decimals for each of the 12 families at the same place. But the people from 'Thakur tola', a hamlet in the village, were against the idea because the place was the main grazing land for their cattle and some of the land had been encroached upon to grow pulses. There was strong opposition to the project. The Birhors were threatened, and bricks and other construction material was stolen.

The role of the block office was commendable in this situation. The Block Development Officer (BDO) took personal interest and encouraged the VDC to go ahead with the project. He warned the troublemakers that anyone who interfered with the proceedings would be prosecuted. The VDC, with the guidance of Sanichar Singh and Kameshwar Bhuiyan and with active support from the SHG members in the village, completed the process of land allotment and demarcation by mid-2010.

The allotment of land to the Birhor families was not the end but the beginning of the empowering process that PRADAN and the VDC initiated. With the onset of the monsoon, the construction of the houses was supposed to be halted. But the Nawagarh VDC and the Block Level Coordination Committee (BLCC), formed by PRADAN, comprising the watershed villages of the Chouparan Block, pressed hard to go ahead with the plan. The plan was that everyone carry on work until the task is finished. It was an unarticulated assertion that the first to be benefitted should be those who have never been benefitted. The most striking part of all was the inclusion of the Birhor people—Birju Birhor, Pahari Birhor and Santosh Birhor, in the process. The Bihors began to attend the VDC and the BLCC meetings; they became a part of the process of forwarding the applications to the block and circle offices and approaching the BLC to press for the demand that their houses be constructed. There was a ray of hope in the tribe—a people who did not have anything to lose had started to think of property and had begun to dream of well-constructed houses; they began to recognize and assert their rights to live as humans, which the earlier generations of Bihors had never aspired to.

The happiness and excitement of the people inspired PRADAN even more to bring them into the mainstream of society. An SHG was formed, comprising Birhor women; it started meeting once a week. The other SHGs and the older SHG members helped these women make a start.

In the latter half of 2010, construction work on the land started, which the Birhor people

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could now call their own. One thing was clear—treating the Bihors as beneficiaries would not empower them in the long run, as had been seen in various programmes run amongst other communities. So PRADAN and the VDC decided to conduct a meeting with the Birhor people, to formalize a plan for the construction of their houses. As per the project outline, they were meant to bear 10 per cent of the total cost; it was clear that they could not afford to do

that. But the proposal was put forward that they would be paid to construct the houses and that they would contribute a percentage of their earnings towards the building cost of the houses. It took two to three months to convince the Birhor people to contribute; a change from a receiver to a partner in the development.

A detailed plan was chalked out for the construction and the roles of the different people involved— PRADAN, the VDC, the SHG and the Bihors themselves—were defined. It was decided that a meeting would take place once a week at the site, in which the Birhor people, with the help of Sanichar Singh and Kameshwar Bhuiyan, would monitor the progress. At each meeting, the Bihors were encouraged to put forward their views and if there was anything of concern, that must be considered and attended to. It yielded results because the Bihors started taking an active part in the construction.

A monitoring committee was formed amidst the Birhor people, under Pahari Birhor, to look at the developments in the construction work. The Birhor families agreed to work in the construction and to contribute Rs 30 from each day's wages that they earned. They also

contributed a few days' wages during the foundation of the building. Strikingly enough, the hired mason from the neighbouring village also decided to take Rs 130 instead of Rs 150. Other workers also charged less in comparison to the wage rate at that time. Brick kiln owners, cement suppliers also decreased their rate from the market rate. It seemed as if every individual was contributing and propelling enough energy to take this project forward.

Initially, nine houses were to be built, comprising one room and a verandah; the main living room was to be made of RCC, whereas the verandah was to be built with a slanting tin roof from the allotted DVC fund (Rs 3.85 lakhs) for the construction. While the work was in progress, someone from the village told the Birhors that the houses would collapse because the walls were only five inches thick. "Have you seen any house in the village that has a five-inch wall?" The Birhors then said, "*Ee gharwa to gir jaito, hamni sab ekra mai nahi rahbo.* (These houses will collapse, we will not live here)." On demand from the tribals, the thickness of the wall was changed to 10 inches, even though this would create havoc with the finances. To keep the project within the budget, it was then decided to erect one single house of nine rooms, which would have an outside wall of ten inch thickness and the inner walls would be of five inch thickness.

In addition, there was the problem of constantly rising prices of everything from cement, sand, bricks, labour force, etc., because of the high rate of inflation. The budget was eroding fast. All these issues were discussed with the Birhors. Money was transferred from PRADAN's account to the account of the VDC, Nawagarh. The signatories of the VDC were responsible for the transactions, with consent from the VDC members. Each week, the VDC would sit with the Birhors, to discuss the expenses as well as make detailed plans

of the activities. Accounts were maintained at two levels; one by the accountant appointed by the VDC and the other in PRADAN's books of accounts. Realizing the amount of effort and expenses being put in, the Birhors agreed to increase their contribution from 10 per cent to 20 per cent and during the last stage, they even contributed 40 per cent of their total labour. The budgeted amount was still inadequate and after discussions with the DVC officials, an additional Rs two lakhs was sanctioned.

The sense of participation and contribution of the people of the area for the Birhors was so strong that even the masons and others persons working there contributed a portion of their earnings. These contributions offset, to some extent, the erosion of the budget. The amount contributed by the Birhors stands at Rs 59,770 (approximately 30 per cent of the wages that they had earned) and an additional Rs 25,000 was saved by reducing the wages and waivers offered by the suppliers. The total amount came to approximately Rs 85,000. Although this was not a very high amount, it was very meaningful for the success of the project.

The people of the settlement needed a source of fresh water because they would otherwise have to go to nearby villages where they were being harassed and would have to wait till the last to fill water. The DVC officials were informed of the situation. And because government sanctions take time, PRADAN invested another Rs 25,000 to install a tube well. After five to six months, the DVC also installed a tube well there. The Birhors now have two tube wells for their fresh water needs. PRADAN even created a lavatory for them, but it remains unused till date. Originally, the model was designed keeping in mind a small settlement that would have all the facilities and amenities and this included a common



lavatory and bathroom for 12 families. Later, it was realized that the concept of a common latrine did not work.

In January 2010, three families that had abandoned the place during the initial phase of construction, returned with the hope of being accommodated as well. Pahari Birhor voiced the desire to have a similar accommodation facility. PRADAN began to explore the

possibility of constructing more houses but in May 2010, a cyclone from the Bay of Bengal hit the village causing extensive and severe structural damage to the verandah. The result was horrifying. All the Birhors moved back to their huts saying, "*Tut jaito, nahin rehbo.* (We will not live in houses that collapse.)" To restore confidence and rebuild the structure was very difficult; but after a full day of discussions with the Birhors, they finally agreed to move back into the houses. The next challenge was the budget. Sir Ratan Tata Trust (SRTT) sanctioned a budget of Rs 5.30 lakhs under its innovation fund to build an additional room, in place of the verandah, and three new houses for the new families. The additional rooms for each of the three families and additional rooms in place of the verandah were erected, keeping in mind the forest stretches in front of the construction. The fund was also used to give the residential colony a comprehensive shape, with an arable landscape in front, a boundary of trench, to recharge the water level as well as to demarcate their landscape.

PRADAN encourages the VDC, Nawagarh and the villagers to treat the Birhors as their fellow denizens, thereby creating a space for the tribals to exercise their choice and strength to improve the quality of their lives. Nawagarh, which had a tendency to overlook the existence

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of the Birhors, has now started to include them in their village-level meetings. After the allotment of land in their names, not only the villagers, but the politicians have also started taking an interest in them. For instance, in the last *panchayat* elections, the Birhors were invited by the contenders to the public meetings. People started taking an interest in their well-being as well, and there are instances where the villagers have helped them access medical

facilities at the primary health centre in the village.

PRADAN could not have erected the buildings without the support of the VDC. The GM land allotted to them was being used by the villagers as a grazing ground; the VDC had intervened to convince the villagers to make this happen for the benefit of the Birhors. The VDC also played an active role in negotiating the prices of inputs from the suppliers and in convincing masons and the labour to work at lower wages to cut down the expenses.

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There are cases where the Birhors have abandoned their dwellings erected by the government. One such example is the Birhor colony of Kewal village in Barhi block. From the beginning, PRADAN was clear that if the homes are constructed without involving the Birhors in the process, it would face the same fate. It took PRADAN and the VDC a lot of energy to include the Birhors in the entire process:

site selection, design and layout, forwarding applications to the block office for land allotment and monitoring the progress of work on a regular basis. It required frequent interaction with the Birhor families to make it happen.

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Each of the 12 families got 10 decimals of land and PRADAN thought of utilizing the small piece of land available to each of the families, to inculcate the habit of farming, especially vegetables, to address the nutritional needs of the people. These families get rice from the PDS but vegetables were rare in their diet. At hamlet-level meetings with the Birhors, PRADAN continuously discussed the nutrition needs of a human being and also tried to show them how other people in the village cultivate vegetables. Some Birhor families, which used to work as agricultural labour, were asked if they would like to change their lives by becoming cultivators. The change would not be major from an economic point of view, but they would be able to maintain a good nutritious diet. At first they hesitated, but Pahari Birhor and his wife Arti Devi began cultivating tomato, brinjal and chilly and soon the others joined in.

Almost all the families have tasted tomato chutney to their satisfaction. There are smiles on the faces of the new cultivators (the first farmers in their generation) such as Birju Birhor, Pahari Birhor, Santosh Birhor, Lambu

Birhor and Brahmadev Birhor. Arti Birhor can usually be seen watering her vegetable farm whereas earlier most of her time was spent at home, either making ropes or looking after her small piece of farm land.

The quality of life of the Birhors is witnessing change. Many issues, regarding health and life expectancy of the community, come up when working with the Birhors. Even if they suffer from serious diseases, they never go to the hospitals or the primary health centres, owing to a lack of money and the fear of facing others. We noticed that in spite of the literacy programme launched by the government, the children of the Birhors and even the adults fear to go to school. When asked, Santosh's son, Manish, remarked, "*Dusra bacha log maar ke bhaga dete hain* (Other children beat us out of the school.)" The food they take is nutrient deficient. It only comprises rice and some forest herbs. They hunt small rabbits and other small animals but they rarely consume the meat; instead, they sell it for the cash they need. The community is out of the mainstream and there has been no effort made until now to include them in society's fold. An occasional distribution of blankets is not going to help communities such as the Birhors to come out of the trap that they have fallen into. Concerted long-term engagement is required to bring about transformational change.