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COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CATALYSED BY SAMRIDHI

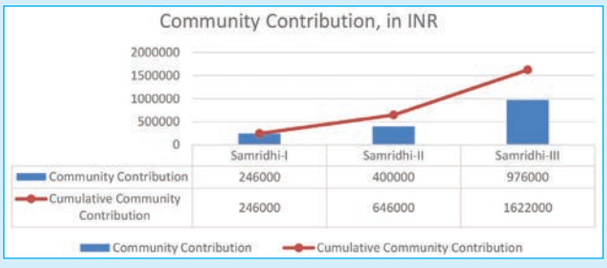
For communities in the villages of Behror block of Alwar district of Rajasthan, water scarcity was having a major impact on agriculture as it negatively impacted the crop yield, was leading to wastage of farmland.

Communities in the villages of Behror block of Alwar district of Rajasthan are leading their own social advances with the assistance of project Samridhi. Samridhi is a CSR initiative of Pernod Ricard India Foundation and is implemented by S M Sehgal Foundation. This community-led activity in Behror began in 2019 in five villages, and in the span of only four years - the project has reached out to people in fifteen villages of Behror.

Initially, when approached by the grassroots organisation, these communities were wary of the newcomers. Their trust was only gained through repeated interaction with the people, community leaders, and the panchayat.

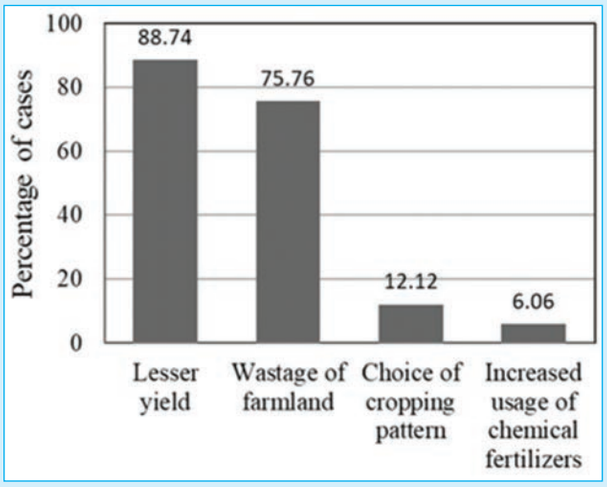
To have a focused approach on the priority activities to be undertaken, the crucial step - a Community Needs Appraisal, was undertaken in early 2019. The people revealed that more than 80 percent of the households in the villages were marginal or small farmers, with two thirds of the population living on a meagre income of less than Rs. 1,00,000 per year. They voiced numerous challenges. The various women related indices revealed the essential need for women's empowerment, as they are the key drivers for development. Multiple interlinked activities were required to be undertaken in order to bring about a holistic positive transformation in this community.

It was only after the completion of initial project initiatives in each of the five villages that the impressed community in general, and gatekeepers in particular, came forward to actively participate in their own development. With each ongoing achievement, the enthusiasm of the people grew exponentially, which has been demonstrated by the increasing community contribution toward the project's activities.



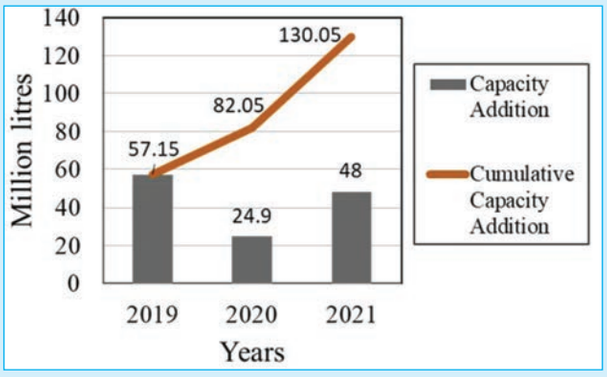
INCREASING THE AVAILABILITY OF WATER

The community conveyed that their primary overarching concern was the scarcity of water, due to which the farmers were unable to provide an adequate number of irrigation cycles to their crop. In the absence of surface water, groundwater was the only source of irrigation, and its mean depth had gone down to about 385 feet (116 metres). This scarcity was having a major impact on agriculture as it negatively impacted the crop yield and was leading to wastage of farmland. Keeping this condition in mind, the farmers were using sprinkler irrigation across all villages.



Effects of Water Scarcity on Agriculture (in %)

As expected, the people here are now unanimously open to learning methods for improving their water situation. Thus with the community's enthusiastic participation, Samridhi undertook initiatives for water harvesting and water conservation. Three check dams, twelve recharge wells and six ponds, with an annual groundwater recharge potential of about 133.05 million litres of water, were built.



Increase in Water Availability through Surface Storage and Groundwater Recharge

In addition, the water requirement for irrigation has been reduced by increasing soil moisture content with water conservation practices. The annual water-saving capacity created in wheat, which is the largest crop that is mostly

flood irrigated, among the prevailing crops of millet, mustard, jowar, and cotton, was 195 million litres in 300 acres, using laser levelling, 118 million litres in 118 acres using mini sprinklers, and 60 million litres in 80 acres using farm bunding.

Farmer Field Day for Millet, Lakhiwas

PROMOTING BETTER AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES

Other than due to the reason of water scarcity, the farmers brought forth the issue of being unable to increase their crop productivity. They said that there were hardly any information channels available to them. Upon investigation, Samridhi found that the agricultural land of these villages was much degraded, and the farmers were supplementing the sandy soil in their fields with urea and DAP as a result of low fertility. However this is not enough to increase crop yields, as the soil remains macro and micro-nutrients deficient, which resulted in the reduced productivity of crops. The farmers were also practicing an incorrect composting method. They just left the animal dung in the open where it was exposed to sun and rain, causing loss of its nutritional value. Besides, half decomposed animal dung invited termites and other soil-borne diseases into the field.

Transformed School, Karoda

Swachchhta Vahini (Toilet Block), Karoda

This issue is addressed by Samridhi through a two pronged regenerative approach – setting up demonstrations of a scientific Package of Practices (PoP) based on soil testing in farmers' fields, and demonstrations on waste decomposer composting, a technology developed by the National Centre of Organic Farming. This well decomposed farmyard manure improves soil carbon and increases the water-holding capacity and microbial population of soil.

Digital Literacy Class, Bhiteda.

The most vital aspect of holding PoP demonstrations is conducting Farmers Field Days (FFDs), where all farmers of a village are invited to observe the improved methods of farming. Through FFDs, the introduced practices are adopted by many farmers in each village. So far, 403 PoP demonstrations have been conducted in 403 acres, on millet and mustard, and twenty-seven FFDs have been held. This has resulted in 3,296 direct beneficiaries of improved agriculture.

CREATING ENABLING ENVIRONMENT IN SCHOOLS

During the baseline survey, the community revealed their requirement for improved conditions of their government schools, for a better future of their children. In response to this need, Samridhi undertook the creation of a model school in Karoda. This included the provision of water and sanitation (WASH) facility, setting up a roof water harvesting system, improving school infrastructure such as putting tiles in the class rooms, wall paintings using the BALA concept, a seminar hall, basketball court, swachchhta vahini (toilet block), a bicycle stand, plantation, and other amenities. The capacity building of the School Management Committee (SMC) was done to continuously maintain the high standards.

These improvements have benefited 250 students and their families, as well as sixteen teachers and school staff. Besides, there has been an average increase in enrolment of about 32 percent.

In addition, a combined digital literacy and life skills awareness course was introduced for senior students. The digital component of their training has empowered the students to access their Aadhar cards, download their mark sheets, help people to apply for government schemes, internet surf, apply online for further studies, and conduct online ticket booking and online shopping. The life skills component builds their social and emotional skills, which empower them to be confident, make decisions, realise the importance of gender equity, and have the ability to be leaders in the development of their communities. In total 331 students (175 boys and 156 girls) completed the six-month course between April 2019 and March 2022.

"After the improvements in the school, the students have started coming to school regularly, there is retention of students, and they are showing much enthusiasm toward studies" said Ms Dinesh Yadav, Principal, Karoda school.

ESTABLISHING COMMUNITY-BASED INSTITUTIONS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Right at the start of Samridhi, *Gram Sangathans* (GS), which are community based institutions, were formed in each village. These representatives of the people intend to oversee, assist, as well as manage the future sustainability of the project and other development initiatives in the village. GS is a platform for about twenty community leaders, with 30 percent being women who are chosen with the consent of communities. The GS members undertake a capacity building course for a period of one year. The responsibilities of GS include collection of community contribution for village development, linking people to various government schemes, organising sanitation drives, and other initiatives for social good. So far they have linked 211 farmers (benefiting 1,055 people) to government subsidies for farm mechanisation (mini-sprinklers and drip system), which amounted to a total subsidy of Rs 9,78,751 from the government agriculture department. They have also linked the community to various social security services.

A community centre has been constructed in Karoda to function as a meeting place for discussions between stakeholders including government officials. The village developmental plans are prepared and their impacts shared there, and it is also a training centre as well as a place for holding various village events.

THE WAY FORWARD

For selecting and prioritising the future activities, Samridhi conducted another baseline survey in July 2022. In this survey, the people communicated the requirement to further strengthen the integrated initiatives that had been started earlier, as well as to expand their scope.

Community Centre, Karoda

Community Mobilisation Meeting with Women in Karoda

CONCLUSION

The domains of water, agriculture and education are interconnected. Therefore, to seek meaningful participation of the community, it is important to focus on holistic development beyond WASH. S M Sehgal Foundation focuses on water security, food security and education in government schools. It plans to replicate this model in more villages across various states in partnership with rural communities and Pernod Ricard, and beyond. Together we can, together we will.

Therefore, two new themes have started. They are advanced mechanisation suitable for small and marginal farming, as well as setting up sustainable farmers collective groups with special emphasis on women. Initiatives using solar energy are being promoted, such as solar street lights, solar spray pumps, and solar irrigation systems that pump water from the ground to irrigate fields. The community centre at Karoda also has a solar panel system to meet all its energy requirements.

Organising farmers is a proven strategy for increasing farmers' advantages in emerging markets and mitigating challenges that individual small farmers face. In this context, two government-initiated women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in the Samridhi area of operation are being strengthened for income generation. An example is the setting up of a Custom Hiring Centre (CHC) for renting out farm machinery, at the Antpura SHG. Further, the members of SHGs will form a Farmer Interest Group (FIG) at the village level that will then become part of a consolidated Farmers Producer Group (FPO) along with farmers from other Samridhi villages.

Since inception, as more and more community members became organically engaged in Samridhi, the project automatically evolved into four phases. Samridhi I, II, III and IV are based on the needs, people's response, and the momentum of the project. These phases engage different stakeholders, are thematic extensions of their previous roles, and they carry on the earlier efforts to a reduced extent.

The most relevant impact has been the increase in community involvement due to the gradual and unrelenting process of community mobilisation. It has taken time, repetition, and familiarity to convert the newly introduced knowledge into a practice in the villages.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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