

Social Mobilization through the Special SGSY Project in Dumka

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Laying a strong foundation of SHGs and Clusters, introducing poverty alleviation projects under Special SGSY, and hand-holding the community as it ventures into new areas of cultivation and agricultural practices is bringing about slow yet steady transformation in the lives of the marginalized and the poor

BACKGROUND

The Special Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) project in Dumka district, built on the edifice of the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) and UNDP-supported Community Based Pro-Poor Initiative (CBPPI) and social mobilization around Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM), introduced poverty alleviation projects under which 350 SHGs were formed and nurtured in four blocks. The objective was to provide means of dignified living to the indigent populace by augmenting their income and ensuring round-the-year food security. This project targeted around 5,000 poor families belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SC), the Scheduled Tribes (ST), and other socially and economically backward population.

During the first phase, the main focus was to promote new SHGs, build solidarity through the formation of Clusters, link these groups with banks through credit linkage programmes, pilot *arhar* cultivation, undertake tasar host-tree plantation and initiate tasar reeling activities. Around 4,500 women from more than 350 SHGs were familiarized with the various modules of social mobilization and livelihoods. Large-scale credit linkages with banks were established successfully. SHGs repaid loans and interests to the tune of Rs 50 lakhs every year. Schemes under Micro Economic Social Organization (MESO) and watersheds were mobilized; crop productivity improvement trials were conducted and new activities such as poultry farming, manufacturing vermi-compost and spinning were introduced.

PROCESS

In the earlier MoRD projects, the focus was on large-scale social mobilization, incubation of livelihood prototypes and creation of service providers, by which the involvement of the community remained confined to the recipients of the programme benefits and who had a limited say in the overall programme implementation.

However, the Special SGSY project set a milestone by ensuring participatory planning and implementation mechanisms through the preparation of a Diversified Activities Plan (DAP) by the benefitting families, project execution and monitoring through the *tola sabhas* and mandatory community contribution in all programme activities. These measures have cumulatively stimulated a high level of accountability and ownership among the community and also established high work-quality standards.

Transparent and prompt wage payment mechanisms, meaningful asset creation and direct involvement of the community at each stage of planning, execution and monitoring of soil and water conservation activities infused a greater sense of ownership and pride among the community members. Regular visits by SHG women to the work site, to check quality and track expenses, ensured timely work execution and maintenance of a standard quality. The women were taught simple techniques, to measure the progress of work. SHG members of all the *tola sabhas* participated in the planning and implementation of the land and water development activities enthusiastically and can now measure their land areas accurately.

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The plan prepared by the *tola sabhas*, through a participatory process (assessing the prevalent situation by visiting each and every plot and analyzing the topography, the economic condition of the family, the assets possessed through earlier schemes, etc.), ensured an equitable sharing of financial resources by the community, while maintaining its focus on poorer families. Moreover, because the members are from homogenous SHGs and enjoy a strong bond of solidarity and compassion, the chances of discrimination in the allocation of resources is almost ruled out.

The aim was to treat the land in an integrated fashion. As a result of these integrated and contiguous treatments of vast patches of land, there has

been a perceptible change in a concentrated geography. This has encouraged more families to plant in the *kharif* season and experiment with additional crops in the peripheral patches, eventually reducing the risk of crops being grazed, stolen or destroyed.

The learning from past experiences led to the formation of a State Cell located in the Rural Development department for smooth co-ordination of the project work between the department and all the five project teams. The Cell helped speed the release of funds and created an enabling environment by establishing co-ordination between the district and the state administration. The State Cell facilitated the visits of various senior government officials, which ultimately created a mechanism of trust, transparency and mutual learning for all stakeholders.

CAPACITY BUILDING

One of the core objectives of the project was to build the capacity of the community. A series of exposure visits, class-room as well as field-based training, and visioning exercises were conducted. The fulcrum of the project interventions revolved around natural resource management (NRM); therefore, exposure visits to successful models of the land husbandry mechanism remained the thrust area. To make the programme more effective, the participation of both women and men was ensured. PRADAN project sites in Banka and Purulia of West Bengal, and Chaibasa and Gumla in Jharkhand were extensively visited by the community, to understand the various kinds of land categories and the relevant land treatment mechanisms. Mango plantations in homestead land, seepage tanks in lowlands, the five per cent model, land treatment in the medium uplands, goat rearing for the landless families in nearby forest fringe areas, etc., attracted the attention of farmers.

Besides these projects, people were also shown earlier activities of the team such as horticulture, land water activities and Arjuna (tasar host tree) plantations in the districts. To promote improved agriculture, PRADAN encouraged and facilitated the families to cultivate *kharif* and *rabi* vegetables on a large scale. For this, they were shown the practices being followed in Pithoriya (near Ranchi) and Siltha, Barapagar and Parmanear Hansdiha in Dumka district. As a result, five agriculture production Clusters (APCs) have emerged.

Along with the Community Service Providers (CSPs) working on the project, PRADAN professionals also got direct hands-on experience of conducting market surveys and

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creating linkages with the market. The CSPs, the professionals, the CEO, the Marketing Officer of the Ekta Mahila Kukkut Palak Swabalambi Sahakarita Samitee Ltd. (a poultry co-operative) played a vital role in making vegetable and poultry production successful and giving the families involved in these activities a brighter future.

IMPACT

The project created vibrant community institutions such as SHGs and *tola sabhas*. It also mobilized a large pool of rural youth, who helped in transactional roles such as book- and accounts-keeping, undertaking measurement, preparing reports and meeting compliance as per the instructions of the *tola sabha*. One of the significant developments of such an engagement with the community is that these *tola sabhas* are now coming out to assist other villagers to plan and execute similar programmes under MGNREGA.

Another important objective of the project was to extend social mobilization. This was met by saturating the existing area through promotion and nurturing of SHGs, and replicating the process in nearby blocks such as Gopikander and Masaliya, through those SHG members, who had the experience and who were instrumental in bringing about transformation in their respective *tolas* or villages. As a result, 1,300 women have been organized into 100 SHGs in Masaliya.

The project brought about new experiences in terms of managing programmes through the *tola sabhas*. The SHG women and their spouses formed an integral part of the *tola sabhas*. Project Executive Committees were formed, with three designated signatories, to

undertake financial transactions. Giving more space to the women in planning, execution and conflict resolution activities, to bring about large-scale change in society, made the existing traditional *gram sabha* more active, functional and participatory. So far the women have converted 89 ha of wasteland into cultivable land through levelling, bunding and lime application, made 125 ha of medium uplands into assured paddy fields through the five per cent model, converted 350 ha of land into assured irrigated field (creating potential for double cropping) by means of 41 narrow wells, 24 broad wells, 10 earthen dams, five lift irrigation units and 443 seepage tanks. Another 165 families have made poultry sheds, with the round-the-year income going to women members of the families. Besides these, the villagers have seen crop demonstration, goat rearing, nursery/seedling raising under a net house, etc.

ROLE OF THE TOLA SABHA IN HELPING REALIZE DREAMS

Life was always a struggle for Bijli Devi and Shamlal Mandal of Patharia village of Saraiyahat block. Being a mother of three, Bijli Devi struggled hard to ensure a square meal daily for the family. Unpredictable and scanty rainfall failed to give them food security. Two acres of her 3.4 acres of land are uplands, 0.6 acres are medium uplands and 0.8 acres are lowlands. Most of her uplands had been uncultivated and remained fallow for years. The major blow came when Shamlal in some litigation was put behind bars. With the absence of an earning member, Bijli Devi found it almost impossible to manage the family affairs and lost all hope. Even in this precarious condition and despondency, she remained a member of the SHG—Sita Mahila Mandal. At this juncture, when Bijli was on the verge of caving in, the other members of Bijli's SHG showed solidarity and came forward to

support the beleaguered family, rescheduled her loan repayment dates, assisted her by providing another loan of Rs 8,000 and attended to the legal prosecution during her husband's six month imprisonment period. The *tola sabha* sanctioned four seepage tanks and 1.5 acres of mango plantation to the family, to ensure a sustainable return from her land. She was allowed to avail irrigation facilities from a broad well in a nearby plot belonging to other families. They helped her recover from the shock.

Six months later, when Shamlal came out from prison, the family was in debt to a large extent. Shamlal and Bijli found a new ray of hope in one of the *tola sabha* meetings when they were cajoled into undertaking mango plantation work in their uplands. The Project Execution Committee members suggested Shamlal's name for an exposure visit to Gumla mango orchards. Seeing the profitability achieved by the farmers in Gumla within five years, Shamlal and Bijli were determined to have their own orchard. Now in their 1.5 acres of orchard with 162 grafted mango seedlings, the couple have engaged themselves, with a lot of zeal, in inter-cropping with cauliflower, bitter gourd, ground nut and tomato. Though this is just the first step, it still is enough of an incentive to dream of a future, in which life will no longer be a struggle but a journey to cherish.

There are many such cases where families who came together through their initial journey via SHGs are fulfilling life's needs.

Salgi Murmu of Baha Bagan Mahila Mandal from Mackrachapar is today a more confident person. In 2010, when the district was facing drought, Salgi decided to dig a five per cent model (40' x 30' x 10') in her rocky barren land. She planted okra and bitter gourd in 3.5 decimals of land each. In spite of the continual

dry spells, she managed to save 90 per cent of the sown seeds, using the small amount of water that accumulated in the structure. She earned Rs 3,500 by selling the crops from a land from which she did not even expect sufficient vegetables for her own household consumption. With the onset of heavy rain, adequate water filled the structure, in which she then reared fish. The fingerlings cost her Rs 200 whereas the income she earned was Rs 2,000, thus providing the family with an additional source of cash income.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND APPRECIATION

The success of the Special SGSY programmes is being lauded by officials from various line departments. Government officials now seek assistance for other SGSY-promoted SHGs from the PRADAN-promoted poultry co-operative for input supply, quality control, training programmes as well as market linkages for the products. In the process of planning and implementation, many officials from the district have visited the field where work is in progress! The project resource persons are being actively used by various line departments

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for their training programmes. The Krishi Vikas Kendra (KVK) has sent batches of agriculture students from Birsa Agriculture University (BAU) to gain first-hand experience from such projects. Similarly, an orientation programme for new recruits of village-level workers was conducted in the Special SGSY project. The Director of DRDA and a group of Lady Extension Officer have seen the poultry activities and also sought expertise as trainers.

CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS

The project's vision of making *tola sabhas* the convergence nodes for various welfare/well-being programmes has miles to go. At least 10 *tola sabhas* have prepared plans for the remaining areas of the villages and have submitted them to the block as well as district administration for inclusion under MGNREGA. Apathy and carelessness seem to be holding back the administration from allotting the work to the *tola sabhas*. Some more time is possibly needed for the department to have the confidence that the communities have the capacity, skills and will to manage their own programmes.