

Empowering Dalit Women and Enhancing Livelihoods

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Background

Among the many deprived communities of the underdeveloped state of Bihar, perhaps the most disadvantaged are those hamlets inhabited by the extremely marginalized Dalit (excluded) communities. Uneducated and mostly illiterate, the women there typically have no opportunities for work other than daily agricultural labor, which yields an income well below the poverty line.

Scope of the Project

Sponsored by Lutheran World Relief, this three-year project targeted 650 women in 25 villages in the Rajapakar block, covering a direct population of 4,500 Dalits and an indirect population of 27,500. The basic strategy was to build the women's capacity through self-help groups (SHGs), supported by groups of local stakeholders and existing community leaders

Goal

The project's overall goals were (1) to raise the women's awareness of economic and other issues affecting their lives and (2) to enable them to increase their incomes through adoption of sustainable alternative livelihood options.

Objectives

- To organize 650 women from 25 villages into 45 self-help groups (SHGs) and strengthen their organizational capacity.
- To promote functional literacy, micro-credit management, and leadership skills within the SHGs.
- To enable SHG participants to borrow from group savings to establish new income-generating activities.
- To seed capital to support SHGs in initiating income-generating activities.

Activities

Village mapping

The first step in the project was to identify the very poorest families in the most deprived villages and *tolas* (hamlets) who were in the greatest need of help.

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Community mobilization

After selecting the 25 target villages, IDF project coordinators met with Panchyat Raj Institution (PRI) leaders (*mukhiyas*), teachers, health and social workers, and other community leaders to explain the project and seek their support. A local resource group composed of these stakeholders was formed in each village to provide peer support to the SHG. IDF then held small, village-level meetings to introduce the community to the project and provide general orientation. Finally, follow-up meetings took place for the women in the village, along with the male members of their family, at which the SHGs were officially formed.

SHG meetings

After initial meetings with a facilitator to establish the process, all SHGs committed to meet weekly on their own to collect money from all participants, record the contributions in a savings book, approve loans for individuals, and discuss relevant social issues.

Training

To promote basic skills among the women, organizers conducted training sessions using games, case studies, role play, and pictorial presentations for selected SHG participants on leadership, group management, bookkeeping, savings and credit systems, and banking procedures. These new leaders then shared what they had learned with the rest of their group. Some women completed a special 30-day course in functional literacy.

Livelihood promotion

With the help of a facilitator, SHG participants identified potential alternative trades to



agricultural labor, such as animal husbandry, bamboo crafts, collective agriculture on leased land, banana stem thread crafts, spice making, vermin composting, and others. Women began taking out loans to start their own businesses in some of these areas. In addition, five SHGs set up demonstration vermin compost units.

Visit to SHG federation

To expose participants to a successful operating model, 135 SHG leaders visited a federation of women SHGs to reinforce their learning, connect with a source of peer support, discuss issues of mutual concern, and find out about additional activities they might undertake.

Revolving fund

A revolving fund of Rs 669,000 was disbursed to all SHGs to be used for income-generating activities.

Outcomes

Following is a selected list of outcomes of the intervention after the first year:

- A total of 48 SHGs were in operation, comprising 647 women in 25 villages (exceeding the target of 45 SHGs).
- All SHGs continued to meet weekly and build up savings regularly.
- All SHGs developed group norms and bye-laws.
- 72 leaders from 25 SHGs were trained in leadership and roles and responsibilities.
- 25 percent of the groups established permanent bookkeeping arrangements to maintain their accounts.
- The 48 SHGs saved a combined total of Rs 165,044.
- The 48 SHGs lent a combined total of Rs 159,755 to other group members, of which Rs 74,280 was repaid.
- 50 leaders from 18 self-help groups were trained in group management norms, savings systems, and credit and banking procedures; 53 were trained in group accounting.
- 17 women completed a 30-day course of literary classes.
- 14 members from four SHGs received Rs 25,500 from the revolving fund.

In addition, it is expected that about 70 percent (455) of the 647 women will have a steady income of Rs 1,200 per month through micro-enterprises by the end of the intervention.

Achievements and Challenges



This empowerment project has produced many tangible and intangible benefits. All SHG members have learned the power of united action and the basics of group management. Training has helped selected participants to identify their potential and take leadership roles in their groups. Through their increased capabilities these leaders have not only enhanced their inner capacities but also benefited their group, and their whole community, by sharing their new insights. In addition to learning the principles of saving and lending, SHG

participants have succeeded in applying them to their specific situations and have thus derived direct benefit in the form of sustainable increased earnings.

Remaining challenges include the limitations imposed by the women's lack of education and the choice of migration as a temporary solution to lack of income. Above all, however, the women have come to understand their own strength and capacity to improve their lives, and to believe that they have earned, and deserve, the respect of all members of the community.

Case study

A new venture, a changed life

Rajna Devi of Bhadasi village in Rajapakar is a grandmother who, like her peers, never had an opportunity to earn more than the Rs 50 a day she was paid for working long days in the field. But after attending her SHG's meetings for a year, saving with the rest of the group, and learning about other livelihood options, Rajna got the idea of starting a goat-rearing business. So she recently borrowed Rs 2,000 to buy a pair of goats. Her plan is to sell them as they breed for Rs 3,000 each, and she expects to sell two goats every few months. "I can earn more money this way," she notes with satisfaction. With her onetime investment, which she will pay back at the rate of Rs 500 per month, she is confident that she can soon become self-sufficient.