

Sustainable rural development through community participation

By Shipra Baduni

“Sustainability is here to stay or we may not be,” is a saying by Niall FitzGerald that aptly captures the essence of sustainability. Even though sustainability matters the most, it is challenging to achieve. For sustainability to become a reality, one needs dedication and investment. If we talk about sustainability in development, it is the investment in social capital, i.e. the people that sustain all the development work because development agencies can only be there for a stipulated period. Solutions to all social problems lie within the communities; it is just a matter of building that trust within the communities that they themselves can do it.

Communities are unable to operate and maintain the physical infrastructure built if their capacities are not built and their participation is just for show.

Questions on sustainability loomed large when Sehgal Foundation started its Transform Lives project. Transform Lives *one school at a time* includes renovation of school property to create a safe, interactive, educative, enabling environment for students; water conservation techniques that provide continued water supply for drinking and sanitation purposes; and digital literacy and life skills education classes. School premises and rainwater harvesting systems needed regular upkeep and maintenance.

The answer came in the form of community participation in cash and then through the constitution of the Village Development Committee (VDC) consisting of active members from the community. VDC ensures the sustainability of the interventions and facilitates repairs and upkeep of the structures whenever needed from the community contributions that are secured in the bank account opened in VDC's name.



The capacity building of VDCs began with the knowledge of infrastructure maintenance and progressed to water literacy. Groundwater levels in Alwar are dangerously low. Water literacy trainings with the VDCs and other community members reinforced the idea of water conservation. VDCs in village Dholidhoop and Sohnpur decided that the VDC would be responsible for proper maintenance of the plants in the school. The VDC collected 2,000 rupees in village Dholidhoop and 4,000 rupees in village Sohnpur each month toward the proper care of the plants in the school.

Students of the digital literacy and life skills education center also decided to contribute to the maintenance fund. Each one adopted a plant in their village. They also named their respective plants and added nametags. Each day, they talk to their plants and water them.

This small initiative in these villages shows how community participation forges the way for sustainable rural development. Participation is the pillar of continued development in the coming years with better community understanding and their taking responsibility for their own growth.

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