

Community engagement for greater participation: UC comes full circle

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Background

DSI4MTF and SIAGI are working in Uttar Chakwakheta (UC) and Dhoulaguri, West Bengal, India. As action research projects DSI4MTF and SIAGI have goals and objectives and also research questions which they would like to achieve. Achieving these goals and getting response to the research questions would depend upon active participation of the farmers –male and female. But why should farmers feel enthusiastic about the goals, objectives and research questions and why should they make honest commitments to achieve them?

UC has been a late entrant to the project as its selection was finalized only after a careful process of thinking through and consideration of social and technical indicators. But the process did not attract the locals initially who looked to the exercise stoically as one of the projects/programs which, like others, would be implemented, but the outcome might not be an attractive proposition or they might not even be informed about project activities and outcomes.

Engagement focused around critical questions?

Success of the project would depend upon policy integration and up-scaling which would inevitably mean that the outcome of the research project would get support under relevant policies. These policies are intended to benefit the community. Following affirmative action of the government, the benefits are passed through various layers of the society using constitutional provisions. For the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes there are priority programs. If the research outcome requires policy support then the farmers, belonging to different categories of social groups, must prove their eligibility for entitlement.

For example the farmers from UC, who are predominantly tribal, may benefit maximally if and only if they fulfill the caste criteria authenticated by the state. One such authentication is done through caste certificate issued by the government. The process is said to be cumbersome especially for the poor tribal communities.
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When the project became operational CDHI began an engagement process including:

1. Sharing of the project goals and objectives,
2. Explaining their role, and
3. Identifying long term implication of the research project, which did not offer ongoing physical intervention or subsidies as is often the case.

During the process it became evident that the majority of the community did not have caste certificates and therefore, even if the project succeeded, they would not get any outcomes

linked to the existing relevant programs of the government, which alone could help up-scaling. The priority of the community, therefore, was focused on getting a **caste certificate** together with parallel project activities.

The basic approach

With the priority having been set, CDHI realized that this could be an important entry point for creating an enabling environment in which the community could work enthusiastically. Consistent engagement focused on getting the local leadership involved in the process with careful facilitation and a ‘no spoon feeding –we will get it done approach’. Every step was carefully analyzed and follow-up action taken. The last six months witnessed:

1. Heightened community mobilization –identification of family details, engagement with the officials.
2. Interface building with the state agencies facilitated by CDHI creating a win-win environment for both the government and the community.
3. With the above being in place confidence building and participation in the project experiments which is focused on collective action.
4. With the growing community enthusiasm, participation of women SHG’s in various programs.
5. Local teacher organizing activities related to education.

Simultaneously CDHI facilitated a link between the community and the government departments including the District and Sub-divisional magistrates. This, on the one hand, acted as confidence building for the community members and created awareness within the government departments leading to prioritization and action.

The final day: Government at the door steps - State’s initiative for inclusion

The people of Uttar Chakwakheta (UC) will remember the day, 19th January, 2017 as a very special day in the history of UC because they were issued a caste certificate, confirming their identity from the district authority at their door step. Community experience is that it is very difficult to get a caste certificate and some believed it impossible. They had waited a long time, as a tribal community to exercise their right. They now have a document to prove themselves and other groups have initiated a similar process.

Pathway to achievement

The mission to access a caste certificate was started three months back during a meeting facilitated by the CDHI team led by its director Rajeshwar Mishra. The issue of caste certificate was raised during initial discussions when the people of UC decided to start the process for accessing the certificate with the slogan “Payle Tribal Bano”.

It was decided that the villagers would prepare a list of people who are eligible but did not have a caste certificate and at the same time they prepared a mass petition which was submitted to the respective District Magistrate, SDO and BDO who all extended their support and cooperation to process the application smoothly.

A team (evolved) under the leadership of Ramkishor Kindo who worked hard to complete the process of online application, and submission of an acknowledgement paper to the respective authority. Around 273 applicants out of 805 have applied for the caste certificate during the first month.

After several consultations the district authority decided to organize a camp on the 19th of January 2017 at the village for distributing the caste certificate.

Villagers planned a memorable program and various cultural events including Lakrika Ghora were performed by the villagers. People shared their feelings after receiving the certificate. Mr.Dokha Oraon (M/62) said “I became Tribal in the age of 62 and all has happened because of the intervention of the project”. Many people shared their feelings including Sorenda, Ramkishorda, Tapanda, Subjas, all showing their happiness.

Mr.Norbu Sherpa, BDO, Alipurduar-I inaugurated the programme and distributed the caste certificate. Mrs. Jyoti Dingdong Oraon, Pradhan, UC, Mr.Subrata Majumdar, CDHI, Mr.Benukanta Dey, CDHI, Mrs.Mitali Ghosh, UBTMS with others participated in the programme and also distributed the certificate. The BDO delivered an emotional speech, stating that he himself is a tribal, and he knows the pain when communities do not receive their entitlements and are misled. The process helped the community realize their worth and they even underlined their limitations and weaknesses - they have to study, be reflective and united. At the end the BDO announced that he is ready to support them. The whole UC community participated in the auspicious occasion. The programme ended with the dance of joy and everybody participated in the dance.



Inaugural speech by the BDO performing – Lakri ka..



BDO, APD-I distributing ST certificate



After receiving caste certificate: Dance of joy

The impact and learning

1. The caste certificate signifies a basic tool to access entitlements. Upscaling the project outcome to their benefit is now possible through the State's programs. One may argue that this is not the appropriate time for upscaling but in our view a seed for upscaling must be sown at the beginning of the project with the needed preparation in place.
2. The caste certificate created an environment marked by collective efforts, coordination and distributive leadership. This has added to the confidence of the community.
3. Together with this there has been greater synergy between local institutions- Panchayats and self-help groups. This is important for up-scaling (DSI4MTF) and value chain (SIAGI)
4. The community is more close to the project and therefore a scenario of partnership and collaboration has evolved –this makes the project more inclusive.
5. UC has witnessed a significant jump in collective farming and large areas have come under collective farming.
6. UC now offers an important learning for Dhoulaguri which has witnessed a different dynamics over time.
7. This component may not look strongly related to the project objectives. But for us this comprises a foundational component. The process used has helped community mobilization and strong participation.

Field facilitation and policy interface for this component by Subrata Majumdar

Report by: Subrata Majumdar with inputs and support from Rajeshwar Mishra, Mitali Ghosh and Dhanjay Ray.