

Towards Livelihoods Sensitivity

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True empowerment is not something that can be foisted from outside, nor is it charity that is to be bestowed on the poor; true empowerment comes when knowledge and practices that have been assimilated by communities over centuries are encouraged, supported and given the opportunity and space to blossom. The sooner a development professional understands this, the more meaningful will be his/her contribution.

INTRODUCTION

I joined as a Development Apprentice in 2003 in Khunti, Jharkhand. Being a post-graduate in agriculture, I was interested in working for and contributing something innovative to the field of agriculture. I had little knowledge about NGOs but after I joined Pradan I was delighted to see the dedication of my colleagues—their love towards working with poor, their endless energy level and the respect they received from the community. The values and work ethics attracted me and, within no time, this unconventional sector became the most conventional thing in my life. However, I began my journey as someone who wanted to educate the rural masses rather than someone who would sensitively build on their understanding of livelihoods.

My goals, way back in 2003, were very different from what they are now. The team operated in five blocks then—Khunti, Namkom, Torpa, Karra and Murhu—of Khunti sub-division of Ranchi district. At present, Khunti itself is a district. There were 586 villages in these blocks with 49,185 households (Census 2001). We covered only 87 villages (12%) and 4,810 households (9.7%) then. Most of these villages and households were in Khunti and Torpa blocks; we were gradually expanding our area of operations to the other blocks. Of the 4,810 families the team worked with, 3,449 (88.16%) were STs, belonging mainly to the Munda tribe. The occupations of these communities were agriculture, forest produce, livestock, labour and migration.

In 2003, the team felt a need to introduce a package in the community, which, on the one hand, would provide better returns from the uplands and, on the other, would be resilient enough to withstand the erratic rainfall of the region. Further, the crop needed to be such that the production technology could be transferred to a large number of poor families and the produce could be marketed on a large scale.

EMPHASIS ON MAIZE

After some research, the team decided that maize production on a large scale was one of the options that would fulfill the above requirements. Emphasis was given to four areas, in order to stabilize the production and marketing system. These were:

1. Availability of working capital
2. Quality inputs available at the doorsteps of the farmers
3. On-field support to each family
4. Marketing support for families requiring the same

I was involved in implementing this programme in a somewhat top-down manner; we reached out to 743 families in 32 hamlets, with a total coverage of 550 acres. The project was a collaboration between the Government of Jharkhand and PRADAN, with credit support from ICICI Bank and buy-back arrangements with Monsanto India limited, Godrej Agrovet Ltd. and Shree Lingaraj Feeds Ltd. As per the design, the farmers had to sell sun-dried maize, with moisture content no more or less than 10%, to Godrej Agrovet Ltd. and Shree Lingaraj Feeds Ltd.

We organized concept-sharing meetings at the hamlet level with families of SHG members in 32 hamlets, where we reached out to about 1,100 families. Interested families deposited Rs 100 as registration amount, towards the payment of services. Eighteen youth were selected from the villages as Service Providers (SPs)—with one SP for every 30–50 participants. These SPs were then trained by us in various activities to be taken up under the programme. Land measurement camps were organized for the plots of all participants at the hamlet level. Thereafter, the plots were finalized, and participant-wise, plot-wise data recorded.

Inputs were procured and placed in 16 stock centres across the project area. Inputs were issued to families on the basis of plot-wise print-outs made available to the SPs and stock centres. Credit and loans for the activity were mobilized from ICICI Bank.

Besides these processes, some technical nitty-gritties had to be complied with. The layout of the field and the sowing in rows had to be ensured. Inter-culture operations, weeding and fertilizer application had to be undertaken at regular intervals.

Farmers were trained to shell maize with manual shellers. Farmers then packed the shelled maize in gunny bags. It was thrilling to know that farmers would get good returns for their hard work. That year, 743 farmers produced nearly 521 tonnes of shelled maize. The average yield came to 10 to 12 quintals per acre. The average net income was around Rs 2,100 per family.

Once the maize seed matures, the yield cannot be increased and the crop is ready for harvest. The maturity of a seed is identified by the presence of a black layer at the base of each kernel. The decision on how soon to harvest after this depends on several factors such as the weather, the available labour and the crop value. If the crop is left standing to dry fully in the field before harvest, the farmer risks severe yield reduction due to storms, shattering, birds and rodents, insects and mould. The safe and sensible decision is to harvest as soon as the seed is mature and the moisture content is below 20%. Then the seeds can be sun-dried till it becomes suited for shelling. By this time, the moisture content is down to 14–16%. Shelled grain can be further dried to 10% before being packed in bags.

During the harvesting, farmers were guided on how to identify the black layer at the base of each kernel. This was a new concept for farmers; therefore, the first year, they ended up with a yield varying between 11% and 25% of moisture. After lifting the first production of maize from one cluster, complaints came that the moisture content of the product was not as per the requirement. The difference in prices evoked a mixed response from the members of the community—some reacted positively and some negatively. The experience brought in a scientific thought process in the traditional mindsets of the farmers. They were eager to learn skills about proper harvesting and post harvest care. Some were disappointed because during that season, the green cob in the local market fetched Rs 7 to Rs 8 per kg. However, the farmers sold their products at the differential prices to Godrej Feed. The positive outcome of the experience was that the farmers became aware that:

- ♦ Quality production, not mere production, is important
- ♦ There is a need for output linkage
- ♦ Post-harvest care is essential

processes of marketing their produce. Because there were no concrete plans for post-harvest care the previous year, many farmers did not dry the maize to the optimum level, and ended up with fungus-affected produce. Initially, this did not seem to be a serious issue until the three different categories were introduced on the basis of the quality and the produce started to be rejected by the buyers. The farmers were not forewarned about the different categories with their differential prices and this created a lot of discomfort among the villagers. Again, because the SHGs did not repay their loan fully after the harvest, profits to each family also could not be distributed; this also discouraged the farmers. We had promoted maize cultivation in the forest areas as well, where wild boars and elephants damaged the crops; hence, the farmers were also not eager to invest in maize again. For a few others, the maize and arhar programme was not core to their needs. Maize was labour intensive and the time for land preparation overlapped with the paddy transplantation time.

TABLE 1: DIFFERENTIAL PRICE SYSTEM FOR MAIZE

Grade	Quality of Maize	Price (per kg)
A	Fresh yellow looking	Rs 4.50
B	Light yellow looking	Rs 4.00
C	Maize showing black colouration	Rs 3.80

A year later, however, there was very low response from the community, regarding the scientific cultivation of maize and arhar. Although farmers had earned profits the previous year, they were not ready to invest in maize again. They did not seem to have doubts about maize as a profitable crop; instead, they were unsure about the

TOWARDS LIVELIHOODS SENSITIVITY

These explorations helped me understand that a professional working in a community should not be biased in favour of or against any project. The community's needs should be core to the project. This experience helped me make the shift in my approach from a project perspective to a community context.

Exploring what the villagers were more interested in, I found that their core interest was to stabilize and improve the package of practices of the crops they traditionally cultivated. There were mainly crops such as paddy, black gram, green gram, wheat, mustard, chana, potato, onion, garlic and lac. They did not have maize in this list. The community also required vaccinations of their draft animals and milch cows, many of which had subsequently died because of a number of diseases. This support of vaccination for their livestock would help them also in agriculture. I then started working on their needs. We groomed the SPs on their technical know-how of the crops that the villagers wanted to cultivate. A few of the SPs were groomed to provide vaccination services. This shift in my approach made me very positive and it was a satisfactory experience. There was an increase in the average production—food grains doubled and vegetable produce increased three times as compared to traditional method of production.

Earlier, my work seemed mechanical and less transformational. I was keen to know why the community is doing things mechanically; there was change in production but there was no change in human well-being. This allowed me to relate and reach out to far many more farmers.

I realized that rural farmers hold external factors and the environment responsible for all the good and bad that happens to them. For instance, if there is an increase in their production, they would attribute it to me or to the support imparted by the facilitating agency. Also, they held the rural professional

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mainly responsible for any of the failures. This realization prompted a shift in my attitude when working with the village community. I became more alert in my interactions with the community. My effort was to place them in the driver's seat. I thought to myself that the true purpose of facilitation is to invoke the knowledge that is

dormant in the people. The knowledge that has already been assimilated by communities became the locus of my efforts. For instance, when I started training the villagers on the package of practices, I would encourage the participants to identify how the content of my training is related with their traditional practice. For instance, in nursery raising, we encourage farmers to use polythene sheds to protect saplings from direct sunlight and rain; however, traditionally the farmers have used leaves that are knitted to make a temporary shelter. Such linking brought about continuity in our efforts. It helped to systematically synchronize our technical offering with traditional knowledge. I started identifying their good practices and building on that in the training I offered.

In addition, I identified the advanced farmers within the local milieu—those who were a step ahead in terms of innovation or adoption of the new inputs. Usually, there are one or two farmers, who are ahead of the others, in each village/hamlet. Identifying and recognizing advanced farmers within their hamlets or villages, and inviting them for meetings and trainings allowed for a better integration of local practices with technical/scientific inputs. The recognition of local knowledge and practices in this way not only provided a base for our efforts but also boosted the confidence of the local

communities. My earlier approach—that of a ‘dispenser of knowledge’, in which the community was nothing more than a passive recipient of my technical/scientific and managerial knowhow—was not constructive.

Promoting livelihoods alone will not empower the poor. One needs to understand their context from their point of view before implementing any activity; otherwise our intervention will only become an unnecessary interference. Livelihoods sensitivity is the need of the hour. Even at the institutional level, one must begin by understanding the family structure that prevails in an area. The family is the most basic unit, in

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which people work with one another and coordinate activities. Without understanding the advantages and the constraints that the prevailing family structure offers, it is not possible to build robust people's institutions. One needs to understand the community context and map out why there is a need for intervention.

How relevant is the intervention? Do people own the intervention or is it merely being thrust upon them? Do people feel significant at the end of every endeavour? Needless to say, it is the enhanced self image of the poor that denotes how accurately the intervention has been matched with the aspirations of the people.