

Vol. II Issue II, 2015

# CSR *Mandate*

Enabling Sustainability

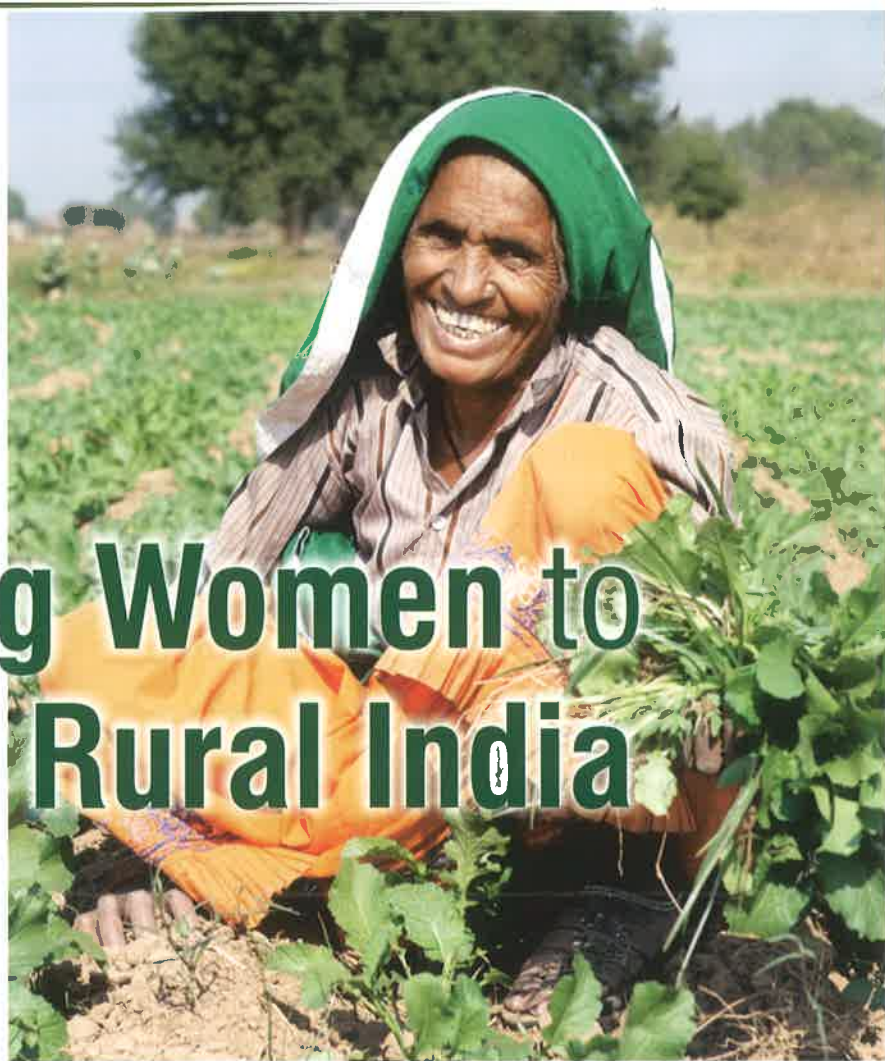
To 'Make in India' Happen...  
**Cordial Coexistence of  
Communities Crucial**





Sehgal Foundation:

# Empowering Women to Change Rural India



Among the many development NGOs that work in India, S M Sehgal Foundation follows a fundamentally different philosophy.

Starting with the vision that every person across rural India should be empowered to lead a secure, prosperous, and dignified life, the Sehgal Foundation

recognized that gender equality and women's empowerment were central to development.

"This essential human rights concept is embedded in every program and every project we engage in so that we can assist in developing every person's potential," explains Jane Schukoske, the foundation's CEO. Haryana-based Sehgal Foundation designs and promotes rural development interventions that create opportunities, build resilience, and provide solutions to some of the most pressing challenges in India's poorest communities.

Established in 1999, Sehgal Foundation works with rural communities to create sustainable programs for managing water resources, increasing agricultural productivity, and strengthening rural governance.

From the beginning, the foundation intentionally chose to focus on specific areas of extreme poverty (primarily communities in Mewat district, Haryana, and Alwar district, Rajasthan),





where people are known to lack basic necessities, such as water, sanitation, nutrition, healthcare, education, reliable electricity, navigable roads, access to public transportation, and the like.

"Our reasoning was simple: If we can make a positive and sustainable social, economic, and environmental difference in places where such seemingly intractable issues exist, we will be able to expand those successes across rural India," explains Schukoske.

During the course of its activities in selected regions, the Foundation helped manage water resources, increase agricultural development, and support individual and community empowerment. This was made possible by building essential supportive relationships of trust and by engaging side-by-side with individuals and village level institutions within the communities.

The foundation believes each episode of success builds on the next as this transfer of energy and responsibility takes place. The Sehgal Foundation team continues

to engage with communities beyond the duration of any single project to help them ensure that the impact is sustained. The Sehgal Foundation has also been recognized for finding creative and innovative solutions, which are refined through pilot testing and participatory research with communities.

"We utilize community media platforms to increase involvement of the community," says Schukoske. "In addition, our research team collects, assesses, and reports qualitative and quantitative data, tracks the impact of projects and initiatives, and maintains an archive of evidence-based research that incorporates the voices and views of communities and demonstrates the results."

As part of its media strategy, the foundation launched a community radio station that provides a platform to villagers to share their views. In 2012, the foundation obtained a license to operate a community radio station, Alfaz-e-Mewat, which reaches 183 villages in Mewat District, Haryana. By

championing the voices of the most isolated and vulnerable populations, community radio raises citizen awareness and empowers individuals to participate in their own development. Local staff, trained in broadcast and production skills, produce entertaining and educational series of programs on topics ranging from health and agriculture to women's empowerment and local culture. These episodes are shared with other community radio stations, increasing the reach of this inspiring work.

As with other NGOs in India, the foundation's path has been challenging.

"Changing the mindset of people who are used to feeling helpless and hopeless so they can see that positive change is possible in the first place, is a slow process," explains Schukoske. "Social change takes time and perseverance. We know that quick results will be short-lived, Rural India's diverse needs are so vast that we want to scale up our development work to accelerate positive change. However, it takes time to build







the essential relationships of trust and collaboration with communities that are needed for the required behavior changes associated with empowerment."

Other challenges include coordination of community needs with government programs and services to address the needs of poor.

In the first 10 years, the family trust of the co-founders Suri and Edda Sehgal funded S M Sehgal Foundation in India. About six years ago, the management team began external fundraising to expand the foundation's impact. Since then, grants and donations from the government and from local, regional, national, and international agencies, companies, universities, foundations, research institutions, and individual partners have enabled the foundation to broaden its reach and strengthen its impact across rural India. Some of the foundation's major donors include The Coca-Cola Foundation and the Mosaic Company Foundation. Government support has come through Department of Science and Technology, Government of India; Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India; and Mewat Development Agency, a district-level government body. Other project sponsors include the Embassy of Japan in India.

Among the many initiatives that the foundation has launched, the "Good Rural Governance Program" has been the most challenging and had the broadest impact.

The program arose in response to the facts that India has extensive government programs and laws to address poverty, but the programs fail to reach many of the intended beneficiaries. Laws on school education and gender equality are not enforced in many rural areas. The foundation's team realized programs for rural development exist, but the results cannot be seen in the villages. Dysfunction is the reality in many healthcare clinics and schools. The foundation experienced episodes of doctors not showing up; there may be one teacher to 250 students in schools.

Sehgal Foundation's Good Rural Governance program empowers rural communities by engaging citizens and by working with village-level institutions. With it, the Sehgal Foundation focuses on issues, such as nutrition and food security, health and sanitation, social security, right to education, and right to information. "Raising citizens' awareness of government programs enables them to understand their rights and access their entitlements," Schukoske observed. "As the communities became empowered,

they energetically took ownership of development initiatives."

As part of the good governance project, strengthening village-level institutions in 100 villages has involved working with *panchayats* (village councils), village committees on health and education, and multi-village collectives of elected women leaders. Local leaders were encouraged to obtain skills for mapping village problems and planning and budgeting, in order to submit well-formulated requests for development funds from the government. Strengthened village-level institutions have, for example, accessed government funds for schools and village development and mobilized village-wide efforts to raise the level of sanitation and wastewater management.

Heartened by the new legislation, particularly the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) provision of the Companies Act, Sehgal Foundation entered 2015 with some fresh insights about project planning in a growing number of rural communities in three states of India: Bihar, Haryana, and Rajasthan. "With our recent receipt of the Millennium Alliance Award for water innovation, we will expand our reach to more districts in need, using the new technology to make water available for drinking, sanitation, and agriculture," Schukoske said.

Further, in 2015, the foundation has plans to expand the reach of its 'Good Governance Now!' initiative from 400 villages to hundreds more across rural India.

For the next three years, the Sehgal Foundation has set itself a goal of implementing sustainable positive social, economic, and environmental change in selected districts in the states of Haryana, Rajasthan, and Bihar.

"Our focus is on impact: we have expanded our work over the past 15 years, from four villages and a handful of people, to hundreds of villages including more than a half-million people," adds Schukoske. "We aim to empower communities with total population of a million people by 2017."

Source: Sehgal Foundation