

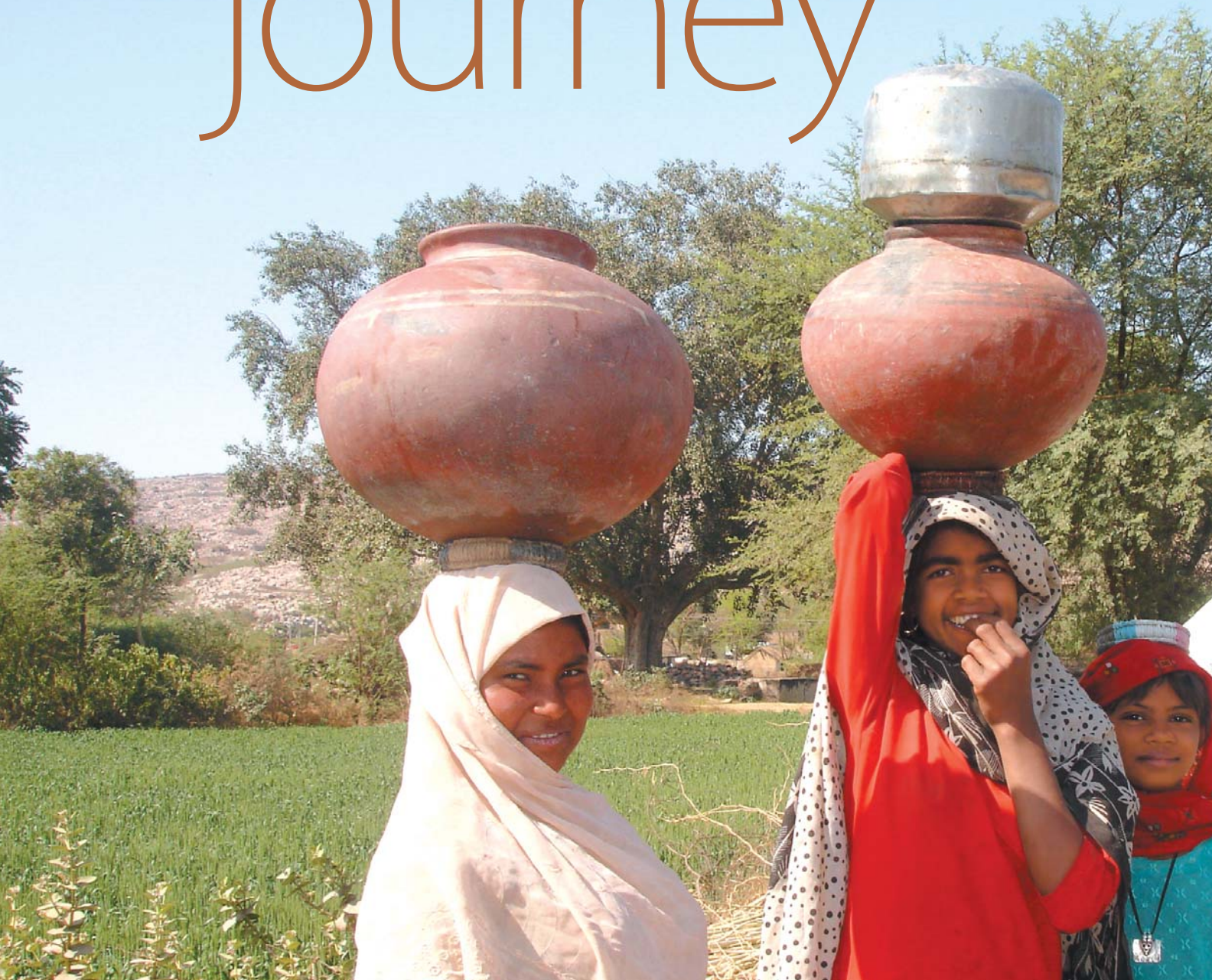


IRRAD[®]

(An initiative of S M Sehgal Foundation)

Institute of Rural Research and Development

RURAL INDIA
a learning
Journey



THE INSTITUTE OF RURAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT (IRRAD) is an initiative of the S M Sehgal Foundation, established as a charitable trust in 1999, whose goal is to improve the lives of rural people. With a focus on poverty reduction in rural India and inclusive growth, IRRAD engages in diverse areas—natural resource management, income enhancement and livelihoods, education, health, sanitation, empowerment (of women in particular), and promoting good governance. IRRAD's achievements are the practical solutions and innovative models it has created through original research and grassroots work for the benefit of the rural poor.

Over the past ten years, IRRAD has expanded its scope of activities and enhanced its efforts towards rural development. Learning from its experience working with the communities of Mewat—a very poor, agriculture-based district in Haryana—IRRAD has refined its approach during its first decade and evolved into a highly productive and respected institution.

improving RURAL LIVES



PHASE 1, 1999-2002

NEEDS-BASED APPROACH

Early on, the Foundation operated like any other donor civil-society organization (CSO), willing to fund a project that had clear goals, deliverables and timelines. After visiting a few villages in Mewat, where we observed a gloomy picture of big families and few resources, we decided to take a hands-on role rather than remain a donor CSO. As an implementing CSO, we emphasized small family size and increased income through greater agricultural productivity and connectivity to the market. We quickly learned, however, that development work requires a lot of patience, and that changing the people's mind-set is not easy. We experienced slow progress in those first few years, and it became clear that the priorities of the communities were different than our priorities for them.



We had learned our first lesson—to succeed, we must involve the community from the very beginning and work with their needs rather than ours. Community participation at every stage is essential.

We had put in a lot of effort towards empowering adolescent girls through life skills courses, with emphasis on building self-confidence and delaying marriage and childbirth. In spite of several successes, we found that an adolescent daughter or son has literally no freedom. He/she has to pretty much follow the wishes of parents and grandparents, who are the decision makers in the family. This led us to add programs for mothers and fathers, which slowed down the momentum of this strategy.

This was our second key lesson, that if one focuses on youth alone without involving the elders in the family, success can remain a mirage.



PHASE 2, 2003-2008

SERVICE-DELIVERY APPROACH

After much thought, we developed a vision that we call "Integrated, Sustainable Village Development" (ISVD). ISVD is a multi-disciplinary approach to improving the quality of life in the villages, based on mobilizing the community and building sustainable village-level institutions. It targets grassroots actions in water management, income enhancement (primarily agricultural), family life (life skills) education, and preventive health. We felt it important to have a model that is modular, so each of these four interconnected programs is also a distinct component that is replicable, scalable, and sustainable.

WATER MANAGEMENT
Collection
Conservation
Purification
Wastewater Disposal

RURAL HEALTH
Reproductive and Child Health (RCH)
Hygiene and Sanitation
Curative Linkages

ALTERNATIVE ENERGY
Solar Energy
Low-cost Energy Solutions

INCOME ENHANCEMENT
Primary Agriculture
Secondary Agriculture
Enterprise Development

LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION
Vocational Training
Social Skills
Support to Schools
Non-formal Education

COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION
Village Champions
Interest Groups
Women Empowerment

INTEGRATED SUSTAINABLE VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT

Because water management is such a critical issue, we have placed great emphasis on this program. It comprises rainwater harvesting and storage, replenishment of groundwater, rejuvenation of village ponds, and so on. Efforts to prevent waterborne diseases center on water purification, wastewater disposal, and better sanitation through the design, construction, and promotion of low-cost filters, soak pits, and latrines. These interventions, as well as those of the other ISVD modules, have had a positive and measurable impact on the villages in which they have been implemented.

Income enhancement is another key component of our work. Land is often a villager's only significant asset, therefore one needs to think strategically about how to generate maximum income from the land through better crop rotation, planting high-income crops (where freshwater is available), using improved seed, establishing direct links with the market, and maintaining soil health. Poor soil in particular is a common problem in Mewat, due to low levels of organic matter and essential nutrients (e.g., phosphorous, nitrogen, boron, zinc), but one that can be remedied using relatively simple methods. IRRAD promotes balanced fertilizer use and supplemental nutrients to help restore soil health and boost crop productivity.

ISVD is an elegant construct that leads to real improvements in rural communities, but it also has drawbacks. As a service-delivery model, ISVD can be scaled up only with massive support from the government or other donor organizations; otherwise its impact is likely to remain limited to a small pocket in Mewat. Furthermore, we felt that it is indeed the government's responsibility to deliver key services, especially in the areas of health and education. Unfortunately, most of the government institutions in the villages do not function adequately. There is a disconnect between what is on paper and what actually happens in the villages, an on-the-books reality versus a lived reality. All too often the rural schools don't teach and the clinics don't treat. Acknowledging the limits of ISVD, we realized we would need to tackle rural development not only from the bottom up, but also from the top down. We must close the loop between policy at the top and its implementation at the bottom if we are to make faster progress and a bigger impact. Around this time, landmark legislation was being enacted in India to provide new constitutional rights to the people, and this encouraged us to make another shift in our strategy.

In 2005 we conceptualized the framework for IRRAD, which the Foundation formally established in 2008. IRRAD comprises four operational centers that create awareness among communities about ways to expand their opportunities, enrich their lives, and brighten their future. The four centers of IRRAD have individually and collectively achieved great success, and the impact is being felt across Mewat. We believe that we are now on the right track.

THE RURAL RESEARCH CENTER conducts baseline surveys and otherwise lays the groundwork for a project before it starts, and then measures its impact at the end and at appropriate stages along the way.

THE NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT CENTER creates, implements, and promotes low-cost solutions to problems related to water, soil, and forests. This center has incorporated simple and affordable innovations in various projects that can be demonstrated on a large scale. In the demonstration village of Notki, several such projects can be viewed in one place; in addition to the functioning government school, greenery and overall cleanliness, Notki's delivery hut and orchard have attracted a lot of attention from visitors.

THE CAPACITY BUILDING CENTER strengthens village-level institutions such as panchayats, village education committees, and village health committees.

THE POLICY, GOVERNANCE AND ADVOCACY CENTER empowers communities to seek the benefits and rights to which they are legally entitled.

During this pivotal period in IRRAD's history, we learned several more important lessons:

First, small may be beautiful, but big leads to meaningful change; scaling up is a must if we are to make a significant impact.

Second, small innovations *can* have a big impact, and those that are replicable and scalable need to be demonstrated and promoted on a large scale.

Third, sustainability can be achieved by empowering villagers to take ownership of their own development by building the capacities of key community institutions.

PHASE 3, 2008 onwards

RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

Lacking the resources to support a long-term service-delivery approach, we shifted our strategy and adopted what is known as a rights-based approach (RBA) in 2008-2009. RBA considers overcoming poverty to be a matter of human rights, and it emphasizes empowerment and accountability over charity, which fits nicely with our view that people must take control of their own development to achieve lasting change.

The shift to RBA was not a purely financial decision, however; it would not have made nearly as much sense without groundbreaking legislation—for example, the Right to Information Act (2005), the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (2005), and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009)—that gives RBA much-needed legal heft.

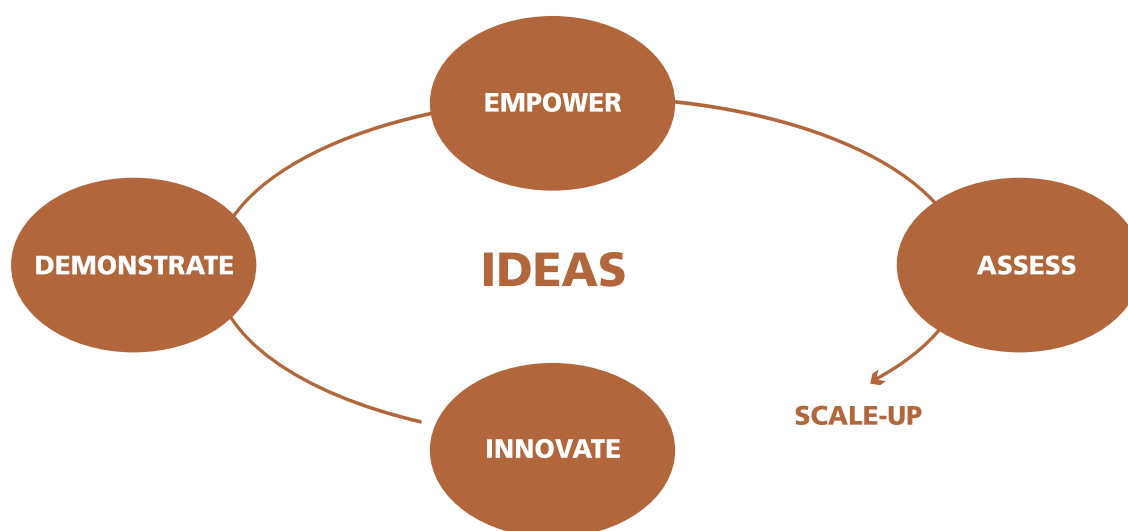


Though there is still no explicit right to food, there are mandates to improve the functioning of government programs such as the Public Distribution System (delivery of food to the poor), the Mid-day Meal Scheme (free lunches for schoolchildren 6-14 years of age) and the Integrated Child Development Scheme (nourishment and health care for children 0-6 years old). Through RBA, IRRAD informs rural communities and empowers them to hold the government to its promises.

While our ISVD work will continue under this new strategy, how we expand its reach has changed. Instead of replicating projects in village after village, the focus now is on demonstrating to the communities what is possible and empowering them to do it for themselves.

So far we have learned that RBA is very promising. The beauty of the model is that it is replicable, scalable and sustainable. It is also simple. It is based on "IDEAS":

- **I**nnovate new cost-effective technologies and interventions
- **D**emonstrate ISVD projects to large numbers
- **E**mpower communities
- **A**ssess impact
- **S**cale up through aggressive promotion.



However, without our ISVD experience under our belt, we would not be able to implement the key component of this strategy—to demonstrate. Like many other wonderful ideas in the country, it would be a nice model on paper but amount to little in the real world.

We adopted RBA as a concept in 2008 and initiated it in six villages in 2009. It has now reached over 60 villages and is on track to cover all 400 villages of Mewat—one million people—by 2012. At first a simple idea and then a small initiative, it has become a campaign now. It is already having a positive impact on the poorest of the poor in Mewat, and it has the potential to become a nationwide movement if properly nurtured. We at IRRAD believe in the power of empowered communities. As Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

WHAT MAKES IRRAD A UNIQUE CSO?

ISVD MODEL

Most other CSOs work on one area at a time, be it health, education, population stabilization, etc. IRRAD, recognizing early on that the needs of the village are interdependent, undertook an integrated approach to village development. For example, take water, education, and health: In a village with little water, girls are less likely to go to school because they must spend their time fetching water; and because over 80% of the infectious diseases in India are waterborne, wastewater management is essential to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Water management is the engine that drives all other functions in the village. Similarly, other areas of development overlap and intertwine.

Though we believe in an integrated approach, our ISVD modules can be scaled up independently. We have partnerships with reputed multinationals in water, education and agriculture, and we welcome new collaborations for any or all of our development initiatives.

EXPERTISE AT THE GRASSROOTS

The uniqueness of IRRAD derives from grassroots learning experiences. We have 10 years of experience working with the community at the village level in diverse areas such as reproductive health and integrated natural resource management, which includes water, agriculture, and forests. IRRAD has made significant strides in raising farmers' incomes, and our community-based forest management program has also been a great success. Water is our flagship program, with emphasis on water collection, storage, and conservation. To promote efficient and effective management of water resources, IRRAD develops water harvesting and storage facilities in the villages and fosters water-conscious communities. In recognition of its achievements, IRRAD has been named a "Best Water NGO" by UNESCO and Water Digest for three consecutive years (2007-2009), and its model project "Improving Sustainable Livelihood Security Using Proven Solutions to Land Degradation in Semi-arid Regions of India" was recently selected as one of the 30 most innovative projects, out of 300 from around the world, at the 2010 Global Conference on Agriculture, Food Security and Climate Change in The Hague, Netherlands, organized by the Dutch, Norwegian and Ethiopian governments, FAO (UN), and the World Bank.

VILLAGE CLUSTER WITH A COMMUNITY CENTER

Out of about 400 villages in Mewat District, IRRAD concentrated on a group of neighboring villages and built a community center to serve the cluster. A cluster is typically 20-30 villages, depending on their populations. The village cluster method brings economies of scale and accelerates the spread of ideas. We are currently active in 17 villages in which we have implemented one or more modules of ISVD, and we are in the process of organizing our next cluster.

GOVERNANCE MODEL

IRRAD follows a rights-based approach for rural development that enables the mainstreaming of voiceless villages in the country's overall development process. In the past, corruption and waste have sapped government efforts to help the poor. Former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi estimated that only 15% of what the government spends reaches the intended beneficiaries. RBA strengthens the efforts of the government by boosting the effectiveness of the government programs available for the rural poor and helping in their proper implementation at the village level. Our "Good Governance Now" model focuses on developing a critical mass of villagers actively participating to bring about effective governance in their communities. This is an innovative model that has merited recent global recognition as one of three finalists for a 2010 Global Development Network Award under the category of Japanese Award for Most Innovative Development Project.

SUSTAINABILITY

We are strong believers in sustainability, be it IRRAD, ISVD modules, RBA, or any stand-alone project. IRRAD is not dependent on its founders for its sustainability, which has been ensured through adequate endowment and income generating assets. IRRAD has strong management in place, with a cadre of well-trained professionals. Each of the ISVD modules is sustainable on its own, and if any organization is interested in a particular module and would like to implement it in a particular village or collaborate with IRRAD to bring more villages under development, it can be easily done. RBA is sustainable because the community is involved from the beginning to bring about good governance. It is not only sustainable, but also replicable and scalable.

AWARDS & RECOGNITIONS

- **Special Consultative Status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)**
- **Member organization of the Clinton Global Initiative**
- **Finalist, Excellence in Information Integrity Award, 2009**
- **Named "Best Water NGO" by UNESCO and Water Digest for three consecutive years (2007-2009)**
- **Model project on sustainable agriculture among the 30 most innovative projects at the 2010 Global Conference on Agriculture, Food Security and Climate Change in The Hague, Netherlands**
- **"Good Governance Now" one of the top 3 finalists for 2010 Global Development Network Award.**

PARTNERSHIPS

- **IRRAD continues to collaborate and partner with leading government institutions, international organizations, civil society organizations and corporations.**

SUMMING UP

IRRAD is committed to the pursuit of excellence in rural development. It has a proven track record and is credible, honest, transparent and accountable. Using its own financial resources, IRRAD over the past 10 years has worked at the grassroots frontlines to understand what it takes to bring about village development—the costs, benefits, timelines and deliverables. IRRAD has a clear vision for transforming lives in rural India and turning the rhetoric into reality.





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