

Institutions, Collectives and Engagement Approaches for Sustainability



Improving the livelihoods of marginal farmers, by outscaling irrigation and agricultural practices, through collectives, in the Eastern Gangetic Plains (WAC 2018 163)

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Defining institutions

Institutions, by definition, are a collective of more than one individual, joined together with a clear common goal and normative structure. The collectives are institutions as long as they have a 'common', and 'clear goal' and a normative structure that every member adheres to. Institutions can be of various types:

- **Imposed institution-** which is often the case when external agencies, government or any other agency, impose an institution to achieve certain goals which may not always represent the goal of the members. An agency may like certain tasks to be implemented through a group of people to offer a democratic semblance.
- **Evolving institution-** signifying a situation where a group of people are aware of and seized with an issue which affects them and which requires others, with common interest to involve themselves for better solution of the issue. To be able to achieve the given goals they evolve norms and procedures to adhere to and follow. A structure evolves, processes are decided to be followed, and accountability and responsibilities are fixed. The effectiveness of the institution(s) would depend upon the extent to which the norms are shared, and processes and procedures are followed.

Collectives under DSI4MTF

The collectives under DSI4MTF evolved around dry season irrigation /agriculture, as a **Research for Development (R4D)** initiative. The initiative included use and adoption of a number of water and agriculture technologies and management practices, to understand how collectives can act together to ensure optimum implementation of dry season agriculture, using the given technology and practices mix. The farmers, researchers and other stakeholders joined to examine and analyze how farmers collectives could function in the context. If one would like to understand how the collectives, under DSI4MTF, functioned one would like to examine how the collectives have evolved and how they have worked over the period.

Looking at the overall trajectory of the collectives and considering the socio-cultural dynamics of the Indo-Gangetic Plains (IGP), one can see that the intervention was, initially, perceived to be an opportunity for physical support. This was often considered as dole or largesse, and an opportunity to maximize physical benefits, depending upon one's social position. The elements of partnership and inclusion were missing. The collectives, therefore, did not represent inclusion. According to the definition of institution, the missing inclusion has been a gap in the overall effectiveness of the collectives. Can such collectives, then, sustain? Or is there a possibility such collectives can be scaled?



Farmer collective in Uttarchkwakheti (UC)

Collectives under DSI4MTF: In the following section we would elaborate the integral elements of collectives that evolved under DSI4MTF in the two locations of West Bengal – Dhaulaguri and Uttarchkwakheti (UC). The two locations are different in their socio-demographic structure and livelihood environment.

Reasons for being: Both the villages were identified under DSI4MTF, based on certain technical parameters and indicators. Therefore, in our view, the reasons for being were external to the community –they were picked up and certain possibilities were presented to them. But as the process of engagement continued the reasons started becoming more and more internalized, that the collective could help develop a common perspective for livelihoods focused around water and agriculture. As DSI4MTF continued the reasons for being became closer to their identity. In UC getting caste certification addressed their existential position upholding their identity. Subsequently, as the collectives evolved and consolidated as institutions, the reasons for being became more linked to their identity-if the institutions become stronger they can help us support our livelihoods and can ensure us an identity as people who can make difference in their life trajectory. Reasons for being, therefore, ranged from being existential to creating a legacy.

Evolution Path: This is closely linked to the above. The evolution has been quite interesting as well. The collectives, first, were a short time initiative –work with the project (*a scientific pursuit*). But gradually they brought in glimpses of opportunities which were perceived as long-term gain. This brought in new members and stakeholders with generally common, but sometimes competing interest. The evolution was marked by initiatives to ensure that the collectives maintained their unique identity.

Functions: To begin with, the collectives were uni-functional, to participate as a supporter in the project. However soon they became collaborators, not only in the project, but also in

multiple activities which could bring future opportunity that would matter for the community. New functions evolved which included:

- Supporter in the DSI4MTF
- Researcher to decide on research components, protocols and strategies
- Livelihoods promotion institutions (collectives) including value chain creation
- Stakeholder (s) in the large community of institutions-state/non-state and private

Looking at the changing function, one may say that the functions have evolved systematically, each step offering insight for the other. This is the process which could ensure collectives turning into sustainable institutions.

Governance including authority structure: When the two villages began on the collective journey, it began as a person driven activity- erroneously called opinion leader(s). They provided a link between the research team –DSI4MTF and the community. The governance was person based-the leader (X) who would decide the agenda of a meeting, participation and decision and the decisions were almost pre-planned and scripted. The engagement led to further clarity and transparency and several of the fence sitters were able to occupy prominent space. When the long-term goal of the collectives evolved, opportunities became clear, there was demand for clarity and representation. When the farmer’s club and Farmers’ Producers Companies (FPC’s) were visualized it mandated participation of people from different communities and gender. *Gradually, it became apparent that there was a bigger picture than what was being seen. The governance started focusing on goal, normative structure, transparency, inclusion and system.*

Leadership: Drawing from the above the leadership evolved as from individual based, to patronizing, authoritarian to democratic. The two villages differ in leadership. UC is homogenous and has strong tribal culture where trust and kinship is valued. The community’s leadership is respected. Considering the demand of the collective to evolve into modern institution format, the tribal community shifted from tribal norms to modern institutional norms. The leadership in UC is democratic and maintains transparency. It, however, gives due credence and importance to traditional leadership –respecting their views and perspectives but at the same time following the norms of the modern institutions, which would serve the common goal of the community collective-institution.

Financial Mechanisms: Financial mechanisms, in both the villages, have evolved from being home/individual based to scientific financial protocol and system. Since, in the beginning, financial involvement was quite modest, catering to the petty needs of inputs, it was quite informal. Sometimes the key person would mobilize financial requirement and would keep the accounts. Gradually, modern financial management practices, conforming to the stakeholders and collaborators, have come to be in vogue. There is linkage with the government departments, financial institutions like banks and FPCs etc. The financial system

is evolving, and persons concerned are getting appropriate capacity building training and hand holding.

Initiatives to ensure sustainability of the collectives: Engagement emerges as crucial link

Why different stakeholders can not meet together and ensure inclusion? If there is no inclusion how can a R4D initiative show and ensure impact? Who would facilitate and catalyze this given partnership with unequal partners-class-gender-technical credentials? DSI4MTF adopted ethical community engagement, as a strategy, to create conditions for evolving an institutional framework for these collectives.

Refreshing Ethical Community Engagement ECE

As opposed to a conventional method of deciding on the nature and process of top down implementation strategy, following a specialist's view, the project (DSI4MTF) preferred and practiced collaboration and partnering with the community. Communities were not their 'research subjects' but partners and collaborators. Communities' perspectives, wisdom and priorities have been respected and given due credence to. These were considered and functioned in an environment of mutual trust and respect and decisions that followed were based on objective parameters mutually agreed. Rather than maintaining a stiff stance the researchers and the community deliberated and dialogued as equal partners retaining and demonstrating their strengths and weaknesses in the most transparent manner.



Engagement activities to develop mutual trust and respect.

The conceptual framework

Not to get led into an academic discourse, veering around intricate theories and conceptual complexities, an attempt has been made to understand how engagement, as a strategy, has helped strengthen the collectives. Inclusion is considered across gender and class in the implementation of various operations and appreciation of their contribution and perceived impact. Inclusion is considered in terms of participation in institutional governance, interventions and benefits whatsoever. This is captured through physical participation in different operations and processes, membership to different collectives and groups and benefits sharing practices. Collectivization is seen as joining and acting together to achieve common goals by a group of people following a mutually agreed normative structure. Ethical engagement is seen as collaborative interaction and partnership between the researchers and the community, each valuing others for their wisdom, insights, value system, intellectual, creative and physical endowments in evolving and analyzing concepts, methodologies, strategies, process and outcome. The engagement also includes interaction among stakeholders who join and participate in the research endeavour under similar conditions.

Based on the direct participation and observations during the last four years we can advance a central hypothesis that ethical engagement has led to catalyze enabling conditions where the researchers, community and other stakeholders have worked in tandem and have collectively influenced, among others, impact pathways prominently reflected in dry season irrigation/agriculture, intensification, inclusion and collectivization. The hypothesis is supported by analysis of quantitative and qualitative evidences explaining the changes.

ECE and collectivization

In general, while the community is considered collective in nature and orientation, many years of isolation and marginalization has rendered them indifferent and subdued. State's and non-state's interventions have remained notional and cosmetic. As a result, communities seem to develop cynicism and distrust. When DSI4MTF was proposed the community considered it as one of several such interventions which were 'launched and completed' without much impact. The first few visits failed to attract interest. These visits, however, helped understand the context of their 'indifference and silence'. Causes, as identified, were several – 'notional' projects, indifferent state and non-state functionaries, irrelevant policies and programs and top down mechanical planning.

The engagement was focused on listening, understanding, reflection and collective analysis. Establishing and continuing with physical proximity was yet another strategy that helped communities open up, sharing and expressing freely. The first stage of opening helped thematic reflections spread over various sessions – why the community is what it is? Why the ponds are dry and agriculture fields barren and how the menace of animal attack could be checked? The themes extended to children's education, employment and future career. Community meetings assumed vibrancy and some of the more articulate individuals started questioning themselves. Statements such as – 'who can help us if we don't act ourselves; why

we cannot visit the government offices for our entitlements’? The emerging voices proved quite discerning -the community received its caste certificates, the officials visited the village and the bio-physical systems of the project started getting managed properly. Women groups’ meetings were regular, farmers decided on the management protocols and the farmers club became a reality.

Local challenges combined with Ethical Community Engagement helped communities reach officials and local governance systems for their entitlements. Initial success resulted in the initial cynicism being replaced by determination to set and achieve goals. Collective strength got consolidated and the opportunities started un-folding. Service providers developed trust in the ability for communities to make payments and government officials recognised farmers as groups to be relied upon.

ECE and evolving institutions

The community has tasted the fruits of collectivization – irrigation facilities have ensured much needed timely irrigation; protected farming has enhanced opportunities for niche crops and increase income and they have been able to regain their identity. There is a visible inclination for strengthening and consolidating their collective position. Building on this enthusiasm there has been discussion around building inclusive institutions such as farmers clubs and farmers’ producer’s organizations (FPOs). Besides, a renewed resolve is visible to strengthening their existing self-help groups.

ECE has helped in evolving institutions with clear vision, mission and normative structure. Several iterations of the vision, mission and normative structures have led to clarity around them. The by-laws and memorandum show concern at and for transparency and justice- ‘no free riding is to be allowed –this is non-negotiable’. National banks and local agencies all look for demand clear institutional entity with unblemished track. The community is gearing to satisfy this.

Changes in the project community (collectivization) using ECE approach

The following table indicates how ECE has helped influence the collectives

Before DSI4MTF project	Now
Aspiration level of the community was very low due to lack of confidence.	Community aspiration level is increasing – some of the farmers evolved as progressive farmers including landless women due to enhanced aspiration.
Community members were very hesitant in communicating and visiting the government departments and other agencies.	Now community members are visiting different government departments and office of the district authority. Their negotiation skill has increased,
Self-efficacy was low in adopting new technologies and communicating with outsiders.	Self-efficacy created by using ECE approaches resulted in level of happiness is increasing.
Issue based (livelihood) social bonding was lacking before	Now community members are more organized in livelihood-

the DSI4MTF.	based activities. Strong relationship built among the rich, poor, tenant farmers.
Women were limited to women self help group. Capabilities of women were not identified.	Women are involved in different activities and included in collective farming, farmers club, direct marketing etc. The capabilities and skills of women are recognized by the male dominated society.
Before the DSI4MTF, community had no women groups and farmers club in the project location.	Now they have more group like water user association (WUAs), collective farming group etc.
Community based institutions and local NGOs were not aware about the ECE approaches and principles.	Now community-based institutions along with government department are aware of ECE and they are applying it in their respective fields.
The community members were not exposed to different technologies and tenants / marginalized families were not included in mainstreaming development.	The tenant and marginalized farmers are included in mainstreaming development and adopting new technologies to enhance their crops intensification and income.
Prior to DSI4MTF project, community did not emphasis on cross cutting issues of environment, climate change, market value chain, conjunctive use of water, nutrition sensitive agriculture etc.	Now community members are aware of these issues and including them in their planning process for implementation.
Innovative activities among the farming community were lacking though it was their wisdom to enhance the family earning.	ECE helped them in introducing new crops like spinach, coriander, broccoli, maize etc in adopting new technologies like poly house cultivation, new and improved irrigation methods etc.
Record keeping or maintenance of books was totally missing among the farming members resulted in low risk-taking capability.	Now they are maintaining their farming and marketing records. It helped them to do cost benefit analysis as well as supported them to take new challenges and risks.
Earlier farming community members were not communicating with wholesalers / trader / farmers producer organization (FPO) directly for selling their products.	Farmers have been building relationship with different kinds of buyers for direct selling in gaining more profits from their product. Sometime buyers like FPO at distant location are directly purchasing harvested crops from farmers' field.

Key lessons learned for scaling collectives using engagement

The above table offers insights into how collectives can be scaled. However, we need to understand what level of scaling we are thinking about? Scaling can be a spread in physical terms- areas, number of villages, districts and so forth-**scaling out**. The scaling can also be considered in terms of adoption of the perspective/design or perspective within the policy of the state or non-state actors and agencies-**scaling up**. Both these types of scaling primarily emphasize spread and coverage in physical terms. The spread in physical sense, however, cannot sustain if they are not internalized in the culture, value system and practices. Entrenching values and beliefs, as scaling, takes a perspective deeper and encourages innovation and creativity-**scaling deep**. Our preference is for **scaling deep** which is necessary for both **scaling out and up** and which can positively influence sustainability.

Our key learning from DSI4MTF

On scaling collectives our understanding is that the change has to be at the value and belief level not just growing physically. The collective should be able to uphold and integrate the values of collaboration and partnership rather than being notional. We see the following key learnings:

- 1. Unlearning the values of dependency:** Our understanding, in the project villages, suggest that any externally introduced intervention is considered as opportunity for personal benefits. This value needs to be unlearned and the project's first effort should be to clearly convey the meaning and purpose of the intervention. The two villages, in the past, had several group-based interventions like water users association etc. and carried the dysfunctional value that these interventions would benefit them and more powerful a person is one may draw more benefit. **We systemically dispelled this and communicated clearly that this was a partnership intervention.**
- 2. Entrenching the above values:** Just communicating is not enough, one needs to get this value entrenched by systematic engagement. The engagement offers opportunity for questioning and clarifying various implications and for arriving at a conclusion.
- 3. Evolving norms and practices:** In several interventions norms and operating system are imposed from the above. This is not internalized, neither is there the required ease and comfort of adoption. If the community participate and evolves norms, then there is a sense of ownership of the norms which makes it easy to practice.
- 4. Building interfaces with the stakeholders including the state:** If (1-3) is functional it would be essential to share with the state and non-state agencies to adopt in their context-this may convince them with evidence. This helps adoption at the larger section –**scaling.**

Scaling Engagement approaches for collectives: Learning from WBADMIP

It would be pertinent to share how learning from the DSI4MTF has been used by an international project located in the same region. West Bengal Accelerated Development of Minor Irrigation Project (WBADMIP), is a World Bank supported Government of West Bengal managed project, aimed at effective implementation of minor irrigation using Water Users Association-a collective of farmers. DSI4MTF's learnings were crucial and an interaction began involving DSI4MTF, another sister project under ACIAR and the local organization CDHI on the one hand, and WBADMIP on the other. A series of sharing activities followed including literature, reports and research findings. What struck WBADMIP was our approach of engagement –Ethical Community Engagement (ECE). The theme of DSI4MTF and WBADMIP were similar –bio-physical, agronomical and social sciences. This was considered an opportunity to scale the engagement approach to WBADMIP. CDHI has been facilitating the engagement approach with the WBADMIP. Although the collaboration is recent and new, we have the initial insights:

1. ECE has helped the project mobilize farmers and reflect around the collective's goals, vision and normative structure which used to be an issue pre-collaboration,
2. Some of their existing collectives have modified their functioning and have achieved stronger cohesion among the members with synergy,
3. Water management efficiency seems to have improved as the engineers and farmers have started taking interest in each other-valuing their endowment. ECE does as has been shown earlier,
4. New collectives are being formed using the ECE approach and it has created impact on the existing collectives in the area,
5. Encouraged by the effectiveness of ECE approach, as used under DSI4MTF, WBADMP is implementing the approach in other regions as well result of which seems promising.

Evolving cross-regional perspective on collectives

DSI4MTF has been operational in Saptari (Nepal), Madhubani (Bihar, India) and Cooch Behar and Alipurduar (West Bengal, India). We tried to understand the evolving perspectives on collectives and institutions. There seems to be a similar trajectory and dynamics shaping the collectives and evolving opportunities for them to develop into institutions. There seems to be clear indication of a difference between collectives and institutions. From Nepal collectives appear to be evolving clear norms and processes-a condition which is essential for a collective to qualify as an institution. West Bengal, in fact, has moved ahead on institution building –like development of farmers club, farmers' producers' company. Madhubani has shown preference for institutions which would conform to the existing institutional framework of Jeevika and other government institutions. So, in conclusion there is evidence of collective's evolution as institutions.

Common features and dynamics of collectives

Do collectives –in the three regions-have similarities or striking differences? We tried to understand their – (1) evolution path, (2) key competencies, (3) Goals, (4) strengths and achievements and (5) vision for the future. Interestingly, we come across striking similarities with minor contextual differences.

The collectives, in all the three regions evolved, beginning with a perceived opportunity for creating a collective space in the given local milieu, and enjoying certain benefits which are available in the local social and governance space. For example, initially getting knowledge and physical support from the project, and then extending to support from the government and non-government agencies. Their collectivization is considered as a pre-condition for getting the support.

What have been the drivers for the collectives? The three regions consider establishing smooth communication among the farmers and evolving common norms and procedures. One can examine and analyze the issues in smooth communication. Smooth communication is hindered by power relationships across caste, class and gender. Some of these elements are implicit while others explicit. Dealing with them has been a challenge. The community engagement strategy has been able to moderate the power asymmetry among various partners and collaborators. This is common in all the three regions. In both Madhubani and Saptari the relationship between the landlords and the farmers have been smoothed and a constructive relationship created among them. This has been a win-win relationship. In West-Bengal the relationship among different farming groups, across caste and gender, have been moderated resulting in inclusive collectives which sets the stage for inclusive institutions.

Where are the collectives now? The three regions demonstrate tangible and intangible benefits. While there has been consolidation of land holding by the members, they have also improved their economic conditions. In all the three regions government facilities have been accessed by majority of them they have been able to plan developing institutions for their collective goods.

The evolving framework suggests that engagement has been able to bring the farmers together, work together and create collective endowments and opportunities' leading to the development of institutions with long term common goals.