

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

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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.

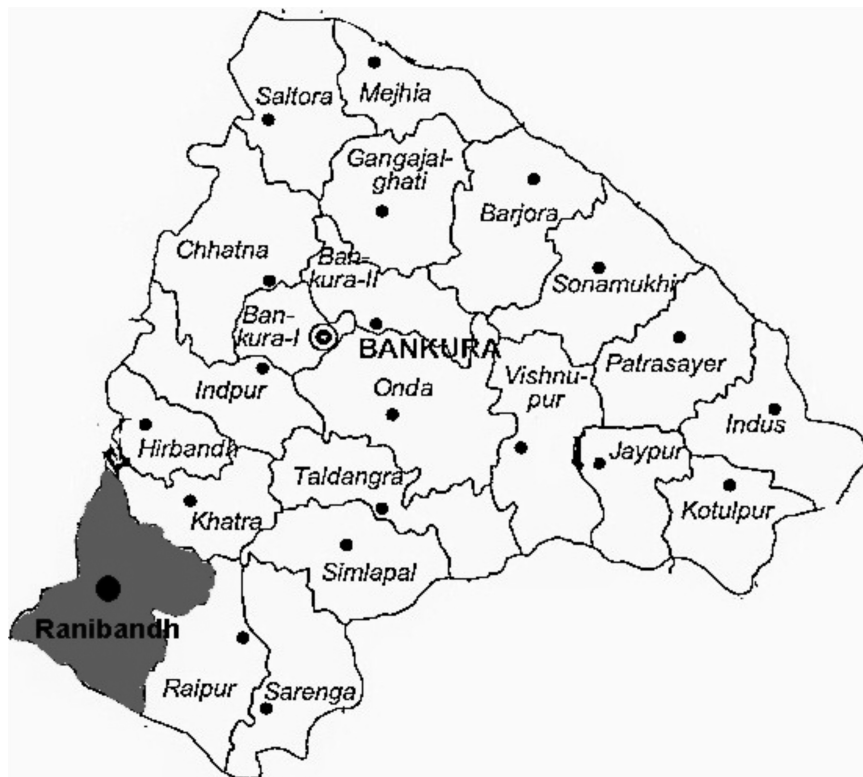
RANIBANDH

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

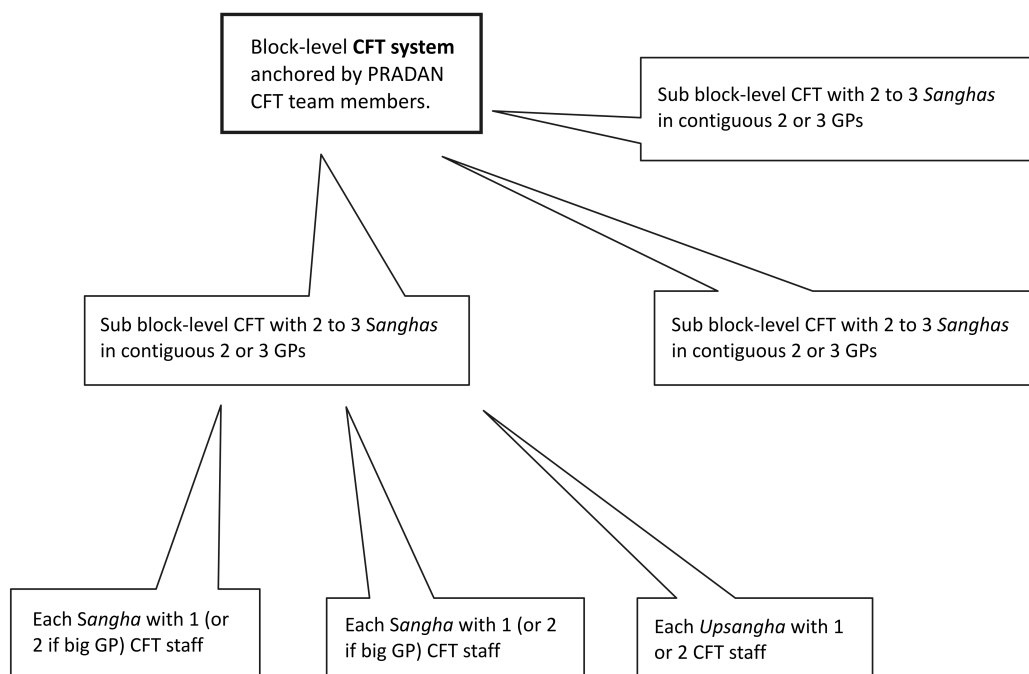
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five blocks of Purulia, Bankura and Paschim Medinipur districts in West Bengal for three years.

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.

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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

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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
	Total	115	53	47	11	11	215	161	130.20	45

(*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
Total Land	130.2
Net Planned Area	102.30

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
Total	233	766	124.25	253.74	145.05	108.69	85829
Net	233	222	102.30	253.74	145.05	108.68	85829

** 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
Total	69	306	31.24	48.81	31.72	17.09	18764
Net	69	197	31.24	48.81	31.71	17.09	18764**

(**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

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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.