



SWISS PHILANTHROPY
Foundation



Confluence

A Living Portfolio of SPF Partner
Progress in West Bengal and Assam

Knowledge partners



Confluence

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West Bengal and Assam



Table of Contents

Foreword	2	Swaniti	63
Executive Summary	3	ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability, South Asia	66
Introduction of the Project	5	Video Volunteers	69
Purpose	6	In Conclusion Understanding Where the Shift Occurs	73
Strategic Pillars of the SPF India Programme	7	Focus Area 3 : Indigenous Communities	76
Communities in Focus	8	Environment Conservation Society (SwitchON Foundation)	77
Focus Area 1: Sundarbans	11	In Conclusion Understanding Where the Shift Occurs	81
Aangan Trust	12	Focus Area 4 : Migrant Workers & Unorganised Sector	82
Deutsche Welthungerhilfe	15	Global Fund for Children	83
Terre des hommes Foundation	19	Society for Direct Initiative for Social and Health Action (DISHA)	87
Water For People PRASARI Akvo Foundation	22	Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee	90
Indraprastha Srijan Welfare Society	25	Jan Sahas	93
Ipas Development Foundation	28	SEWA Bharat	96
Kamonohashi Project	31	In Conclusion Understanding Where the Shift Occurs	99
In Conclusion Understanding Where the Shift Occurs	35	Scaling Community-Led Change	100
Focus Area 2 : Tea Gardens	38	Closing Note : From Individual Efforts to Collective Change	102
British Asian Trust	39		
Child In Need Institute	43		
Child Rights and You	47		
Nazdeek	49		
Family Planning Association of India	53		
Kolkata Sanved	56		
Project Concern International, India	59		

FOREWORD

At Swiss Philanthropy Foundation, we believe philanthropy should be demanding of itself: independent in judgement, rigorous in practice, and humble enough to be shaped by the people it hopes to serve. This requires trust in people who understand their own contexts, openness to different ways of working, and the patience to recognise that meaningful change often takes time.

Development challenges never arrive one at a time. Across the four focus areas of the SPF India Programme, communities live with climate risk, insecure income, exclusion and distance from public services as one interlocking reality. Yet funding is too often designed in silos, on short cycles, with little room for communities to set the agenda. A portfolio built around five connected strategic pillars was necessary for that reason.

What has stayed with me through the programme is the range of ways in which partners have responded to these realities. The 40+ organisations in the portfolio bring different experiences, relationships and capabilities to their work. Some work closely with community institutions, others with government systems, frontline workers, markets or other actors. What connects them is a willingness to work with communities, rather than simply for them, and to build from what people already know, value and are trying to change.

This compendium brings together some of those experiences. I see this as an opportunity to pause and look across the individual journeys, to notice what they have in common, where they differ, and what they might tell us about the process of change itself.

The stories also offer a useful reminder that change does not always appear in the same form. Sometimes it can be seen in greater access to entitlements or services, stronger livelihoods or more responsive institutions. At other times, it begins with something less visible: people coming together around an issue, finding the confidence to engage with a local institution, or beginning to see themselves as actors in shaping the systems around them.

Across the portfolio, we have seen the importance of community agency come through strongly. We have also seen that many of the issues partners are working on cannot be addressed in isolation. Climate resilience is tied to livelihoods. Access to rights depends, in part, on the systems through which those rights are delivered. Child protection, health and wellbeing are shaped by local institutions, social norms and the opportunities available to young people and families.

For me, this is one of the most valuable aspects of bringing these experiences together. They encourage us to look beyond individual interventions and ask what makes change possible, what helps it take root, and what needs to be sustained for it to continue.

I hope the reflections in these pages will resonate with others working across philanthropy and development. There are ideas here to build upon, experiences that may feel familiar, and questions that may lead to further reflection. Most importantly, I hope the compendium creates space for continued exchange between organisations, funders and communities, because some of the most useful learning comes when we are willing to share not only what worked, but also what remains unfinished.

My thanks to all the partner organisations, community members and others who have contributed their time, experience and learning to this collection. Their work is what gives these pages their meaning.

Indranil Niyogi

Consultant – India Programme Fund
Swiss Philanthropy Foundation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Complex social challenges rarely exist in isolation. Among the many communities in West Bengal, there are those that live in the Sundarbans, tea garden regions, indigenous settlements, and among migrant and unorganised workers. These populations in particular, experience overlapping vulnerabilities shaped by climate risks, economic insecurity, social exclusion, limited access to services, and weak representation in decision-making spaces.

Swiss Philanthropy Foundation's India Programme brings together a portfolio of 40+ grantee partners from grassroots organisations and networks to resource agencies. They work across these contexts to address the root causes of inequities and injustices faced by vulnerable communities. The programme seeks to improve outcomes for communities on the ground, and also generate evidence, learning, and practice-based insights that can inform systemic change at state and national levels.

This compendium documents the journeys, innovations, and emerging outcomes of partners working across four focus areas:



Sundarbans communities,
facing climate vulnerability,
displacement risks, and
barriers to services.



Tea garden communities,
navigating intergenerational
poverty, labour precarity, and
social exclusion.



Indigenous communities,
working to preserve identity,
strengthen agency, and improve
access to rights and resources.



Migrant and unorganised workers,
confronting unsafe labour conditions,
weak social protection, and limited
access to justice and entitlements.

Across these geographies and communities, partners have pursued change through **five interconnected strategic pillars**:



Amplifying
Community Voices



Access to
Entitlements



Access to
Justice



Sustainable
Livelihoods and
Climate Resilience



Strengthening
Systems and
Institutions

Together, these strategies aim to strengthen community agency, improve access to rights and services, build resilience against social and environmental shocks, and create more responsive public systems.

The stories captured in this compendium reveal a common pattern of change. Communities that were previously excluded from decision-making processes are increasingly organising, collectivising, and engaging with local governance structures. Women, adolescents, workers, indigenous groups, and community collectives are raising their voices on issues ranging from child protection and gender-based violence to labour rights, environmental justice, and access to social protection. In many instances, communities have moved beyond awareness and participation towards collective action, advocacy, and engagement with institutions responsible for delivering services and upholding rights.

Across the Sundarbans, partners have supported communities to diversify livelihoods, strengthen climate resilience, access social entitlements, and participate more actively in local governance processes. In tea garden communities, collective action has contributed to improved awareness of workplace rights, access to social protection schemes, child protection mechanisms, and greater recognition of issues such as sexual harassment and unsafe migration. Among migrant and unorganised workers, community mobilisation and advocacy have enabled workers and fishworker collectives to pursue entitlements, improve working conditions, and engage more effectively with government systems. Indigenous communities have demonstrated growing confidence in preserving cultural identity, building collective solidarity, and participating in community decision-making while strengthening access to public services and opportunities.

The programme's learning journey also highlights the importance of collaboration. Change has been enabled not only by community members and civil society organisations, but also through the involvement of local governments, frontline workers, schools, community volunteers, worker collectives, research institutions, and other ecosystem actors. These relationships have helped create pathways for communities to access entitlements, influence local planning processes, and strengthen accountability mechanisms.

At the same time, the compendium reflects the realities of long-term social change. Many interventions remain at an emerging stage, with outcomes still developing and deeper systemic shifts requiring sustained engagement over time. Structural barriers including climate shocks, entrenched social norms, labour exploitation, governance challenges, and political dynamics continue to affect the pace and scale of change.

As the portfolio continues to evolve, the knowledge documented here offers valuable insights into how multi-partner, community-centred approaches can contribute to systemic change. The experiences, challenges, and successes presented in these pages provide a foundation for future learning, collaboration, and scaling across geographies and sectors.





INTRODUCTION TO THE SWISS PHILANTHROPY FOUNDATION INDIA PROGRAMME

Across West Bengal, many communities continue to face deeply interconnected challenges that limit their ability to thrive. Climate vulnerability, insecure livelihoods, social exclusion, limited access to public services and justice systems, and unequal participation in decision-making processes often reinforce one another, creating cycles of disadvantage that are difficult to break.

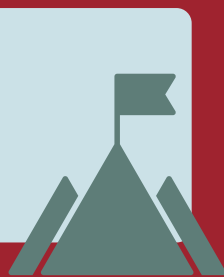
These challenges are particularly pronounced among communities living in the Sundarbans, tea garden regions, indigenous settlements, and among migrant and unorganised workers. While each context is unique, many share common barriers such as weak representation in governance processes, limited access to rights and entitlements, restrictive social norms, inadequate infrastructure, and heightened exposure to economic and environmental shocks.

Recognising the complexity of these challenges, Swiss Philanthropy Foundation supports a portfolio of 40+ grantee partners including grassroots organisations, community-based institutions, advocacy groups, and resource organisations. They work across West Bengal to address the root causes of inequities and injustices faced by vulnerable communities.

The programme is founded on the belief that lasting change requires more than isolated interventions. It requires communities, civil society organisations, public institutions, and other ecosystem actors to work together to strengthen agency, improve access to opportunities and services, and create systems that are more responsive, inclusive, and accountable.

Through its partners, Swiss Philanthropy Foundation seeks to improve outcomes for communities at the local level and also generate evidence, learning, and insights that can inform broader policy and systems-level change. By documenting emerging practices, challenges, and pathways to change, the programme aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of what it takes to build resilient and equitable communities.





PURPOSE OF THIS COMPENDIUM

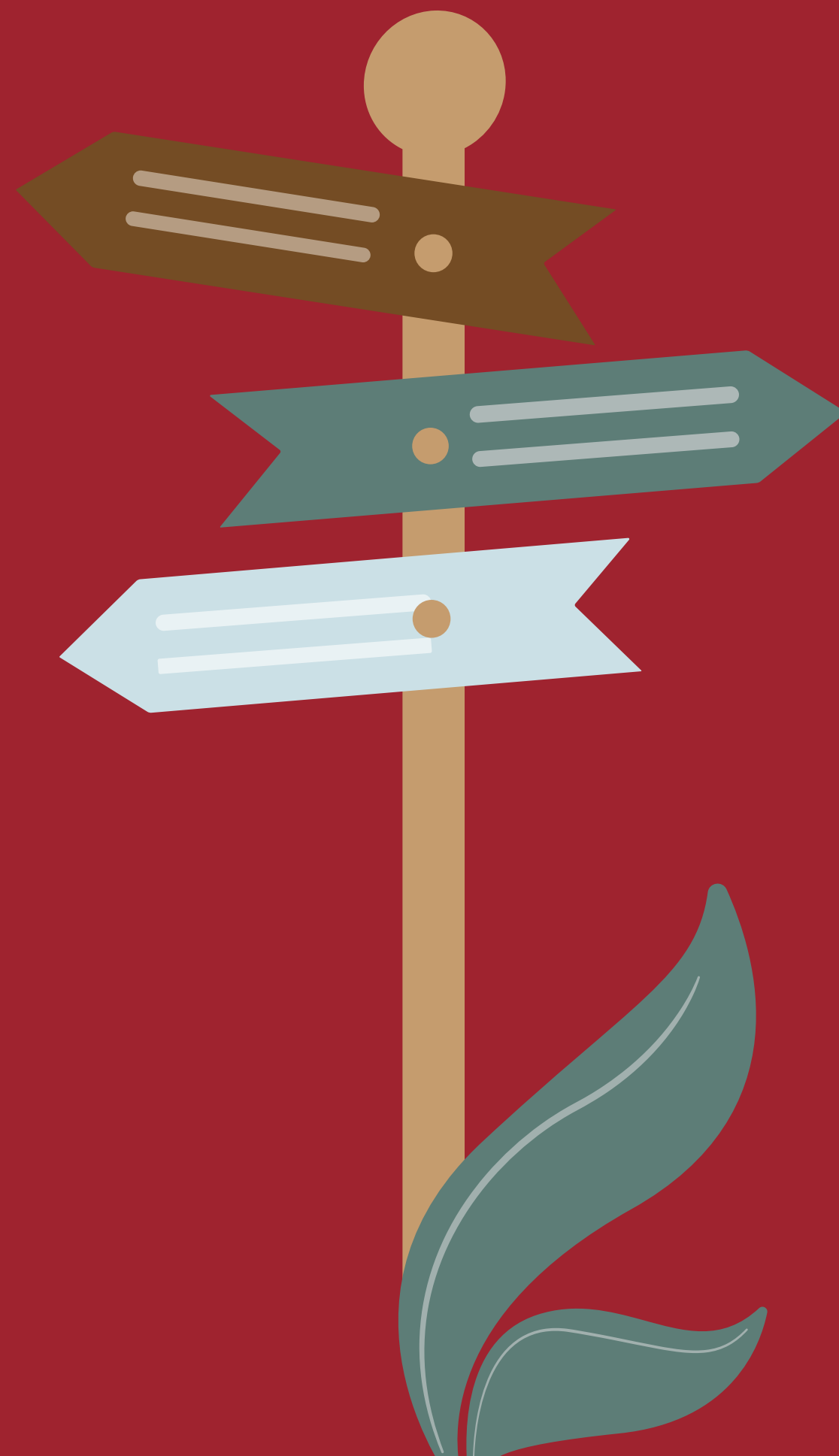
This compendium brings together the experiences, approaches, and emerging outcomes of organisations supported through the Swiss Philanthropy Foundation India Programme. It serves as a collective learning resource that captures how partners are working alongside communities to address complex social, economic, and environmental challenges.

This compendium does not present an exhaustive account of the work undertaken across the SPF India Programme. It features the journeys, experiences and learnings of partners who chose to participate and share their work through this compendium. The portfolio's work extends well beyond the stories presented here, with several other partners contributing to important changes and successes across communities and geographies.

The purpose of this publication is threefold:

- ▶ To document community-led and partner-supported journeys of change across diverse geographies and population groups.
- ▶ To surface lessons, innovations, and emerging evidence that can inform future programming, policy, and practice.
- ▶ To demonstrate the value of collaborative, multi-partner approaches in addressing systemic challenges that no single organisation can solve alone.

This compendium offers a snapshot of ongoing change processes. It highlights both achievements and challenges, recognising that many of the transformations sought by the programme require sustained effort over time.



Strategic Pillars of the SPF India Programme

The programme's approach is organised around five interconnected strategic pillars.

1 Amplifying Community Voices

Supporting communities to organise, identify issues, participate in decision-making, and advocate for their rights.

Examples

- ▶ Community collectives
- ▶ Gram Sabha participation
- ▶ Child and youth leadership
- ▶ Community-led advocacy

2 Access to Entitlements

Enabling individuals and communities to secure welfare benefits, social protection, documentation, and public services.

Examples

- ▶ Identity documentation
- ▶ Social security schemes
- ▶ Land rights claims
- ▶ Welfare enrolment

3 Access to Justice

Creating safer pathways for communities to seek redress, exercise rights, and hold institutions accountable.

Examples

- ▶ Legal awareness
- ▶ Grievance redressal
- ▶ Worker rights
- ▶ Child protection mechanisms

4 Sustainable Livelihoods & Climate Resilience

Strengthening economic security while building resilience to environmental and climate-related risks.

Examples

- ▶ Climate-smart agriculture
- ▶ Livelihood diversification
- ▶ Community adaptation strategies
- ▶ Natural resource management

5 Strengthening Systems

Working with institutions, government departments, and ecosystem actors to create sustainable and scalable change.

Examples

- ▶ Improved service delivery
- ▶ Community-government interfaces
- ▶ Policy engagement
- ▶ Institutional accountability

Together, these pillars reflect a shared commitment to enabling communities to access immediate support and opportunities, as well as to influence the systems, institutions, and policies that shape their lives.

The chapters that follow explore how these strategies come to life across different contexts and communities, highlighting both the distinct contributions of individual organisations and the collective progress emerging across the broader SPF India Programme.

COMMUNITIES IN FOCUS

The programme works alongside communities facing overlapping vulnerabilities shaped by geography, social exclusion, economic insecurity, and unequal access to opportunities. While each community experiences distinct challenges, common barriers—including limited representation, weak access to public systems, restrictive social norms, and climate-related risks—continue to constrain their ability to thrive.

This section introduces the four focus communities that form the heart of the programme and the strategic pillars through which partners seek to create sustainable change.

Communities in Focus



Sundarbans Communities

Context

Located in one of the world’s largest delta ecosystems, communities in the Sundarbans face recurring cyclones, flooding, salinity intrusion, displacement, and livelihood insecurity.

Key Challenges

- ▶ High disaster and climate risk
- ▶ Salinity exposure and declining agricultural productivity
- ▶ Limited access to infrastructure and services
- ▶ Unsafe migration and livelihood insecurity
- ▶ Child protection and gender-related vulnerabilities

Primary Social Actors

- ▶ Women and adolescent girls
- ▶ Farmers and fishers
- ▶ Youth
- ▶ Community leaders
- ▶ Local governance institutions

What Change Looks Like

- ⇒ Stronger climate resilience
- ⇒ Diversified livelihoods
- ⇒ Improved access to entitlements
- ⇒ Greater participation in local governance



Tea Garden Communities

Context

Tea garden communities often face intergenerational poverty, labour precarity, inadequate access to services, and dependence on a single economic sector.

Key Challenges

- ▶ Low wages and economic insecurity
- ▶ Dependence on tea estates
- ▶ Unsafe migration
- ▶ Child protection concerns
- ▶ Limited access to social protection and justice mechanisms

Primary Social Actors

- ▶ Tea garden workers
- ▶ Women and adolescents
- ▶ Child collectives
- ▶ Trade unions
- ▶ Tea garden management

What Change Looks Like

- ⇒ Access to labour rights and entitlements
- ⇒ Safer workplaces
- ⇒ Improved health and child protection outcomes
- ⇒ Stronger worker agency and collective action



Indigenous Communities

Context

Indigenous communities continue to navigate historical marginalisation, resource insecurity, and barriers to participation in governance and development processes.

Key Challenges

- ▶ Land and resource dispossession
- ▶ Limited access to services
- ▶ Social exclusion
- ▶ Gender-based discrimination
- ▶ Cultural erosion

Primary Social Actors

- ▶ Indigenous women
- ▶ Farmers
- ▶ Community collectives
- ▶ Gram Sabha institutions
- ▶ Community leaders

What Change Looks Like

- ⇒ Increased community agency
- ⇒ Improved access to rights and services
- ⇒ Stronger participation in decision-making
- ⇒ Preservation of cultural identity and heritage



Migrant & Unorganised Workers

Context

Migrant workers, informal labourers, fishworkers, and other unorganised sector workers often operate outside formal protection systems.

Key Challenges

- ▶ Unsafe migration
- ▶ Lack of social security
- ▶ Informal and insecure employment
- ▶ Limited bargaining power
- ▶ Occupational vulnerabilities

Primary Social Actors

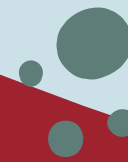
- ▶ Migrant workers
- ▶ Fishworker collectives
- ▶ Informal workers
- ▶ Women's groups
- ▶ Employers and labour institutions

What Change Looks Like

- ⇒ Safer migration pathways
- ⇒ Access to social protection
- ⇒ Improved working conditions
- ⇒ Stronger worker collectives and advocacy



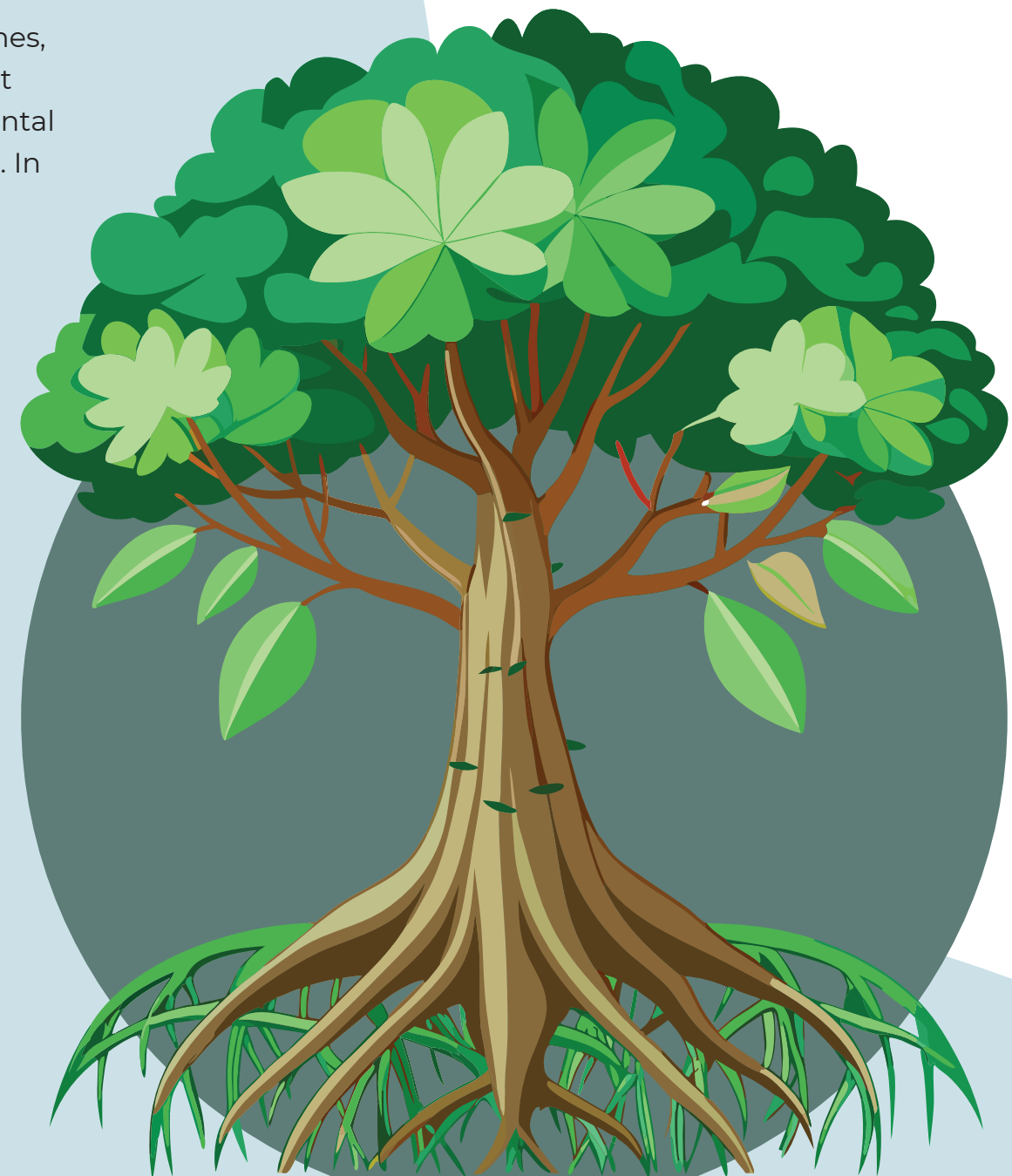
COMPENDIUM



Sundarbans

The Sundarbans, spread across the delta of the Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers, is a vast landscape of mangrove forests, tidal waterways, islands and low-lying settlements shaped by the constant movement of water. Its geography makes it both ecologically rich and highly vulnerable to a changing climate. Communities living across these islands and coastal settlements depend closely on the surrounding natural environment for their homes and livelihoods, including agriculture, fishing and forest-based activities. At the same time, they face recurring cyclones, tidal flooding, salinity intrusion, erosion and other forms of environmental degradation that can disrupt livelihoods and damage essential infrastructure. These climate and environmental pressures are compounded by challenges in accessing essential services and entitlements. In this context, strengthening resilience is not only about responding to climate shocks, but also about enabling communities to build sustainable livelihoods, access the support and entitlements available to them, and have a stronger voice in local governance and decisions that shape their future.

The stories that follow showcase the extensive work partner organizations have put into working with the communities of the regions. It is a showcase of their deep understanding of the cultural context and their participatory approach.



Aangan Trust

In the Sundarbans of West Bengal, climate change is rarely experienced as a distant environmental phenomenon. It arrives as a cyclone that floods homes overnight, as salinity that slowly erodes farmland, as migration that separates families, and as economic distress that pushes households into impossible decisions.

In the face of recurring climate events families are constantly in survival mode. As recurring climate shocks erode livelihoods, deepen poverty, and escalate precarity, children bear the brunt—pulled out of school, pushed into labour, married off early, or forced to deal with migration for themselves or family. Therefore, children in these zones face increased violence and exploitation and their right to protection, care, and development is threatened. Local governments responding to climate emergencies largely focused on immediate relief, and children rarely figured as a distinct group requiring separate attention and care. It is within this gap that the Aangan Trust has been working to strengthen a critical but often overlooked dimension of climate resilience: the safety and well-being of children.

For over two decades, Aangan has worked on preventing harm to children by building systems that identify risks early and respond before crises escalate. Aangan's work has focused on recognising and highlighting the urgent need to address the intersecting risks that climate stress places on children.

The programme '*Child Proofing Climate Change: Child Safety Systems for Communities in Crisis*' was implemented across 150 Gram Panchayats in 16 blocks of North and South 24 Parganas, regions increasingly affected by climate-related vulnerabilities. The initiative aimed to build a responsive, community-led child safety ecosystem rooted in local governance. By empowering community actors, institutionalising child safety mechanisms, and listening to adolescent voices, the programme enabled the timely identification, prevention, and resolution of child safety risks and harms in the face of growing climate stress. The programme has also reimagined disaster preparedness through a child safety lens.

Building on Existing Community Strengths

Instead of introducing external structures, Aangan worked through existing formal systems mainly the Gram Panchayats, the local governance and frontline workers as well as informal systems such as community volunteers and adolescent peer networks to build a child safety ecosystem that is locally rooted and self-sustaining

One of the programme's most significant contributions has been creating stronger collaboration between communities and local governance systems around child safety. Across the intervention geography, 148 Gram Panchayats have made child safety a standing agenda in monthly multi-stakeholder meetings establishing local platforms where concerns can be identified, discussed, and tracked. Of these, 143 Gram Panchayats have gone further, establishing active child supervision systems involving frontline workers such as ASHAs, Anganwadi Workers, and Village Resource Persons. During routine household visits, these workers monitor child well-being and report emerging concerns directly to Panchayats, enabling earlier identification of risks and more timely action.



Adolescents as Leaders, Not Beneficiaries

One of the strongest assets within these communities has been its adolescents with lived experience of climate stress who can see, firsthand, how it links to the safety risks children around them face. Aangan's work recognises that young people, especially girls, often have the clearest understanding of how climate disruptions affect children's everyday realities. They notice when peers stop attending school, when families migrate suddenly, or when children are left unattended after disasters.

Across 132 Gram Panchayats, adolescent platforms have been established where young people regularly engage local governance systems on issues affecting their safety and well-being. In 95 of these Gram Panchayats, formal mechanisms now exist to support the functioning of these platforms through dedicated spaces, regular meetings, and documentation systems to ensure follow-up and resolution.

This shift from children being spoken for to children being heard directly has fundamentally altered how local institutions engage with child protection concerns. Adolescents are no longer peripheral voices in governance conversations. They are increasingly influencing how risks are understood and addressed at the local level. They are now becoming an integral part of the local planning.

The Role of Hyperlocal Evidence

Aangan's approach is deeply evidence-driven, and its evidence begins locally.

With over two decades of experience, one of Aangan's core learnings is the power of hyperlocal data in influencing governance systems. This learning shaped this programme too. Trained community volunteers documented patterns of child safety risks such as child labour, school dropout, unsafe migration, early marriage, runaway cases, and unsupervised children, and tracked how these patterns intensified in connection with recurring climate events.

When these patterns were brought to Gram Panchayats by community members alongside adolescents' firsthand testimonies, local leaders began to recognise child protection as a direct consequence of climate vulnerability in their own communities, and took action to ensure safety within their jurisdictions.

This combination of lived experience and local evidence proved transformative. It shifted child safety from a reactive issue to a governance priority.

Aangan measures impact through a combination of quantitative indicators and qualitative aspects at the community and local stakeholder level.



At the systems level, the organisation tracks:

- The number of Gram Panchayats integrating child safety into governance processes
- The establishment and functioning of child supervision systems
- Actions taken by Panchayats in response to child safety concerns
- Coordination between frontline workers and governance institutions





At the community level, the programme measures:

- Formation and functioning of adolescent collectives and Community Resource Groups
- Frequency of engagement between adolescents and Panchayats and its qualitative aspects
- Frequency of engagement between a Community Resource Groups and Panchayats aspects
- Community awareness around child safety and climate risks
- Participation of young people in disaster preparedness activities



At the child protection level, the programme monitors:

- Incidents and reporting of child labour, unsafe migration, school dropout, early marriage, and neglect
- Identification and referral of at-risk children
- Follow-up actions undertaken through community and government

Importantly, measurement is not treated as an external accountability exercise alone. Monitoring systems also function as feedback loops that help communities and institutions adapt their responses over time.



Learning That Prevention Requires Systems

Several key lessons have emerged from implementation.

First, child protection in climate contexts cannot be addressed through isolated interventions. Sustainable change requires strengthening the broader ecosystem surrounding children such as families, communities, governance systems, and public institutions.

Second, local ownership is essential. Community Resource Groups, adolescent collectives, and frontline workers become effective because they are rooted within existing social structures and relationships.

Third, adolescent participation is strategic. Young people often identify risks earlier than institutions do, making them critical actors in preventive systems.

And finally, prevention requires continuity. Climate shocks can disrupt programmes and overwhelm communities focused on immediate survival. Sustained engagement is therefore necessary to ensure systems do not revert to reactive responses after crises pass.



The Road Ahead

Looking forward, Aangan sees climate resilience and child safety as inseparable. One cannot be built without the other.

As climate-related disruptions intensify, Aangan will deepen the integration of child safety within local governance and disaster response systems, while continuing to strengthen adolescent leadership, particularly among girls. The platforms created through this programme will now be leveraged so that girls can own and lead them practising assertive safety behaviours, seeking support early, and taking individual or collective action to prevent harm. Alongside this, girls will be supported to continue on their education pathways and aspire toward skilling and employment so that safety and opportunity grow together, and adolescent girls are equipped to build futures that go beyond protection alone.

Aangan also recognises that no single organisation can address these challenges alone. Future efforts will continue to focus on strengthening collaboration with civil society organisations, frontline workers, and local governance institutions expanding a broader child protection ecosystem that is community-led and institutionally anchored.

Ultimately, Aangan's work in the Sundarbans offers a powerful lesson for climate resilience efforts everywhere. When local leadership, adolescent voices, governance systems, and evidence come together, child safety moves from being an afterthought in disaster response to becoming a central pillar of resilience itself.

Deutsche Welthungerhilfe

Amidst the lush landscape of the Sundarbans, resilience is often built quietly by women who continue weaving fishing nets after cyclones destroy farmlands. By farmers who experiment with new fish cultivation methods despite repeated flooding. By youth who choose to stay and build livelihoods locally instead of migrating in search of uncertain work. And by grassroots organisations that continue supporting communities through some of the most climate-vulnerable conditions in the country.

Across the islands of North 24 Parganas and South 24 Parganas, livelihoods are deeply tied to an increasingly fragile ecosystem. Agriculture remains the backbone of the local economy, yet most households depend on a single rain-fed paddy crop that is highly vulnerable to erratic rainfall, salinity, cyclones, and coastal erosion.

For many families, climate shocks are no longer occasional disruptions but a part of everyday life. Declining soil productivity, land degradation, debt, migration, and lack of stable livelihood opportunities have steadily increased economic vulnerability across the region. Landless households, forest-dependent communities, women, and youth are often the most affected.

Yet even within these challenges, communities continue to hold important strengths like deep ecological knowledge, strong local networks, informal support systems, and a willingness to adapt. It is within this context that Deutsche Welthungerhilfe has been working to strengthen climate-resilient livelihoods and rural entrepreneurship in the Sundarbans.

Deutsche Welthungerhilfe's work builds on local capacities, grassroots institutions, and community leadership to create pathways toward sustainable economic self-reliance.



From Subsistence to Sustainable Enterprise

The programme emerged from a recognition that conventional skilling systems might not fully address the realities of rural and ecologically fragile regions like the Sundarbans.

Historically, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) systems in India have focused largely on urban and peri-urban economies. In the Sundarbans, however, livelihood opportunities are deeply linked to local ecological conditions, agricultural systems, and natural resources.

Deutsche Welthungerhilfe therefore adopted an approach centred on “Green Skills” with a mix of farm and non-farm based trades and ecopreneurship, supporting rural youth and vulnerable communities to build climate-resilient enterprises rooted within local economies.

The first phase of the programme focused on training and supporting over 1,200 rural youth across more than 50 villages in the Sundarbans. The initiative covered three clusters across Hingalganj, Kakdwip, Namkhana, Patharpratima, and G-Plot regions.



The programme combined:

- climate-resilient livelihood promotion (mix of farm and non farm trades),
- enterprise development,
- value-chain strengthening,
- and long-term ecosystem building.

A major focus was placed on helping communities gradually transition from subsistence livelihoods toward sustainable microenterprises.

Building on Community and Grassroots Networks

From the beginning, the programme worked closely with organisations such as MUKTI, Development Research Communication and Services Centre (DRCSC), Praxis, ISWS, BTS, BUP, and Rupantaran Foundation. These organisations brought deep contextual understanding, trusted community relationships, and years of experience working within difficult geographies of the Sundarbans.

Regular network meetings created spaces where organisations could exchange learning, identify livelihood opportunities, discuss value-chain development, and coordinate efforts around skilling and entrepreneurship.

Two major CSO network meetings in North and South 24 Parganas brought together representatives from 15 organisations including Jivika, Janakalyan Samiti, Ahead Initiative, Palli Unnayan Samiti, Sabuj Sangha, and ISWS. This collaborative approach strengthened local ownership while ensuring that interventions remained grounded in the realities of the region.



The Green College Model

A central framework guiding the programme was the Green College model developed jointly with Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narendrapur. The Green College approach focuses on “Green+” livelihoods, primarily agri-allied trades along with selected non-farm trades suited to local ecological and market conditions. Trade selection is not predetermined. It emerges through stakeholder consultations, market assessments, resource mapping, and local demand analysis.

Training programmes combine:

- 10–20% theoretical learning,
- 50–60% practical exposure,
- business development skills,
- soft skills training,
- exposure visits,
- and assessments.

The programme also identified more than 120 High Potential Rural Youth (HPRY) for accelerated enterprise development. The aim was to foster rural entrepreneurs capable of creating livelihoods for others within their communities while sustaining their own micro-enterprises.

Stories of Local Transformation

For many participants, the programme created opportunities for rebuilding confidence and agency, along with income generation.

In Paschim Surendranagar village of Patharpratima block, Lata Gayen had long struggled to support her family while her husband worked as a migrant labourer away from home. Like many women in the Sundarbans, she managed multiple forms of informal work such as daily labour, fishing, and net weaving, while caring for her children and household. Although she had some experience with goat rearing, recurring disease outbreaks and lack of technical knowledge prevented her from building it into a sustainable livelihood.

In late 2024, Lata attended a month-long training on goat and sheep rearing organised through the Green College initiative. The training introduced her to scientific feeding methods, vaccination practices, and disease management techniques.

The impact was immediate and practical. Today, Lata owns four healthy goats and recently earned ₹7,000 from the sale of one animal. More importantly, she now sees goat rearing not as a coping mechanism, but as a pathway toward long-term economic independence. She hopes to expand her herd to fifty goats and build a sustainable enterprise.

A similar transformation emerged in Hingalganj block through the story of Biswajit Mondal. For years, Biswajit cultivated crops and raised fish primarily for household consumption. Despite continuous labour, his monthly income remained limited to around ₹3,000. After participating in a one-month training on composite fish culture in 2024, he began applying scientific fish farming techniques including pond management, feed formulation, and disease control.

Encouraged by the results, Biswajit expanded from a small household pond to three ponds covering nearly two bighas of land. His monthly income has now increased to ₹5,000, with expectations of higher returns after future harvests. More importantly, he now views fish farming as a viable long-term enterprise rather than a supplementary activity.

These stories reflect a broader programme philosophy that communities already possess knowledge, skills, and resilience. With the right ecosystem of training, mentoring, and market support, these strengths can become the foundation for sustainable livelihoods.



Measuring Impact Through Systems and Enterprise Growth

The programme measures impact through continuous monitoring, field engagement, and systems-based tracking processes.

Key metrics include:

- ▶ Number of rural youth trained,
- ▶ establishment of microenterprises,
- ▶ formation of Farmer Interest Groups (FIGs) and Farmer Producer Organisation (FPO),
- ▶ participation in Fast Track enterprise programmes for HPRYs,
- ▶ stakeholder engagement and network-building activities,
- ▶ and value-chain strengthening processes.

The programme also tracks:

- ▶ enterprise progress
- ▶ training participation and completion,
- ▶ field visit observations,
- ▶ monthly reports,
- ▶ quarterly financial and operational reviews,
- ▶ and annual audits.

Monitoring occurs through:

- ▶ regular field visits,
- ▶ monthly review sessions,
- ▶ stakeholder consultations,
- ▶ quarterly reporting by implementation partners,
- ▶ and external evaluations.

Case studies, exchange workshops, business meets, and outcome harvesting exercises are also used to assess behavioural change, enterprise sustainability, and ecosystem development.

Importantly, the programme measures training outputs as well as the participants ability to transition toward sustainable livelihoods and stronger local market participation over time.



Learning That Ecosystems Matter

Several important lessons emerged during implementation.

- ▶ **First**, skilling alone is insufficient without stronger market linkages, value-chain networks, access to capital support and continuous handholding/mentoring.
- ▶ **Second**, rural entrepreneurship requires ecosystem development rather than isolated training interventions. Sustainable enterprises depend on collaboration between producers, financial institutions, technical agencies, local governance systems, and grassroots organisations.
- ▶ **Third**, the remoteness of the Sundarbans presents ongoing implementation challenges. Natural disasters, weak infrastructure, and difficult transportation frequently disrupt training schedules, exposure visits, and field coordination.

The programme also recognised that enterprise development takes time. Most rural enterprises require three to five years to become stable and profitable, particularly within ecologically vulnerable geographies.



The Road Ahead

Looking ahead, Deutsche Welthungerhilfe plans to deepen support for the first cohort of trained entrepreneurs through refresher training, mentoring, business networking, and digital marketing support.

The next phase will focus on building “value webs” that connect producers, processors, suppliers, distributors, and customers into more sustainable and participatory enterprise ecosystems. The programme also plans to create a digital repository of methodologies, training materials, manuals, and toolkits developed during implementation so they can be institutionalised within local training systems and skilling missions.

Underlying this work is a larger belief that sustainable development in regions like the Sundarbans must build from the strengths communities already possess.

Terre des hommes Foundation

The impact of climate change in the climate-vulnerable region of the Sundarbans is multifold. Frequent cyclones, rising salinization of water, and climate-induced migration are disrupting the livelihoods and social stability of the communities. These shifts especially intensify the protection risks for children in the form of school disruptions, child labour, early marriages, trafficking, and psychosocial distress.

While the current policies under the West Bengal State Disaster Management Policy and other frameworks try to alleviate the effects of climate change, they consider children as passive recipients of services.

Terre des hommes (Tdh) is an international child-rights organization working in more than 30 countries to protect children's lives, uphold their rights, and improve their well-being. Tdh has embedded climate as a cross-cutting priority across its operations, focusing on strengthening community resilience, integrating climate risk considerations within programs, and advocating for children's right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.

Climate change acts as a threat multiplier, deepening existing inequalities and weakening the systems meant to protect children. The Sankalpa project, in partnership with the Swiss Philanthropy Foundation, works in the Sundarbans through schools and local governance institutions and children's collectives. The project strengthens institutional preparedness, protects children from climate-related protection risks, and ensures that children's voices are integrated into community and policy responses to climate change.

The Project Sankalpa

Project Sankalpa is implemented in the Indian Sundarbans, one of the world's most climate-vulnerable delta regions located in South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, India. The project focuses on the climate-distressed blocks of Gosaba and Kultali, where communities live across low-lying riverine islands that face recurrent cyclones, flooding, salinization, and climate-induced migration.

The initiative has been implemented in 23 government schools and gram panchayats, in partnership with New Alipore Praajak Development Society and Barasat Unnayan Prostuti. As part of the intervention, Tdh has implemented the Kabaddi for Empowerment methodology, which was developed in collaboration with UNHCR, IOC and Tdh, to harness the power of sport to strengthen protection, development of climate resilience and empowerment for children living in climate-vulnerable regions.

The project also collaborates with the West Bengal Commission for Protection of Child Rights (WBCPCR) to advance child-centred climate adaptation and policy dialogue.



Path to Structured Impact

Children are often missing from policy-making conversations, both as subjects and as contributors. The Sankalpa project integrates child-centred climate resilience into local institutions to enhance the adaptive capacities of children.

At the institutional level, the project is strengthening government schools and local governance bodies to function as safe, climate-responsive spaces for children. In spaces often frequented by children, teachers and panchayat members are supported to identify vulnerabilities early, provide psychosocial support, and activate referral pathways when children face risks of abuse, neglect, or exploitation. Through this approach, schools are becoming spaces where children can safely express concerns, participate in disaster preparedness activities, and access trusted support during and after climate shocks.

Another transformative change is the growing agency of children through structured sports sessions. Platforms such as Kanyashree Clubs and Child Cabinets are enabling children to discuss climate risks, gender norms, and safety concerns while leading awareness initiatives within their schools and communities.

At the systems level, the project is contributing to policy dialogue with the West Bengal Commission for Protection of Child Rights to integrate child-centric policies in the disaster risk reduction framework and climate education through curriculum changes. Together, these efforts aim to ensure that children are not only protected from climate impacts but are recognized as active stakeholders shaping resilient futures.



Frameworks for Impact

The impact of the work is measured through a results framework that tracks changes across children, institutions, communities, and policy systems in climate-distressed blocks of the Sundarbans in West Bengal.

- **Kabaddi for empowerment:** In 2018, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Terre des hommes (Tdh) developed the Sports for Protection (S4P). It is a programming model for young people that harnesses the power of sport to strengthen protection, development and empowerment environments for vulnerable children and youth (aged between 15–24 years) living in forced displacement settings including refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

Based on the detailed S4P toolkit, Tdh India adapted the methodology to its local context in collaboration with local community-based

organizations, leading to the creation of the Kabaddi for Empowerment (K4E) methodology. Whilst the global methodology was developed primarily for children in displacement settings, the K4E methodology has been contextualized to expand its applicability to local communities at the risk of unsafe migration and climate vulnerability.

K4E is a gender-transformative model that integrates structured Kabaddi-based sessions and additional activities; like mock drills, reflection and study circles, local tournaments, community-based child led social action events with child protection and psychosocial support objectives.

- **IASC MHPSS pyramid:** The project integrates Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) approaches aligned with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) pyramid. The IASC MHPSS intervention pyramid conceptualizes a continuum of care across four interconnected layers:

- Basic services and security
- Family and community supports
- Focused non-clinical support
- Specialized clinical services.

Together, these layers reflect a socio-ecological understanding of wellbeing, situating children within a network of relationships and systems including family, school, community, and broader sociopolitical environments. Teachers and frontline workers are equipped with basic helping skills to identify distress, provide emotional support, and refer children who may require additional care.

- **Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction:** Disaster risk reduction activities with children draw from principles of the Sendai Framework, promoting awareness of risks, preparedness, and community resilience. Children participate in activities such as hazard mapping, disaster calendars, and resource mapping to understand climate risks and contribute to preparedness planning.

- **RoboMitra:** It is a digital learning platform used to engage children on topics such as climate change, mental health, personal safety, and menstrual health through interactive tools. It helps make complex issues accessible and encourages children to explore and discuss them in engaging ways.

- **EmpowerPlus:** It is a digital safeguarding and learning tool used to train teachers and frontline workers on child protection, legal provisions, and referral mechanisms. It supports duty bearers in identifying children at risk and responding appropriately through structured guidance and resources.

By employing these frameworks, children and adolescents increasingly influence how schools function, how local governments prioritize resources, and how communities prepare for disasters. Through Sankalpa, community members such as teachers, elected representatives, frontline workers, and parents are already seeing the value of child participation. What lies ahead is deeper ownership, where communities sustain these practices without external facilitation.

Beyond acknowledging differentiated impacts of climate change on children, investing in children requires listening to, involving, and empowering them as part of the solution and even acting at the forefront of tackling the climate crisis.



Listening to Trusted Voices

A key success of the Sankalpa project has been the role of schools as trusted platforms for strengthening child protection and climate resilience. Teachers are increasingly able to identify signs of abuse, warn against harmful practices, and refer vulnerable children for support. Schools and local governance institutions such as Gram Panchayat have also begun responding to children's concerns, leading to improved relationships and trust between children, schools, and community stakeholders. Child-led platforms, including eco clubs and sports activities, have helped normalize child participation and encouraged children to raise issues such as child marriage, school dropout, and gender discrimination within their communities. Children have initiated climate awareness actions at home and in their communities and have successfully advocated for improved attendance and safer school environments.



The Road Ahead

Strong social protection systems are essential for climate resilience. Schemes and entitlements act as climate risk insurance and can help communities absorb climate shocks, protect household livelihoods, and reduce the risks that children face during disasters and slow-onset climate stresses.

What lies ahead is the deepening of a model where schools and panchayats not only adopt child-friendly practices but truly own them. For Tdh, the Sankalpa project marks a shift from program-based interventions to long-term, institutional strengthening.

This means continuing to embed child participation into everyday institutional functioning, where children's voices are not occasional inputs but an expected part of governance. The road ahead also includes stronger collaboration with systems and institutions. The role now is to support these institutions in operationalizing the recommendations that make their Disaster Management Plans genuinely child-centric, ensuring preparedness, response, and mitigation all consider children's safety, psychosocial well-being, and vulnerabilities.

Water For People | PRASARI | Akvo Foundation

Water insecurity in the Sundarbans is not only about scarcity but also about how water is understood, managed, and governed. It is shaped by a combination of ecological stress, livelihood dependence, and fragmented planning systems in which water is affected by salinity, rainfall variability, and intersecting competing demands.

Beyond environmental pressures, a key challenge lies in how water is governed. Water-related issues for drinking water, irrigation, health, and climate adaptation are typically addressed through separate schemes and government departments that follow limited coordination. Local community members, particularly women, are often absent from water planning processes. Despite direct engagement with water systems, they have limited space to influence formal planning. Economic constraints further shape how households prioritize short-term needs over long-term resource management.

To bridge these divides through a planning process, the project brings together complementary roles across the three partners to address water security in the Sundarbans. This is led through community-led planning, data-informed decision-making, and institutional engagement.

Water For People leads the project through engagement with state-level institutions and stakeholders to strengthen government convergence by linking departments and schemes related to water, livelihoods, health, and climate adaptation. It also develops communication products to support knowledge generation and learning, helping connect field insights with government systems and planning processes. PRASARI anchors on-ground implementation by working with Self Help Groups (SHGs) and community institutions to develop village-level water security plans. They also convene a Sunderbans learning alliance and engage with block and district administration. Lastly, Akvo Foundation supports the data and digital components, that includes data collection, organization, and interpretation methods to inform planning, monitoring, and capacity building of program staff.

The project is implemented in the Sundarbans, within the South 24 Parganas of West Bengal. It is working across two administrative blocks: Gosaba and Patharpratima, which are highly vulnerable to salinity, flooding, and climate variability. The focus is on three Gram Panchayats in each block; in the Gosaba block, these include Pathankhali, Bali I, and Kochukhali. In Patharpratima block, the program covers Patharpratima, Banashyamnagar, and Brajaballavpur.

The work is primarily rooted in rural, agrarian communities where water access is closely linked to livelihoods, agriculture, and domestic use. The project is focused on developing a shared understanding of local water systems, strengthening community capacities, and testing how data can support more grounded planning processes.



Creating Ripples

The core problem the project seeks to address is the persistent mismatch between water availability and water use in the Sundarbans.

The work has focused on making complex and interconnected systems more visible and understandable for use at the community level. The primary participants in the project are community members who are more confidently engaging in discussions around water use, agriculture, and local resource planning. There are also early signs of engagement with local governance platforms (Samasad Sabhas), where water security priorities from the hamlets are being presented and discussed.

The project supports the development of barefoot hydrogeologists (SHG representatives) and strengthens community-led planning processes. It has enabled local actors to engage more actively in understanding water quality, demand, and trade-offs. It has gradually incorporated technical concepts such as water budgeting, resource mapping, and water quality into practical tools for communities to understand and use in local planning and decision making.

Communities have begun to engage with water security planning and data to inform discussions, but the shift to sustained action is still ongoing. In some cases, plans are being taken forward into local governance platforms, but this is not yet consistent across all villages. Factors such as availability of resources, alignment with government processes, and the time required for institutional engagement continue to influence how far these plans translate into action. At this stage, the project's contribution lies in strengthening the foundation for more informed and collective decision-making, with longer-term outcomes dependent on how these processes continue to evolve.

An Ear to the Ground

The project is guided by a participatory water security planning approach that combines community knowledge, technical assessment, and local governance engagement.

It draws on participatory groundwater management, water budgeting, resource mapping, and the idea that water must be understood across competing uses such as drinking water, agriculture, livestock, and livelihoods. Household surveys, agricultural demand assessments, PRA exercises, geo-tagging of water sources, and water balance calculations informed the evidence-building for improved planning. These inputs help communities and the project team understand freshwater availability, seasonal demand patterns, and water deficits.

Alongside recognizing gaps, the team also periodically pauses and reflects on how its work aligns with the broader water security landscape. This helps to understand where the efforts were concentrated, where gaps exist, and how different elements of water security were (or were not) being addressed. This exercise questions the assumptions and avoids viewing the project only through the lens of past approaches or predefined activities.

The consistent demand from the community emphasized on the drinking water attributes leading to occurrences of the water-borne health issues. Although the groundwater used for drinking is presumed to be safe, the water quality tests using 'palintest wagtech' revealed presence of bacterial colonies beyond permissible limits. To address this, the tank pump filter arrangements with higher invited costs were replaced by innovations through partnerships for safe drinking water. This innovative technique for enhancing hand pump pressure led to the installation of water purification systems (leveraged through partnership with Tata chemicals) using zero energy to deliver safe-water at the door-step. This was a cost-effective and simple model for wider replication, probably one of the significant contributions of the project for the sundarbans population.

Measuring impact

The project outcomes are measured through a mix of quantitative indicators, field evidence, and process-based observations. The main areas tracked are

- ▶ Capacity building
- ▶ Community planning
- ▶ Water balance assessment
- ▶ Benefits of adoption of water-efficient practices.

Some indicators are activity/output-based, such as:

- ▶ Number of training sessions conducted
- ▶ Number of SHG members and barefoot hydrogeologists trained
- ▶ Number of household surveys completed and agricultural demand assessments conducted
- ▶ Monitoring of selected water sources
- ▶ Number of hamlet-level micro-planning exercises facilitated
- ▶ Number of Samsad or village-level water security plans prepared

As the project closes in 2026, the team is also assessing water security outcomes using insights from the water balance studies. These help understand household and agricultural water needs, availability of surface and groundwater sources, their seasonal reliability, and the overall freshwater deficit at the local level. This analysis shows whether water availability is improving and where gaps continue to persist.

It also indicates how practices and water-efficient agricultural practices are performing in reducing water stress. While early findings indicate improvements in some locations, this evidence is still being strengthened now.

Additionally, they are capturing qualitative signs of change: how SHGs and barefoot hydrogeologists use data in discussions, communities understand trade-offs between domestic and agricultural water use, and micro-level plans inform site selection of the models/infrastructure.



Learning Important Lessons

Evidence alone is not sufficient, how it is used matters. While detailed data was collected on water demand, supply, and sources, their value depended on how it was translated into formats that communities could engage with and use for facilitation with community members. A recurring theme was that water security cannot be treated only as a question of schemes, infrastructure, or technical solutions. In practice, discussions around water consistently opened up wider questions of agriculture, livelihoods, land use, health, migration, and the management of common resources.

A key enabler is the presence of trusted local platforms, such as SHGs or other community institutions, through which women and local actors can participate meaningfully in planning and oversight. SHG women and barefoot hydrogeologists shaped water-related discussions at the community level and decisions on project-supported models. Their involvement helped move planning closer to the people who understand daily water use, seasonal stress, and livelihood trade-offs.

It also highlighted that sustainability depends on community oversight, not only construction or implementation. Assets and processes need local ownership, continued monitoring, and clear links with governance systems.

It's important to rethink how 'traditional knowledge' is described. Practices such as planting coconut or moringa along bunds may be better understood as adaptive responses to fragile deltaic conditions, rather than inherited tradition alone. This distinction matters for how local knowledge is documented, valued, and used in future programs.



The Road Ahead

Looking ahead, there needs to be a movement away from water-focused projects to a broader resilience lens for the Sundarbans. Water has been the entry point, but it is closely tied to agriculture, livelihoods, ecosystems, health, and migration. These are not separate issues, they intersect in how communities experience risk and respond to change.

The plans include iterating on building a place-based resilience frame that brings together these dimensions across people, livelihoods, and nature and connects them with the roles of institutions, markets, and the state. This requires working beyond a single project or partner. Multiple actors are already present in the region, each addressing parts of this landscape. The opportunity lies in making these efforts more visible to each other, identifying points of convergence, and building shared understanding around water and resilience.

For communities, this means continuing to strengthen their role in planning and sustaining local actions.



Indraprastha Srijan Welfare Society

Indraprastha Srijan Welfare Society (ISWS) is guided by community systems that strengthen frameworks, integrating evidence, participation, and continuous learning.

In partnership with the Swiss Philanthropy Foundation, ISWS is strengthening community-led systems and amplifying community voices for vulnerable communities in the Sundarbans and tribal populations. This part of West Bengal is shaped by its complex ecosystem, where informality of work, climate risk, and systemic exclusion from welfare and justice mechanisms are expansive issues. Despite progressive policies, implementation gaps persist due to weak last-mile delivery, limited awareness, and power asymmetries. These systemic challenges make community-led, systems-focused interventions critical.

In the Sundarbans, climate change has intensified livelihood loss and displacement, and tribal communities experience historic marginalization from governance and services. ISWS' project responds to these challenges by addressing root causes of the issues. It is anchored in five strategic pillars that focus on systems strengthening, climate adaptation and resilient livelihoods, access to entitlements, the intersection of gender, and child protection.

Fostering a Spirit of Change

The project addresses interconnected challenges faced by marginal farmers, women, adolescent children, unorganized and migrant workers, Sundarbans communities, and tribal populations. These issues include:

- ▶ income insecurity
- ▶ climate vulnerability
- ▶ exclusion from welfare systems
- ▶ limited access to justice

ISWS's core impact within this project lies in strengthening community systems. The organization has worked to ensure that vulnerable populations can access livelihoods, entitlements, justice, and decision-making spaces in a sustained manner.

An example of this impact can be seen in the story of Dipali Majhi, a young adolescent girl from Paschim Sridharpur, studying in Class XII and living with her parents and two younger siblings.

Her daily routine includes regularly attending school, taking care of her younger siblings, and supporting her mother with household chores. Although she occasionally visited her local playground, she never actively participated in any group activities in her community. However, this changed when she came to know the Indira Adolescent Girls' Group, facilitated by ISWS. Dipali started attending the group's regular sessions on adolescent problems and social issues, helping her build knowledge and personal development. She was also informed about the myths and taboos that exist in her community, especially around menstruation.

One day, she noticed several women from her neighborhood preparing to visit the Lakshmipur Temple. They invited her to join them. Dipali wished to go, but since she was on her period, she declined. When she asked her mother, she did not permit her to go due to traditional taboos around menstruating women visiting places of worship. Using the knowledge she had gained from the sessions, Dipali explained to her mother that menstruation is a natural biological process. Through calm and respectful conversation, she convinced her mother to reconsider. Gradually, her mother understood and agreed to let Dipali visit the temple during her period.

This small but significant victory for Dipali. She has taken a firm stand against harmful societal taboos and brought change within her own household. Now, Dipali confidently participates in rituals and visits the temple even during her menstrual cycle, breaking barriers for herself and inspiring others in her community.

Driving Impact Through Results

Through their work, ISWS empowers local communities, migrant workers, their families, coastal and island communities, and tribal populations that are affected by climate change or facing structural exclusion. Local adaptations include climate-resilient livelihood models in the Sundarbans and child rights protection facilitation for vulnerable children. These measures are undertaken particularly for adolescents, gender equality with perspective building, women's empowerment, and community governance strengthening in tribal and other areas by inclusion and participation.

Under this project, ISWS works in four villages of Digambarpur Gram Panchayat, a part of Pathar Pratima block of South 24 Parganas district in West Bengal's migration-prone and climate-vulnerable districts of the Sundarbans. These interventions are adapted to local socio-economic and ecological contexts. These are facilitated through partnerships that involve local governments, community-based organizations, local leaders, and district, state, and national-level NGOs and institutions.

In this project, a mix of quantitative and qualitative indicators across livelihoods, systems strengthening, and social protection are tracked:

Number of individuals reached, disaggregated by population group

- ▶ 408 families covered,
- ▶ Adolescents group – boys, girls, mix,
- ▶ Women group,
- ▶ Farmers groups- both men and women

Number of community groups formed or strengthened –

- ▶ Adolescent groups-12,
- ▶ Farmers groups-10,
- ▶ Women group-9,
- ▶ Total -31 groups,

Percentage of households accessing at least one entitlement –

- ▶ 35 applied,
- ▶ 30 accessed.

Changes in household income and livelihood stability-

- ▶ 10 families, very less in number, gradually increasing

Adoption of climate-resilient livelihood practices in

- ▶ 125 families, maintain MIS in excel sheet

Participation of community representatives in governance forums-

- ▶ About 100 among adolescents and parents in village level child protection committees (VLCPC),
- ▶ Women in panchayat level VLCPC monitoring committee,
- ▶ Women in VHSNCs,
- ▶ Women in GPDP committee etc.



A Framework for Change

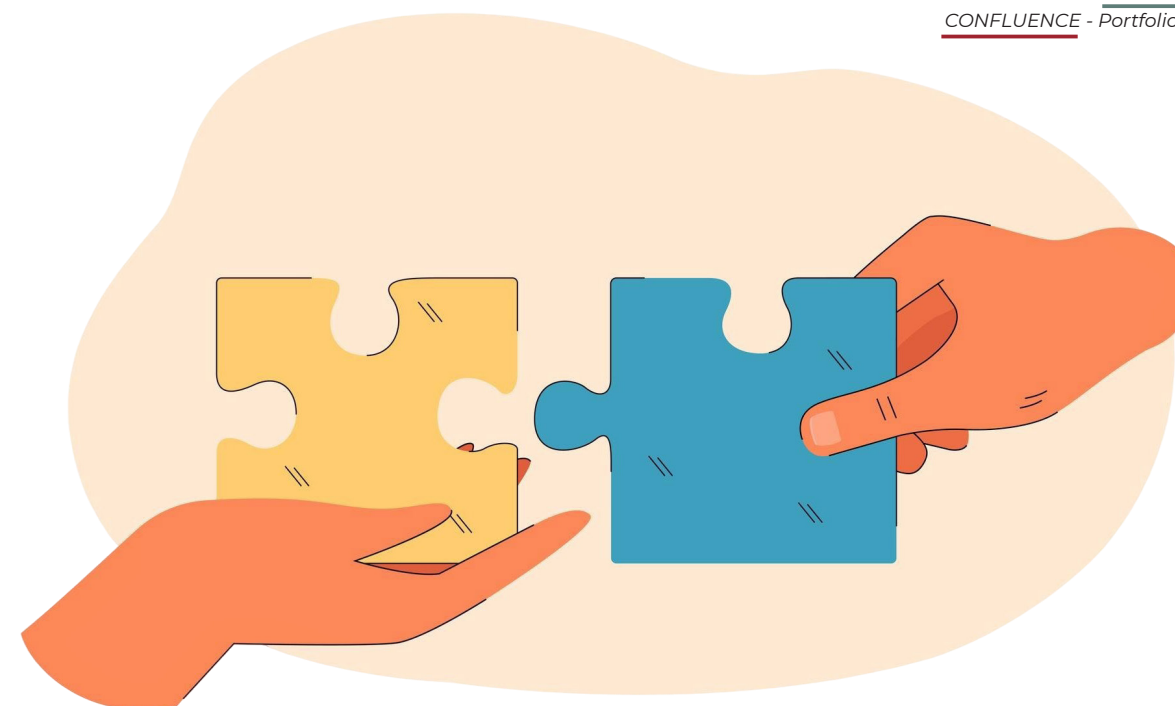
The project uses a community systems strengthening framework that integrates evidence, participation, and continuous learning. For this, ISWS uses participatory diagnostics to understand local vulnerabilities and assets, co-design interventions with communities, and build leadership capacities to sustain outcomes.

Implementation is informed by adaptive management practices, where feedback loops from the field shape course corrections. Technology supports data collection and monitoring, while qualitative insights ensure that lived experiences inform evaluation. Evidence from pilots, community feedback, and secondary research informs scale and replication decisions, ensuring that interventions remain contextually relevant and grounded.

Community trust and ownership have proven to be foundational for sustained impact. It was noted that interventions that prioritized leadership development and collective platforms yielded stronger outcomes than standalone service delivery. Through this program design, adolescents quickly learnt and practiced joint action on social and environmental issues. The communities also adopted climate-resilient practices when supported with peer learning and practical demonstrations. Another insight was the importance of flexible implementation timelines to respond to building gender perspectives, migration cycles, and climate events.

This positive change can be illustrated through the story of Reboti Dhara, a woman in her early 50s, whose day involves managing household chores, taking care of her grandchildren, and also engaging in farming to sustain her livelihood. She became involved with the ISWS farmer group, where she regularly attended meetings, training sessions, and actively participated in discussions.

Through her involvement in the group, she learned about organic farming techniques and came to understand the harmful effects of chemical fertilizers on health. After several training sessions, she began practicing organic farming methods such as creating nutrition gardens, circle beds, and more. Additionally, she started making organic manure and pest control additives such as liquid manure, fermented plant extracts, fish tonic, and amino acid solutions made from banana stems and jaggery. She shared that, during the last season, she used a circle bed method and received a fairly good yield, which benefited her. She appreciated the method as it allowed cultivation of various species in smaller areas with less water during summer. Moreover, she noted that her visits to the market and the need for medication have decreased as well.



The Road Ahead

Through community mobilization, leadership development, and institutional linkages, the project has enabled communities to collectively identify risks, prioritize needs, and engage with state systems more effectively. Climate-adaptive livelihood interventions have reduced economic precarity, while structured support for entitlement access has helped households secure health services, pensions, and food security benefits that were previously out of reach.

ISWS was founded in response to the persistent gap between policy intent and lived realities of marginalized communities. Our founders witnessed how structural inequities related to caste, gender, migration status, geography, and informality of work systematically excluded large populations from basic rights, services, and opportunities.

In this project, lives have changed through improved income stability, reduced vulnerability to climate shocks, and increased confidence to engage with authorities. At the community level, informal groups have evolved into functioning collectives capable of negotiation and advocacy. At the systems level, local institutions now recognize and respond more consistently to community needs due to strengthened interfaces.

This demonstrates that when communities are supported to organize, learn, and lead, social protection and justice systems become more responsive resulting in durable, scalable impact beyond the project period.

Ipas Development Foundation

Adolescent girls and young women in rural Jharkhand and West Bengal encounter substantial barriers to sexual and reproductive health. These include restrictive gender norms, stigma surrounding contraception and abortion, and limited youth-friendly services that contribute to early pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and reduced educational and economic opportunities affecting the overall well-being of the young people.

This prevents young people, particularly girls, from meeting their essential sexual and reproductive health needs. As a consequence, they are vulnerable to various health issues, notably early and unintended pregnancies, which often drive many to seek unsafe abortions. Despite India's supportive policy frameworks for adolescent health and comprehensive abortion care, implementation gaps are significantly widespread in rural and hard-to-reach areas.

Public health systems often contend with shortages of trained providers, stockouts of contraceptives, and infrastructure constraints, limiting service accessibility and quality. Migration and mobility patterns further complicate male engagement, while geographical isolation, as seen in areas like the Sundarbans, intensifies these inequities.

Ipas Development Foundation (IDF) is working to advance sexual and reproductive health through systems strengthening, community engagement, and policy implementation. At its core, the project seeks to strengthen the agency of adolescents and young women while building a sustainable, youth-responsive public health and community ecosystem.

The project was implemented across select regions of Jharkhand and West Bengal. In Jharkhand, interventions focused on Chakradharpur and Chaibasa blocks in West Singhbhum district, primarily serving tribal populations. In West Bengal, activities covered the South 24 Parganas district—blocks Magrahat I, Mathurapur I & II, Kulpi—and three Sundarbans blocks: Namkhana, Sagar, and Patharpratima, addressing coastal and migration-affected communities.

These areas are characterized by high rates of early marriage and teenage pregnancy, limited SRH information and service access, and geographical remoteness. The interventions were delivered through partnerships with local NGOs, Panchayati Raj Institutions, and the public health system.

With its extensive experience in expanding access to safe abortion and contraception, IDF led the design and implementation of a youth-centred SRH model across intervention areas in Jharkhand and West Bengal.

Youth, Health and Agency

Interventions that address adolescent and young people's access to SRH services were created to bridge the persistent gap between policy intent and the lived realities of adolescents by simultaneously strengthening community agency and health system responsiveness.

To address these challenges, the project empowered adolescents and young people aged 10–24 years while strengthening local health systems and creating an enabling environment that promotes informed choices, gender equality, and access to quality SRH services.

- ▶ **Youth Leadership and Agency** - Local youth trained and mentored as leaders became influential change makers, creating safe spaces for peers to discuss SRH, identify barriers, prioritize needs, and develop practical action plans. These platforms empowered adolescents and young women to express their concerns, build confidence, and take collective action. Engaging male partners promoted shared responsibility in family planning, positively influencing household decision-making.
- ▶ **Strengthened Participation for collective action** - Over 1,200 community influencers, including local government and self-help group members, were sensitized and supported youth-led action.. Structured interface meetings with Panchayat representatives and village committees enhanced adolescent girls' and young women's participation in decision-making, improved school facilities for menstrual hygiene, promoted safer mobility, and strengthened referral systems.
- ▶ **Improved Access to SRH Services** - Youth leaders highlighted gaps in local health facilities, leading to the restoration of non-functional services in several villages. Simultaneously, training and ongoing mentoring for service providers improved knowledge, and availability of youth friendly SRH services, enabling adolescents and young women to access care safely and confidently.

The community outreach strategy and communication resources were co-created with selected young men and women from the communities, trained as youth leaders. Engaging these community leaders ensured culturally sensitive approaches, creating communication resources that were locally relevant, youth-friendly, and effectively addressed the needs of adolescents and young women across these diverse contexts.

Through these efforts, over three years, approximately 25,000 adolescents and young women and more than 10,000 young men gained knowledge on SRH, rights, and gender. Additionally, over 13,000 adolescents and young women were supported to access SRH services.

A Systems-focused Approach to SRH

The work is guided by a Theory of Change that positions women's and girls' agency at the centre, supported by responsive health systems and an enabling policy environment.

The framework operates across three interconnected outcomes:

- ▶ Strengthening policy implementation and public financing for sexual and reproductive health
- ▶ Ensuring high-quality, accessible SRH services
- ▶ Increasing the agency and decision-making power of women and girls.

Implementation is systems-focused and multi-layered. They provide technical assistance to the government to operationalize laws and integrate SRH into existing programs, while strengthening provider capacity, supply chains, monitoring systems, and decentralization of SRH services to improve service quality and reach. Simultaneously, they invest in community processes such as training peer leaders, building referral and accompaniment systems, and engaging with community stakeholders to shift norms and increase demand.

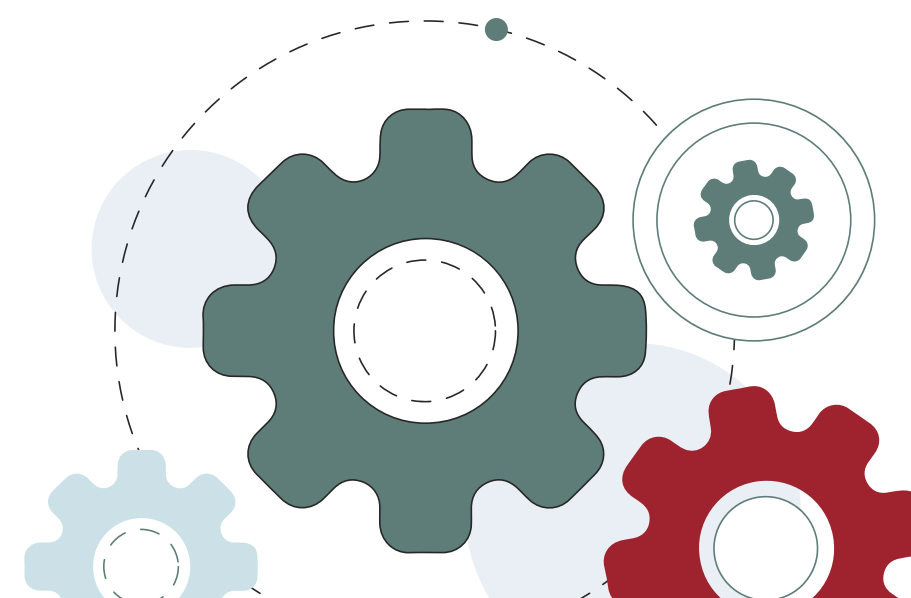
Both quantitative and qualitative evidence, including case stories, were used to assess shifts in social norms, decision-making power, and system accountability. In addition, outcome harvesting was applied to identify and analyze significant changes in behaviors, practices, and policies, capturing outcomes that emerged organically from the community and health systems.

Key indicators for measuring included:

- ▶ Improvement in SRH knowledge levels
- ▶ Increase in modern contraceptive uptake
- ▶ Agency scores
- ▶ Number of adolescents reached
- ▶ Number of referrals and accompaniment support for SRH service
- ▶ Increase in adolescent service caseload at intervention public health facilities
- ▶ Perceived quality of care

Innovation and technology, including AI-enabled chatbots and helplines, expand access to information and support. Community co-creation ensures that interventions remain contextually relevant, equitable, and sustainable.

The project's deep impact can be seen through the eyes of Suparna, a dedicated Yuva Sathi in Anjinagar village, who stands as a beacon for adolescent empowerment. When Rakhi faced familial pressure to marry before 18, Suparna and her team intervened. Through dialogue and collaboration with Rakhi's family and community stakeholders, they successfully postponed the marriage, ensuring Rakhi's right to choose and consent.





Learning from Experience

Through the implementation of the program, many learnings emerged:

- **Ecosystem engagement drives sustainable change** - In the long term, working not only with adolescents and young women, but also with families, male partners, Panchayat members, Self Help Groups, and frontline health workers helped shift restrictive gender norms and reduce stigma around youth SRH. Continuous dialogue and trust-building were essential to creating an enabling environment for informed reproductive choices.
- **Youth Leadership strengthens reach and ownership** - Investing in youth leaders significantly enhanced outreach, credibility, and service uptake. Peer-led engagement increased relatability and community acceptance. However, migration, academic pressures, and family restrictions affected continuity. So, flexible participation models and continued mentorship emerged as key strategies for sustaining youth engagement.
- **Youth participation in community platforms can shift power dynamics** - While initial hesitation was expected, several Panchayat members responded positively when adolescents raised SRH concerns. In some cases, this led to quicker attention to service gaps and improved accountability. This demonstrated that amplified youth voices can influence local governance spaces more effectively than anticipated.
- **Health systems strengthening requires sustained efforts** - Improvements in service delivery were evident, but stockouts and provider gaps persisted. Multi-level engagement, better data use, and supply coordination are essential to ensure that empowered communities are met with responsive systems.



The Road Ahead

In the coming years, the work will deepen its focus on addressing the interconnected nexus of child marriage, teenage pregnancy, and school dropout through a more integrated and prevention-oriented model. Sustaining change requires simultaneous action at the individual, family, community, and system levels.

Through an integrated approach, IDF aims to create sustained pathways for girls' education, economic participation, and reproductive autonomy, strengthening a larger movement that recognizes girls' empowerment as fundamental to social justice, gender equality, and inclusive community progress.

Building on their learnings, the focus will be on strengthening mechanisms that support girls to continue their education, transition back to school where possible, and access alternative learning pathways. Expanding livelihood and skill training opportunities for adolescent girls will be central to enhancing their agency, economic aspirations, and decision-making power within families.

The model will also intensify engagement with boys, parents, schools, and community influencers to shift norms that perpetuate early marriage and early childbearing. Strengthening referral systems, adolescent-friendly health services, and community-based monitoring will ensure that girls can access contraception and counseling to delay teenage pregnancy.

Proactive engagement with community influencers, SHG federations, schools, and district administration can mitigate risks around provider resistance, gender norm backlash, and supply gaps. Scaling requires sustained, phased engagement over multiple years to build trust and shift social norms, with youth leadership, governance integration, and system support remaining non-negotiable throughout.

Kamonohashi Project

The communities in the North and South 24 Parganas in West Bengal face several structural and social inequalities that make them highly vulnerable to human trafficking. They often experience poverty, unsafe migration, weak educational retention, child marriage, gender discrimination, and limited access to responsive protection systems. These vulnerabilities are exacerbated in the Sundarbans, where recurring cyclones, erosion, and livelihood insecurity push families into distress and cause climate-related displacement.

Trafficking is rarely an isolated incident. It is often a result of socio-economic inequities that are present alongside weak protection systems and an absence of supportive community relationships and structures. Although anti-trafficking efforts in India have historically focused on rescue, rehabilitation, and prosecution, there has been relatively limited investment in prevention-focused approaches.

Kamonohashi Project was founded from a deep concern about the widespread exploitation and trafficking of vulnerable children and communities, and from the belief that every person deserves to live with dignity and safety. In India, their work has evolved through the Taftesh Resilient Communities (TRC) program, a survivor-informed anti-trafficking initiative.

TRC emerged from field experiences, research, and engagement with survivors, communities, schools, and governance systems where they recognized that most anti-trafficking responses focus on rescue and rehabilitation after exploitation has already occurred, while very little attention is given to prevention.

Survivors, social workers, and community members repeatedly highlighted that many risks could have been prevented if families, schools, local institutions, and communities had stronger systems to identify vulnerabilities earlier and respond collectively. Therefore, TRC works with existing government structures such as Child Protection Committees, School Management Committees, Panchayat systems, adolescent groups, survivor collectives, and families to identify and respond to risks before trafficking occurs.

Through survivor leadership, community mobilization, family strengthening, and governance engagement, TRC aims to build long-term resilience and locally owned prevention systems.

Prevention Rather Than Reaction

Rather than focusing only on crisis response, the TRC program works to strengthen the relationships, institutions, and local mechanisms that protect children, adolescents, and vulnerable families in everyday life.



The project recognizes that prevention requires long-term community ownership, stronger family relationships, active local governance, and responsive institutions. It addresses gaps in attention toward labour trafficking, trafficking of boys and men, and vulnerabilities faced by gender-variant adolescents, which are often overlooked within mainstream anti-trafficking discourse.

It has been implemented across North and South 24 Parganas in West Bengal, particularly in trafficking-prone and climate-vulnerable areas of the Sundarbans region. The program currently works across multiple Gram Panchayats through partnerships with community-based organizations and survivor collectives. The communities served include adolescents, parents, women, survivor groups, school communities, and socially marginalized populations including SC, ST, and Muslim communities who face heightened vulnerability to trafficking, unsafe migration, school dropout, child marriage, and social exclusion.

The program also works closely with gender-variant adolescents and their families, addressing stigma, violence, and exclusion within schools and communities. The interventions are adapted to local realities and include school-based child protection systems, governance engagement through Panchayats and Village Level Child Protection Committees (VLCPCs), family strengthening processes, and community-led protection mechanisms.



Transformation That Shows

The TRC project has largely impacted the prevalence of trafficking at the community and family levels. It has contributed to greater visibility and inclusion of gender-variant adolescents through school sensitization, family counseling, and community engagement processes that reduce stigma and violence.

Community impact: Communities have begun increasingly identifying and responding to risks such as child marriage, school dropout, unsafe migration, domestic violence, and social exclusion. School-based Child Protection Committees, VLCPCs, adolescent groups, and community forums are becoming more active in identifying vulnerable children and linking them with support systems.

Family-level impact: The program has contributed to stronger communication and trust between parents and adolescents, helping families discuss issues such as migration, relationships, emotional wellbeing, and safety more openly. Fathers who were previously less involved in caregiving have also started participating more actively in family relationships.

Today, communities are increasingly engaging with Panchayats and local governance systems to raise protection-related concerns and demand accountability. This shift from passive participation to collective action reflects one of the program's most significant impacts. Communities have begun to see themselves not only as beneficiaries, but as active agents of protection and change.



Tracking Impact

The TRC program uses a combination of quantitative indicators, qualitative documentation, and reflective learning processes to understand changes at the individual, family, community, and systems levels.

The key indicators are:

- ▶ Number of community members, adolescents, parents, and schools engaged
- ▶ Number of Child Protection Committees and VLCPCs activated or strengthened
- ▶ Cases related to child marriage, school dropout, trafficking risk, violence, and unsafe migration identified and addressed
- ▶ Re-enrolment of children into schools
- ▶ Participation of communities in governance platforms and Panchayat engagement
- ▶ Changes in family communication and parent-adolescent relationships
- ▶ Reduction in stigma and improved acceptance of gender-variant adolescents

It also documents case stories, community reflections, and behavioural shifts observed through field engagement. Continuous feedback from communities, survivor collectives, adolescents, and partner organizations informs adaptive learning and programme improvement.

A Framework For The People

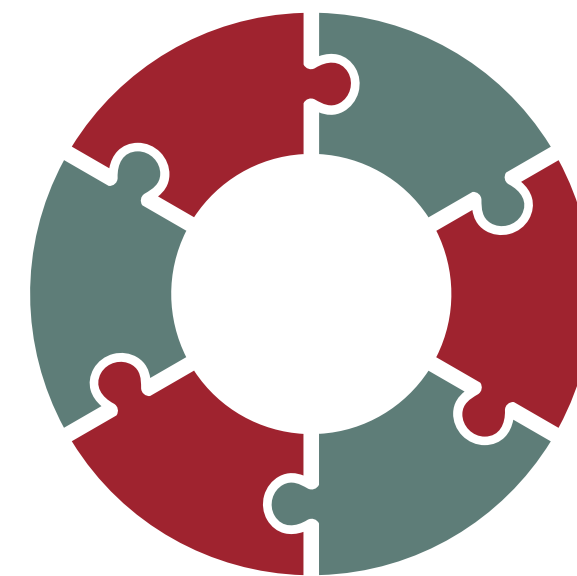
TRC is guided by a community-led prevention framework that focuses on strengthening existing systems rather than creating parallel structures. It is rooted in the understanding that trafficking vulnerability emerges through interconnected social, economic, emotional, and institutional factors, and therefore prevention must also be multi-layered.

The program works through four interconnected pillars that operate together to create protective environments around children and vulnerable individuals.

- ▶ School-based child protection
- ▶ Community governance and accountability
- ▶ Gender-variant child protection
- ▶ Parent-child relationship strengthening.

Implementation is strongly informed by reflective practice and adaptive learning. Community feedback, field observations, case discussions, and regular partner reflections shape program modifications and local adaptations. Survivor collectives and community members are also actively involved in designing and reviewing interventions.

Additionally, it draws from secondary research on trafficking prevention, psychosocial approaches to family strengthening, and rights-based community mobilization. Existing government systems such as VLCPCs, Panchayats, School Management Committees, and Kanyashree Clubs are used as entry points for strengthening accountability and community ownership.



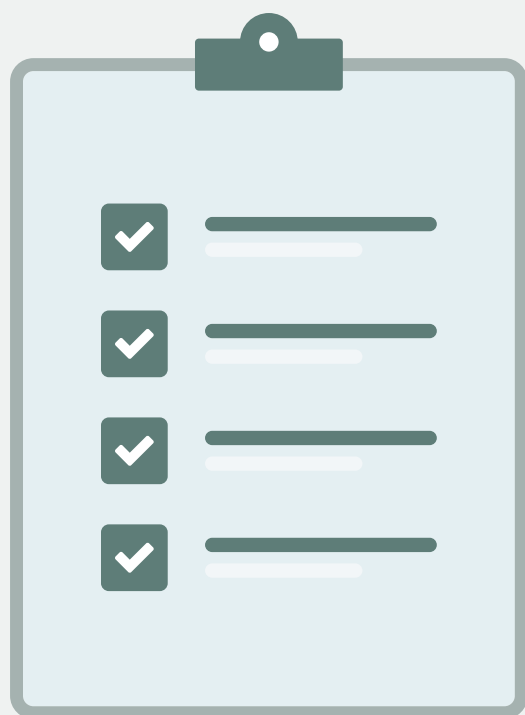
Field Tested Takeaways

One of the strongest learnings from the TRC program has been that prevention becomes more sustainable when communities themselves begin taking ownership of protection processes. When programs focus only on awareness generation, it has limited long-term impact, while interventions that built local leadership, trust, and collective action showed deeper and more lasting change.

Many adolescents facing vulnerability to unsafe migration, child marriage, or emotional distress lacked safe communication spaces within their homes. The family relationship becomes an important entry point in structured parent-adolescent engagement that creates opportunities for trust-building and helps families discuss difficult issues more openly.

Another important learning has been the need for flexibility and adaptation. Different communities responded differently based on migration patterns, local politics, social norms, and economic pressures. This required partners to continuously adapt their approaches rather than follow rigid implementation plans.

The work with gender-variant adolescents also demonstrated that change requires sustained trust-building with families, schools, and communities. Visible shifts in acceptance were possible when interventions moved beyond awareness sessions and created ongoing support systems and dialogue spaces. The value of patient, community-led, and relationship-centred approaches is central to address trafficking vulnerability.





The Road Ahead

Looking ahead, TRC aims to deepen community ownership of prevention systems so that local structures increasingly function independently and sustainably. The long-term vision is for communities, schools, survivor collectives, and governance systems to take collective responsibility for identifying and responding to vulnerabilities related to trafficking and child protection.

The program also seeks to strengthen evidence around prevention-focused approaches, particularly in areas that remain under-addressed within mainstream anti-trafficking work, including labour trafficking, vulnerabilities faced by boys and men, and the protection of gender-variant adolescents. As climate vulnerability, migration pressures, and social inequalities continue to intensify in regions like the Sundarbans, prevention approaches rooted in community resilience and local accountability will become increasingly important.

For the success of the program, significant time was invested in building trust and relationships within communities before expecting visible outcomes. Prevention work is deeply relational and requires consistent engagement with families, adolescents, schools, local governance structures, and community leaders. One important lesson is that existing systems should be strengthened rather than bypassed. Structures such as VLCPCs, School Management Committees, Panchayats, and adolescent groups may appear inactive initially, but when communities are supported to engage with them meaningfully, these systems can become important protection mechanisms.

It is also important to recognize that trafficking vulnerability cannot be addressed through a single intervention. Issues such as school dropout, unsafe migration, emotional isolation, gender discrimination, violence, and weak governance are interconnected, and programs that aim to reduce trafficking need multi-dimensional approaches that combine psychosocial support, governance engagement, community mobilization, and institutional strengthening.

Survivor leadership and community participation should not be treated as symbolic involvement, but as central components of program design and decision-making, alongside a commitment to reflective learning and flexibility as community dynamics evolve.

The program's future direction will continue to prioritize survivor leadership, adaptive learning, and strengthening the capacity of communities to become active protectors of their children and vulnerable members.

In Conclusion - Understanding Where the Shift Occurs

Across the Sundarbans, partners are working towards 18 shared outcomes, with change recorded against 14. The strongest progress is visible in how communities are identifying shared concerns, organising around them, and taking them to Gram Panchayats. In several cases, this has moved beyond raising concerns to securing improvements in basic infrastructure and services. Awareness of government schemes and services is similarly translating into action, with communities taking steps to access entitlements.

This progress is evident across climate, water, livelihoods, and child protection. Communities are raising concerns around waterlogging, flooding and salinity with local governance institutions while also developing their own responses. As traditional livelihood options become more uncertain, households are beginning to diversify their sources of income. Child protection shows the clearest institutional change across the themes: communities increasingly understand child safety as a broader responsibility, with protection efforts operating across multiple levels. Women and children are also entering Gram Sabha and Gram Sansad spaces to raise issues that affect their lives.

However, this progress has not consistently extended beyond the Gram Panchayat. Engagement and responsiveness at block and district levels remain limited. Water security illustrates this gap most clearly. While communities are identifying and reporting water-related challenges, there is little evidence of government departmental response and no demonstrated system-level change in water security.

Four shared outcomes show no change across the four phases: water security with PRIs, the para-hydrogeologist network, survivor-centred media practice, and survivor participation in local governance. The latter two are particularly significant because they concern survivors taking on public roles and participating in local decision-making.

Taken together, the evidence points to stronger community-led action and local institutional engagement, alongside persistent gaps in wider system responsiveness. The next phase of work will need to build on gains at the Gram Panchayat level while strengthening the pathways through which community priorities reach, influence, and are acted upon by block and district institutions.



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PRASARI | Akvo
Foundation



Image Courtesy - Kamonohashi Project



Image Courtesy - PRASARI | Akvo
Foundation



Image Courtesy:
PRASARI | Akvo
Foundation



Image Courtesy: Terre des hommes Foundation - Community Meeting



Image Courtesy: Terre des hommes Foundation - Climate Change Session

Tea Garden Communities

West Bengal's tea gardens stretch across the foothills and slopes of the Darjeeling hills, the Dooars and Terai regions, where cool temperatures, high rainfall, mist and fertile, well-drained soils create conditions suited to growing tea. The landscape is a distinctive mix of rolling plantations, forested hills, rivers and scattered settlements, with tea estates often forming the centre of community life. Generations of workers and their families live and work within and around these estates, with livelihoods closely tied to the seasonal rhythms of tea cultivation and the functioning of the gardens. Yet behind the green expanse of the plantations are communities navigating labour precarity, low and uncertain incomes, social exclusion and limited opportunities for economic and social mobility. Heavy rains, landslides, floods and changing weather patterns can further disrupt livelihoods and access to essential services, particularly in remote garden communities.

For these families, resilience is therefore closely connected to having secure livelihoods as well as access to healthcare, education, child protection, social security and government entitlements. Strengthening community agency and collective action becomes an important part of enabling tea garden communities to navigate these challenges and shape better futures for themselves.



British Asian Trust

In the tea garden regions of North Bengal, children grow up in communities shaped by grit, labour, and deep interdependence. Children and adolescents often find support through peer relationships and more structured platforms such as child collectives supported by school, communities or programs, where children build confidence, raise concerns and support one another.

At the same time, these regions also face layered vulnerabilities. Irregular wages, unsafe migration, climate shocks, school dropout, child labour, trafficking, and child marriage continue to place children at risk. Many settlements remain geographically isolated, with limited access to services and fragmented protection systems.

It is from this understanding, supported by SPF, KAWACH works across 276 tea gardens in Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, and Alipurduar, bringing together a consortium of organisations — Child Rights and You (CRY), Child In Need Institute (CINI), Bal Suraksha Abhiyan (BSA), and Praajak.

KAWACH is the British Asian Trust's flagship child protection programme, a ten-year initiative to strengthen child protection systems and build communities where children are safe from harm and free to pursue the futures they deserve. KAWACH works in alignment with national and state priorities and policies that protect children such as Mission Vatsalya.

Together, the consortium works across 24 blocks, 236 Gram Panchayats to build a child protection system that is preventive, community-owned, and institutionally embedded.



From Reactive Responses to Preventive Systems

KAWACH emerged from the recognition that child protection could not rely solely on responding to crises after harm had already occurred. The vulnerabilities children face are deeply interconnected. The programme therefore focuses on strengthening the ecosystem surrounding children rather than implementing isolated interventions. Instead of creating parallel structures, KAWACH works through existing government systems and community institutions. Child Welfare Protection Committees (CWPCs), Panchayats, schools, frontline workers, women's groups, and adolescent platforms become the foundation for prevention and accountability.

This systems-based approach reflects a core belief of the KAWACH programme that long-term child protection becomes sustainable only when communities and institutions themselves own the process.

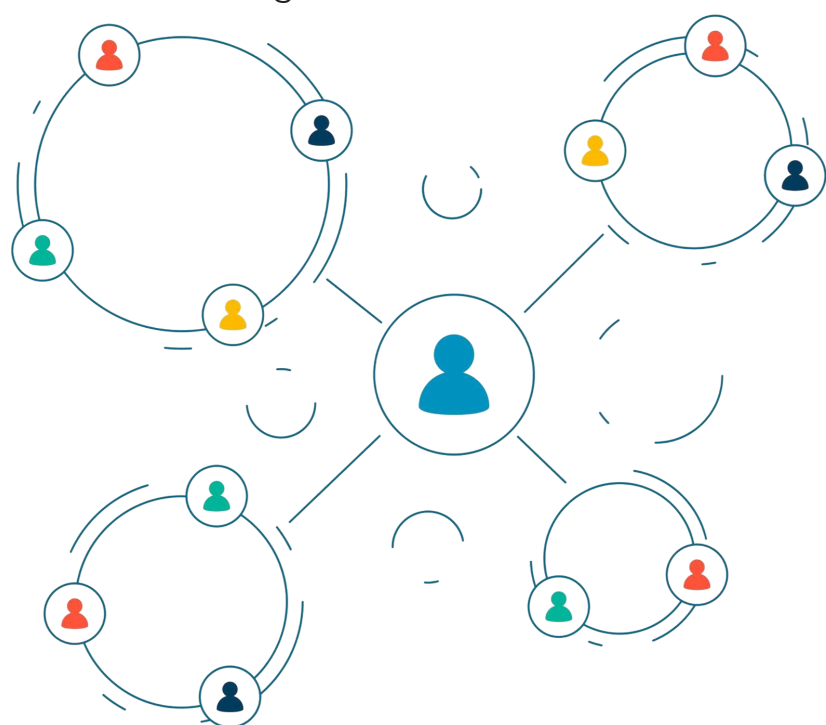
Building on Community Assets

Aligned with the national thrust to build robust community systems that protect children, tea garden communities already had the building blocks in place — youth collectives, teachers, Panchayat representatives, and frontline workers. What was missing was the connective tissue: training and tools, a sense of ownership, rigour and consistency, and links to formal governance systems. That is what KAWACH set out to provide to amplify individual effort and drive collective effectiveness.

Institutional platforms such as Kanyashree Clubs and Meena Manch have become particularly important spaces encouraging children's participation in issues that affect them and early identification of risk. These platforms enable children and adolescents to raise concerns related to child marriage, school dropout, abuse, and unsafe migration directly with local systems.

The programme has strengthened Child Welfare Protection Committees from village to district levels, improving coordination between departments and clarifying roles around case identification, reporting, and response.

Over time, these systems are beginning to shift child protection from an external programme activity into a more embedded function within local governance.



Children as Participants in Protection

For the KAWACH programme, the story of Maya (name changed) is something the team always refers back to. Maya (name changed) a 15-year-old girl from a tea garden in Jalpaiguri, had dropped out of school and was working in potato fields because of acute household hardship. Members of the local child collective, including two of her own friends, identified her situation during their local outreach. Since the collective had already become a trusted peer space, Maya felt safe enough to say that she wanted to study again. The case was then escalated to the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) worker, who visited the family, counselled the father repeatedly and explained why education mattered to the child's future. Panchayat members also joined the effort and reinforced the family's responsibility to support her right to education. The sustained, multi-actor follow-up eventually led to her re-enrolment in school.

The programme supported the inclusion of children's voices in local governance and protection systems through platforms such as child cabinets, bal sabhas and the child friendly village component of Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP). These mechanisms enabled children to raise concerns, submit charter of demands to the gram panchayat. The child focused priorities were incorporated into GPDPs unlocking approximately 17 crores for initiatives related to children's health, education, protection and well-being.

This shift, from children being passive recipients of protection to active participants within it, has become one of the programme's most transformative outcomes. The programme's work also reinforces the importance of schools as protective spaces. Re-enrolment initiatives, adolescent engagement platforms, and stronger linkages between schools and local governance systems are helping restore education as a pathway to both safety and opportunity.



Measuring Systems Change

KAWACH measures impact through a structured framework of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) linked to the programme's Theory of Change. These indicators are supported by a robust Information Management System (IMS), which tracks progress across Gram Panchayat, block, district, and state levels. The programme measures impact across three interconnected areas:

1. Empowering and Protecting Children

Indicators include:

- ▶ Number of child protection cases reported by children
- ▶ Participation of adolescents in Kanyashree Clubs, Meena Manch, and Panchayat-level CWPCs
- ▶ Number of issues raised and recorded in child protection registers
- ▶ Number of children re-enrolled in school across age groups 6–14 and 14–18
- ▶ Enrolment of eligible girls in the Kanyashree scheme

2. Strengthening Vulnerable Households

The programme tracks:

- ▶ Household linkages to livelihood opportunities and related schemes
- ▶ Access to food security schemes such as the Public Distribution System (PDS)
- ▶ Access to health services and social protection entitlements

3. Strengthening Child Protection Systems

At the systems level, KAWACH monitors:

- ▶ Functionality of Child Welfare Protection Committees from Panchayat to district levels
- ▶ Cases addressed through protection systems
- ▶ Funds allocated through Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDP)
- ▶ Effectiveness of block-level coordination mechanisms

The Information Management System enables real-time tracking, verification, and analysis of programme data. This supports evidence-based decision-making and allows teams to identify gaps, respond to emerging risks, and strengthen accountability.

Beyond quantitative indicators, the programme also documents qualitative changes through Panchayat diaries, migration registers, case narratives, and community feedback systems. Together, these tools help measure not only outputs, but whether local systems are becoming more responsive, coordinated, and preventive over time.



Learning That Systems Need Relationships

One of the programme's key learning has been that the government systems do not become functional through mandates and orders alone. While policy, frameworks and committee structures provide the foundation, translating them into consistent action requires sustained relationship building, mentoring, practical tools and regular follow up.

The programme found that the Child Protection Committees became more effective when frontline workers and officials were supported to understand their roles, review risks, coordinate actions and work toward shared outcomes for children.

At the village level, Child Protection Committees increasingly served as the first point of identification and response enabling actions such as family counselling, school enrolment and linkages to social protection schemes. The tools such as the Panchayat diary and migration register further strengthened these efforts by providing a common platform for identifying and tracking vulnerable children and households. These tools helped local stakeholders to monitor risks such as child marriage, child labour, trafficking, school dropout and unsafe migration while strengthening reporting and follow-up across the system.

At the block and district levels, regular review of information coming from village level supported their efforts and coordinated responses across departments. KAWACH block level coordinators played a critical role as facilitators helping bridge gaps between government mandates and local action and supporting committees to function more effectively.



Challenges Within Complex Realities

The programme operates within a context shaped by poverty, migration, climate vulnerability, and uneven access to services. Tea garden settlements are often geographically dispersed, with poor transport connectivity and limited institutional presence. The daily wage in the tea garden is approx. INR 250 and many households depend on seasonal or informal work to supplement the income. Boys usually migrate for construction or manual work, while girls move into domestic work or hospitality to support the household income. During monsoons, access to schools, health centres, and child protection services becomes even more difficult.

Many children are first-generation learners, while lack of documentation restricts access to government schemes. Gender norms continue to place disproportionate domestic responsibilities on girls, increasing their vulnerability to early marriage and school dropout.

KAWACH's work therefore requires long-term engagement to shift deeply rooted social norms and build institutional accountability.



The Road Ahead

As the programme moves forward, its focus is shifting from activation to institutionalisation.

The next phase of KAWACH will prioritise strengthening the functionality and sustainability of child protection systems by ensuring regular engagements that actively prioritise child protection, better case follow-up, stronger documentation, and deeper convergence between institutions.

The programme also aims to strengthen Child Collectives, School Management Committees, and village-level protection structures so they can increasingly lead child protection efforts independently. At the same time, the initiative will continue linking vulnerable households to social protection schemes, supporting school re-enrolment, and addressing risks such as trafficking, unsafe migration, child labour, and child marriage.

Underlying all of this is a larger vision to demonstrate that child protection becomes more effective when it is locally owned, embedded within governance systems, and shaped by the voices of children themselves.

Child In Need Institute

In the tea garden regions of North Bengal, migration is often woven into everyday survival. Families move seasonally in search of work. Young people leave home hoping to support their households. Labour contractors arrive with promises of employment beyond the tea estates. For many communities facing irregular wages and economic uncertainty, migration has long been understood not as a choice, but as a necessity.

Unsafe migration, trafficking, child labour, school dropout, and child marriage continue to affect vulnerable children and adolescents across the tea garden belts of Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, and Darjeeling. Geographic isolation, weak coordination between systems, lack of awareness, and limited livelihood opportunities often leave children exposed to exploitation.

But these communities are not defined only by vulnerability. They are also shaped by strong local relationships, collective resilience, and people who consistently step forward to protect others. These can be teachers who intervene before a child drops out, adolescent girls who raise concerns about early marriage, Panchayat leaders who support vulnerable families, or frontline workers who quietly hold fragmented systems together.

It is within this context that Child In Need Institute (CINI) has been working to strengthen community-based systems that prevent trafficking and unsafe migration before harm occurs.

Through its initiative, *Prevention of Trafficking and Unsafe Migration around the Tea Garden Regions of West Bengal*, CINI has focused on building convergent, child-friendly protection systems across the Dooars, Hills, and Terai regions of North Bengal.

At the centre of this work lies a simple but important belief that sustainable child protection begins within communities themselves.



Strengthening Systems Along Migration Corridors

The tea garden regions of North Bengal sit along major migration and transit corridors connected to Nepal, Bhutan, and other neighbouring regions. Economic insecurity and limited employment opportunities often push adolescents and young adults toward informal labour markets where risks of trafficking and exploitation remain high.

CINI recognised that these risks are rarely isolated incidents. Unsafe migration is often linked to school dropout, weak access to government entitlements, household economic stress, and gaps in local governance systems.

The organisation therefore adopted a systems-strengthening approach that focused not only on individual cases, but on the larger ecosystem surrounding children and adolescents.

Over two years, the project worked across:

- ▶ Alipurduar district (Kumargram, Madarihat, Kalchini, and Alipurduar II blocks),
- ▶ Jalpaiguri district (Malbazar, Banarhat, Nagrakata, Mateli, and Kranti blocks),
- ▶ and Darjeeling district (Naxalbari, Phansidewa, Khoribari, Bijanbari, and Rangli blocks).

CINI's role focused heavily on stakeholder engagement, systems strengthening, and coordination among local institutions. The programme worked through existing governance and protection systems, helping them become more responsive and connected.

Building on Existing Community Leadership

One of the programme's strongest assets was the leadership already present within tea garden communities.

Women's groups, youth volunteers, Tea Garden Associations, schools, Panchayats, frontline workers, and adolescent collectives all became part of a larger child protection ecosystem. A key shift emerged when Tea Garden Associations began to be recognised not simply as employers, but as important stakeholders in addressing trafficking and child protection concerns. Their inclusion in district-level convergence meetings strengthened local accountability and created new spaces for collective problem-solving.

At the governance level, Child Rights and Social Development Committees (CRSDCs) also began receiving greater recognition from district administrations. CINI teams worked closely with Child Welfare Police Officers (CWPOs), Panchayat functionaries, PARA Legal Volunteers, schools, and district-level systems to improve coordination around child protection and unsafe migration.

The organisation conducted extensive advocacy and capacity-building efforts to strengthen local ownership of protection systems.

Between 2023 and 2025, the programme facilitated:

- ▶ 801 advocacy meetings with Gram Panchayat-level functionaries across six Gram Panchayats,
- ▶ three Quarterly District Task Force and District Child Welfare & Protection Committee meetings involving 109 participants,
- ▶ and capacity-building programmes for 45 Child Welfare Police Officers on child protection issues.



Image Courtesy - Child In Need Institute (CINI)
Capacity-Building Workshop

Children and Adolescents as Protectors

One of the programme's most significant learnings was the role adolescents themselves can play in identifying risks early and protecting their communities. Through school programmes, child group meetings, and adolescent engagement platforms, young people became active participants in child protection efforts rather than passive recipients of awareness programmes.

A powerful example of this leadership emerged through the story of Neha Chik Baraik from Turturi Tea Garden in Alipurduar district. Growing up in a remote tea garden community marked by economic hardship and limited opportunities, Neha witnessed how vulnerable children often became invisible within systems struggling to respond to migration and trafficking risks.

After participating in programme activities and trainings, Neha began actively engaging with child protection systems within her community. She learned how trafficking networks operated, how child marriages were often normalised, and how children could access support mechanisms.

Her growing confidence soon translated into action. In one instance, Neha learned about two impending child marriages within her area. Rather than remaining silent, she alerted Childhelpline and local authorities, contributing to timely intervention and prevention of the marriages.

In another case, she identified a vulnerable child at risk of trafficking and coordinated with local systems and police to ensure the child's safety and return to education. Over time, Neha became recognised not only within her community, but also by district-level authorities and the Department of Women and Child Development and Social Welfare.

Her journey reflected a larger transformation taking place across intervention areas: adolescents were increasingly becoming leaders within preventive protection systems.

Image Courtesy - Child In Need Institute (CINI) Alipurduar District Administration Facebook page



Measuring Impact Through Systems and Participation

CINI measures impact through both quantitative indicators and qualitative system-level changes.

The programme tracks:

- ▶ Number of advocacy and convergence meetings conducted
- ▶ Participation of government stakeholders and frontline workers
- ▶ Capacity-building initiatives for Child Welfare Police Officers and local governance actors
- ▶ Functionality and engagement of Child Rights and Social Development Committees
- ▶ Child group and adolescent participation
- ▶ Cases identified and referred related to trafficking, unsafe migration, and child marriage
- ▶ Institutional responsiveness and coordination mechanisms

Key programme metrics include:

- ▶ 801 advocacy meetings with Gram Panchayat functionaries
- ▶ Three district-level task force and protection committee meetings involving 109 participants
- ▶ Capacity building of 45 Child Welfare Police Officers
- ▶ Engagement across multiple blocks in Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, and Darjeeling districts

Beyond quantitative indicators, the programme also documents case studies, field narratives, and behavioural shifts to understand how community awareness, institutional coordination, and adolescent agency evolve over time.

Quarterly review meetings and convergence platforms help monitor implementation progress, identify emerging challenges, and strengthen adaptive planning.

Importantly, the programme's approach to measurement extends beyond activity counts. It also examines whether:

- ▶ local systems are becoming more coordinated,
- ▶ communities are identifying risks earlier,
- ▶ adolescents are participating more actively,
- ▶ and institutions are responding more effectively to protection concerns.



Learning That Prevention Requires Convergence

Several important lessons emerged through implementation.

First, trafficking prevention requires strong convergence between systems. Schools, Panchayats, Tea Garden Associations, police systems, frontline workers, and community groups all play different but interconnected roles in prevention and response.

Second, adolescents are often the earliest identifiers of risk. Their peer networks and lived experiences allow them to recognise warning signs long before formal systems intervene.

Third, continuous capacity building is essential. Child protection systems require regular engagement, especially when dealing with sensitive issues such as trafficking and unsafe migration.



The programme also highlighted several implementation challenges:

- ▶ Competing priorities within government systems during Panchayat and Lok Sabha elections,
- ▶ inconsistent stakeholder engagement,
- ▶ limited awareness around trafficking processes,
- ▶ and weak coordination between departments in geographically dispersed tea garden regions.



The Road Ahead

Looking forward, CINI sees the future of child protection in strengthening institutional accountability and community ownership simultaneously.

The organisation plans to deepen work around:

- ▶ policy advocacy,
- ▶ monitoring and accountability systems,
- ▶ data collection and quality assurance,
- ▶ stronger coordination between departments,
- ▶ and more responsive referral mechanisms.

There is also growing emphasis on strengthening adolescent leadership and community vigilance so that prevention becomes embedded within everyday governance and social systems. Across the tea gardens of North Bengal, that shift is already visible. Adolescents are speaking up, institutions are coordinating more closely and communities are becoming more vigilant.

Child Rights and You

Across the tea garden regions in the North Bengal districts of Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, and Darjeeling, childhood is a fragile reality. Child Rights and You (CRY), supported by the British Asian Trust (BAT), is strengthening child protection systems against exploitation and unsafe environments in the tea gardens.

The tea garden communities face chronic poverty, seasonal unemployment, migration, and food insecurity, which weakens families' ability to provide safe and supportive environments for children. Compounded with childhood vulnerabilities such as child marriage and child labour, the lack of child protection measures deeply affects children's access to education and safety, making sustained protection outcomes harder to achieve.

Communities have to work together to become more aware, vigilant, and proactive with child safety measures. This program is a step in building communication and collaboration with communities, Panchayati Raj Institutions, and frontline government functionaries to empower communities to reinforce ecosystems for child protection against vulnerabilities.

CRY was founded on the belief that every child deserves a safe, healthy, and dignified childhood, regardless of the circumstances into which they are born. The organization works to transform the conditions that keep children vulnerable by strengthening families, mobilizing communities, and making public systems more accountable and responsive. The program spans four administrative blocks, nine Gram Panchayats, and approximately 135 Gram Sansads. Rather than short-term relief, CRY focuses on long-term, sustainable change so that children can access education, protection, healthcare, and participation as a matter of right.

A multi-layered approach to resilience

The program's framework integrates early identification, prevention, timely response, and long-term rehabilitation within existing systems. It operates at three levels, combining communities, government institutions, and public systems to improve children's safety, education, and well-being.

- ▶ **Community Mobilization and Child Protection Committees:** Activating and strengthening community-based Child Protection Committees to enable early identification and timely reporting of risks like child marriage, trafficking, abuse, and school dropout. It integrates prevention, early identification, timely response, and long-term rehabilitation within existing structures, aligning with national child protection laws, policies, and service delivery systems.
- ▶ **Governance Strengthening:** Engaging Panchayati Raj Institutions and frontline government functionaries to improve coordination, referral pathways, accountability, and access to services. Integrating with government schemes and existing service delivery systems rather than running parallel structures, for more durable outcomes.
- ▶ **Evidence for accountability:** Conducting baseline assessments, case tracking, and monitoring school enrollment data to inform planning, prioritization, and adaptive decision-making with stakeholders.

These processes work to strengthen local protection ecosystems and deliver sustainable improvements in children's overall protection and growth. The project is contributing to safer childhoods, stronger community ownership of child protection, and more resilient local protection ecosystems across the tea garden communities of North Bengal.

The project primarily benefits children, especially girls and adolescents, and with their families. Child Protection Committees are functioning regularly and actively, enabling early identification of risks. Communities have also become more aware, vigilant, and proactive in safeguarding children. Working with Panchayati Raj Institutions and frontline government functionaries, CRY is enabling early identification and timely response to child protection risks. Additionally, it supports re-enrollment and retention of children in schools as a safe and protective space.

Improvements in local systems and accountability has contributed to children increasingly voicing their concerns, seeking support, and staying connected to education and protection services.

Measuring impact

Results-based monitoring and Child rights-focused evaluation frameworks are employed to track change across the children, communities, and public systems-levels.

- ▶ **Impact at the child level:** Measurement indicators include prevention of child marriage, reduction in child labour and abuse cases, re-enrollment and retention of children in schools, access to health and nutrition services, and timely referral and rehabilitation of children at risk.
- ▶ **Impact at the community and systems level:** Monitor of the functionality of Child Protection Committees, participation of children's groups, responsiveness of Panchayati Raj Institutions and frontline duty bearers, convergence with government schemes, and improvements in reporting and grievance redressal mechanisms.

CRY relies on baseline assessments, school enrollment data, service access indicators, and case tracking to inform planning and decision-making. Additionally, they conduct regular field monitoring visits, review meetings with stakeholders, and community feedback processes to ensure accountability and continuous learning.



Understanding the Ground Realities

System convergence leads to more durable change than parallel service delivery.

- ▶ Achieving sustainable child protection outcomes relies on collective action by stakeholders to effectively enable early identification, timely reporting, and coordinated response to risks such as child marriage, trafficking, abuse, and school dropout.
- ▶ When children understand their rights and gain support through collectives, they are able to influence family behavior, shift community norms, and contribute to safer environments.
- ▶ Education is a critical protective factor. When re-enrollment and retention in schools increase, they significantly reduce children's exposure to exploitation and abuse.

Integrated, rights-based, and locally anchored approaches that are supported by continuous learning and stakeholder collaboration are essential for building resilient child protection ecosystems.



The Road Ahead

At the program level, the next phase will focus on deepening institutional strengthening at the Gram Panchayat and district levels to embed child protection mechanisms within local governance structures firmly. Additionally, it will ensure stronger convergence across education, health, and social protection services, for prevention and response mechanisms to become fully integrated into local governance rather than remaining program-dependent.

The program envisions community-level resilience and reduced vulnerability, with informed families, functional Child Protection Committees, and responsive public systems working together. This will be pushed through continued emphasis on school retention, adolescent engagement, and livelihood linkages for families to break intergenerational cycles of poverty and exclusion.

At a sectoral level, CRY aims to scale insights from North Bengal, influence policy and practice, and strengthen partnerships so that safer childhoods become the norm across other regions as well. The program's experience is a demonstration of how rights-based, system-strengthening, and community-driven approaches can create durable change in highly vulnerable contexts.

The overarching goal is to move towards a future where community-owned child protection systems are fully self-sustaining, and child protection is recognized as a shared societal responsibility rather than a programmatic intervention alone.

Nazdeek

Tea plantation workers, particularly Adivasi and women workers in India, are trapped in inter-generational poverty. They are forced into exploitative labour practices where their backbreaking work is supplemented with earning less than a living wage, with weak legal enforcement and a lack of access to social security benefits provident fund (PF) and pensions. They often live in dilapidated housing without land rights, clean water, or adequate healthcare, and their livelihood is constantly threatened under growing climate insecurity.

There is a critical gap in research, coordinated advocacy, and structural engagement to address these systemic injustices. This is compounded by limited awareness of legal entitlements and by inaccessible grievance mechanisms, which play a major part in eroding their agency.

Nazdeek supports its partner organizations in implementing legal empowerment programs in the tea plantations of the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley of Assam, as well as in the Dooars region of West Bengal. In this project, they are building the capacities of tea garden workers, especially women workers to serve as community paralegal volunteers, transforming them into informed leaders who can access their socio-economic entitlements and support fellow workers in navigating complex legal and administrative systems.

The work is rooted in the founding motivation that justice must be accessible, participatory, and rooted in the lived realities of marginalized communities. Nazdeek exists to ensure that access to justice is not a privilege, but a right that communities can claim for themselves.



Building a Collective Voice for Tea Workers

In this project, Nazdeek addresses both immediate barriers to justice and the structural causes of exclusion. The core challenge is the lack of legal empowerment, accountability, and collective advocacy for tea plantation workers and resident communities.

In the first phase, they strengthened three grassroots organizations in Assam and West Bengal and trained 115 community-based Paralegal Volunteers (PLVs). These PLVs raised awareness of socio-economic and labour entitlements, supported workers in navigating grievance redressal mechanisms, and began challenging wage theft, denial of social security, and barriers to healthcare.

At the same time, they supported the formation of the Forum for the Rights of Tea Workers (FRTW), a regional platform that brings together grassroots groups, researchers, unions, and academics to advance evidence-based advocacy.

This work has improved access to benefits, increased confidence in engaging authorities, and fostered emerging local leadership within historically marginalized communities. By institutionalizing legal empowerment and enabling regional collaboration, the project is shifting power toward workers, strengthening accountability systems, and building a sustained movement for dignified livelihoods and rights in tea plantation communities.

The project is now scaling this impact by training new PLVs, supporting experienced volunteers to become trainers, strengthening institutional capacity, and advancing research-driven advocacy.

Listening, Learning, and Adapting

The project is guided by a community-centered, adaptive, and evidence-informed framework, which was intentionally designed around local realities of the communities, recognizing that sustainable impact depends on local ownership and contextual relevance. They adopted a participatory, co-creation approach that keeps community voices at the center of design, implementation, and refinement.

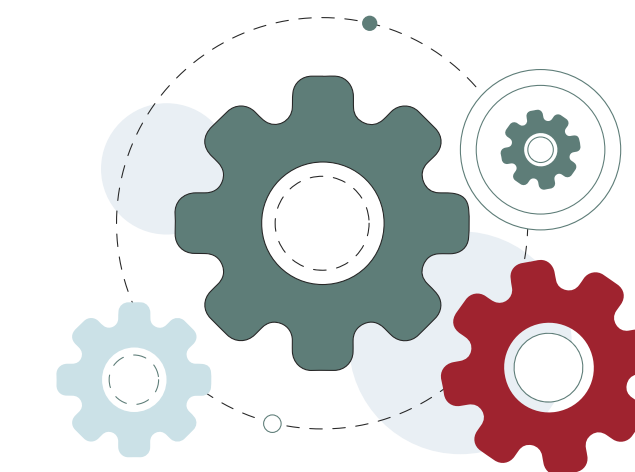
Community participation drives continuous learning through close collaboration with PLVs embedded in the community. Their regular feedback provides real-time insights into emerging issues, design and implementation gaps, and other areas for improvement. This constant feedback loop allows them to refine the intervention, ensuring that it remains responsive, practical, and aligned with actual community needs.

This model is adaptive and iterative: based on community engagement and learnings, it adapts strategies, strengthens effective components, and redesigns what needs improvement. This design adaptability, rooted in co-creation, ensures that the program grows organically alongside the community it serves. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) supports this cycle by tracking activities and case trends, measuring outcomes, and identifying opportunities to improve and scale.

Structured monitoring enables tracking activities and case trends, while evaluation helps with measuring outcomes and overall impact. The data generated through these processes allows a better gauge of the scope of work, identifying gaps, and determining opportunities for strengthening and expansion.

Evidence informs both the implementation and evaluation processes. They combine qualitative insights from community members and PLVs with quantitative monitoring data to make informed decisions, prioritize resources effectively, and ensure accountability. Innovation in this model is grounded in community systems, particularly through collaboration with the trained PLVs who serve as trusted intermediaries and catalysts for change.

Overall, the approach is to listen, co-create, iterate, and expand to sustain impact over time.



Measuring Progress, Capturing Change

The project's impact is assessed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative indicators with the following key metrics:

Capacity Building of PLVs

- ▶ Number of PLVs trained
- ▶ Percentage of trained PLVs actively working to facilitate access to socio-economic entitlements for tea plantation workers
- ▶ Improvement in knowledge and skills of PLVs, measured through:
 - Pre- and post-training assessments
 - Practical case handling evaluations
 - Periodic refresher assessments
- ▶ Retention rate of PLVs over time

Community Outreach and Awareness

- ▶ Number of community meetings conducted by PLVs
- ▶ Number of tea plantation workers reached through meetings and awareness sessions
- ▶ Frequency of follow-up visits and support sessions

Access to Government Schemes and Entitlements

- ▶ Number of applications filed or facilitated under various government welfare schemes
- ▶ Types of schemes accessed (e.g., social security, health insurance, pensions, housing, education benefits)
- ▶ Approval rate of applications submitted

Advocacy and Systems-Level Engagement

- ▶ Number of advocacy meetings held by PLVs and the project team with government authorities
- ▶ Issues formally raised with authorities
- ▶ Policy or administrative changes influenced
- ▶ Grievances resolved at institutional level



Qualitative Impact Indicators

- ▶ Case studies of individuals or families whose lives improved through intervention
- ▶ Testimonials from workers and PLVs
- ▶ Observed increase in community participation in governance processes

Learning by Doing, Leading from Within

One of the most significant lessons has been the value of engaging members of the impacted communities as PLVs. The success of this approach was due to the fostered trust and credibility with community members who were more open to sharing concerns and seeking support when engaging with people they knew, understood, and related to. The embedded nature of PLVs reduced barriers to delivering legal awareness or support services.

Additionally, structuring a step-by-step curriculum that gradually built knowledge and practical skills prevented participants from feeling overwhelmed. An incremental learning model proved especially effective for participants who had no prior legal background. By creating manageable segments of information, PLVs were able to absorb key concepts, reflect on them, and gain confidence before moving to more complex topics.

Assigning practical tasks where PLVs could apply newly acquired knowledge and skills within their communities after each training session was also crucial. This approach reinforced learning, strengthened accountability, and ensured that the program translated into tangible community engagement and support.

An unexpected but positive outcome was the level of ownership and leadership demonstrated by PLVs. A combination of trust-based selection, supportive training design, and clear action steps contributed to this strong sense of responsibility. When given clear expectations and structured opportunities to act, they showed initiative and commitment beyond initial projections.

Investing in carefully sequenced, skills-based training helps sustain volunteer engagement. But this requires including community-led implementation, especially in trust-sensitive areas such as legal empowerment. Integrating structured post-training action into program design ensures that learning is immediately translated into practice, increasing both impact and volunteer motivation.



The Road Ahead

In the coming years, Nazdeek aims to deepen its investment in community ownership. They will focus on strengthening local leadership, building the capacity of grassroots justice actors, and ensuring that our interventions are women-led and inclusive of those most often excluded from formal systems. Women's leadership is not only central to equity, but it is essential to building responsive, accountable justice systems at the community level.

During this project, they have seen communities growing confident, stronger solidarity networks, and increased ability to engage institutions on their own terms. As legal awareness expands, communities will be better equipped to address land disputes, family matters, social protection gaps, labor matters, and other everyday justice challenges without fear or dependency. Over time, this empowerment fosters resilience, reduces conflict, and strengthens democratic participation.

The broader movement for legal empowerment continues to face challenges, limited resources, resistance to shifting power dynamics, and deeply entrenched structural inequalities. Yet it is also a movement marked by resilience and possibility. Across regions, community justice advocates are demonstrating that change is possible when people understand the law and see themselves as active agents rather than passive beneficiaries.

There are risks such as volunteer burnout, political capture, backlash from powerful local actors, and inconsistent service quality as the model scales. Mitigation strategies have to include clear role definitions, safeguarding policies, supervision structures, and modest incentives or recognition mechanisms.

The future of this movement lies in collaboration, evidence-building, and sustained advocacy. It is important to share lessons, strengthen partnerships, and amplify community voices, to a growing global recognition that access to justice is foundational to development, gender equality, and human dignity.

Family Planning Association of India

For more than seven decades, the Family Planning Association of India (FPA India) has worked to strengthen access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) across India. Established in 1949, the organization emerged at a time when conversations around family planning, maternal health, and reproductive choice were limited in public discourse and access to healthcare services remained deeply unequal. Over the years, FPA India has evolved into one of the country's leading SRH organizations, building a nationwide network that combines healthcare services, community outreach, advocacy, and local partnerships.

Today, FPA India operates across 17 states and Union Territories, reaching more than 30 million people annually through clinics, outreach programmes, mobile services, associated clinics, and community interventions. Its work spans contraception, safe abortion care, maternal and child health, adolescent health education, prevention of gender-based violence, STI and HIV services, and broader reproductive health support.

What distinguishes FPA India's approach is its long-standing investment in community trust and care. The organization recognizes that access to healthcare is shaped not only by infrastructure, but also by social norms, confidence, information, and local support systems. Through Project ASPIRE and other interventions, FPA India has focused on ensuring that underserved communities, particularly women, adolescents, and marginalized populations, can access healthcare services with dignity, safety, and informed choice.



Building Access in Underserved Communities

FPA India's interventions under Project ASPIRE focus on some of West Bengal's geographically and socially vulnerable regions, including tea garden communities in Alipurduar district, rural populations along the Indo-Bhutan border, urban settlements in Kolkata and Howrah, and selected blocks in the Sundarbans across North and South 24 Parganas.

These geographies present multiple challenges related to healthcare access, transportation, stigma, early marriage, gender inequality, and shortages of trained healthcare providers. Rather than approaching these areas through a deficit lens, FPA India's model builds on existing community strengths and local participation.

In the Sundarbans, local communities supported outreach efforts by providing spaces for service sessions, mobilizing participants, and helping organize health camps. This collaboration enabled the programme to deliver more than eight lakh services through outreach sessions alone.

In Kalchini's tea garden communities, FPA India focused on building local leadership through Mothers' Clubs which are peer-led groups where women gather regularly to discuss maternal health, menstrual hygiene, family planning, adolescent health, infection prevention, and gender-based violence.

These clubs have evolved into trusted local support systems where women could exchange information, support one another, and connect families with healthcare services. Members mobilized communities for health camps, guided women to clinics and government facilities, and supported access to antenatal and postnatal care.

The strength of the model lay in its peer-led nature. Information shared within trusted social networks proved more accessible and culturally acceptable than external messaging alone. Over time, the role of Mothers' Clubs expanded beyond health awareness to broader community support, including interventions around early marriage, school retention, and domestic violence.

Today, 192 Mothers' Club members continue to serve as visible points of care and guidance within their communities, voluntarily contributing time and effort to support others.



Expanding Services Through Local Partnerships

FPA India's approach combines direct service delivery with capacity building and systems strengthening. Alongside clinics and outreach services, the organization works closely with healthcare providers, grassroots workers, and local institutions to improve long-term access to care.

In the Sundarbans, the programme strengthened local healthcare systems by training Rural Medical Practitioners (RMPs), ASHAs, and grassroots health workers on SRH services and referrals. In 2024 and 2025 alone:

- ▶ 257 Rural Medical Practitioners were trained on SRH care
- ▶ 355 ASHAs and grassroots cadres received capacity-building support.

These trainings strengthened referral pathways, improved quality of care, and expanded local access to information and services, especially for women and adolescents.

The organization also significantly expanded its partner network. The number of partner clinics increased from 103 to 222, a 116% increase, strengthening service delivery infrastructure across intervention areas.

This expansion reflects one of FPA India's core learnings that sustainable healthcare access requires distributed systems built through partnerships, community ownership, and local capacity rather than isolated service points alone.

Progress Through Reach, Utilization, and Participation

Monitoring and evaluation are central to FPA India's implementation approach. The organization uses the District Health Information Software (DHIS2), an open-source health information platform, to record, analyse, and track programme data across service delivery points.

Monthly branch-level service data is entered into customized DHIS2 formats, allowing the organization to monitor outreach, service utilization, referrals, and trends across geographies.

In addition to digital systems, FPA India maintains:

- ▶ Registration records;
- ▶ eCMIS online data systems;
- ▶ Medical records and procedure registers;
- ▶ Referral follow-up registers;
- ▶ Stock and inventory records;
- ▶ Consent documentation systems.

These systems support both programme management and accountability.



Key programme indicators demonstrate the scale and growth of the intervention:

- ▶ Programme reach increased from 2,987,995 people at baseline to 8,399,029 by the end of 2025, a 181% increase
- ▶ Total SRH services increased from 4,324,581 to 5,238,048
- ▶ More than 119,000 clients accessed SRH care between April 2022 and December 2025
- ▶ Client footfall increased nearly fourfold from 12,821 in Phase 1 to 64,532 in Phase 3.

Alongside quantitative indicators, FPA India also tracks qualitative changes through community feedback, field observations, and engagement with local stakeholders.

The organization observed increasing awareness around reproductive health rights, improved health-seeking behaviour, stronger participation by women in household decision-making, and declining instances of early marriage in some intervention areas.

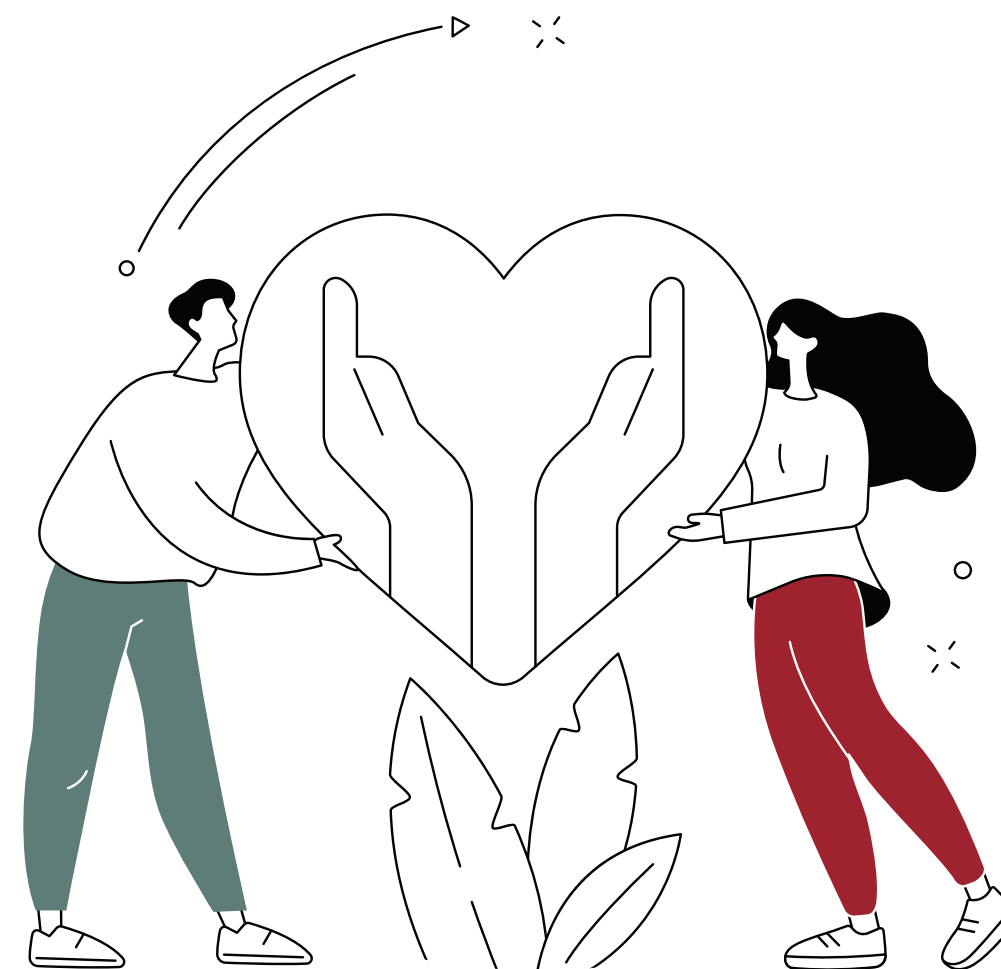
Strengthening Access Through Community Confidence

A defining feature of FPA India's work is its integration of healthcare access with entitlement-based engagement. The organization recognizes that stigma, misinformation, and silence often prevent individuals from seeking timely care, especially adolescents, women, LGBTQIA+ communities, and other marginalized groups.

Through community outreach, peer engagement, and safe discussion spaces, the programme helps normalize conversations around reproductive health, menstruation, contraception, abortion care, and adolescent wellbeing.

This approach has helped create environments where individuals feel more informed and confident in seeking support. In many communities, women who once had limited participation in family decisions are now actively influencing discussions around health, education, and wellbeing.

The organization's work also demonstrates the value of continuity. FPA India's long-term presence and sustained community engagement have enabled trust to grow gradually over time, which is an essential factor in areas where reproductive health remains closely linked to social norms and cultural sensitivities.



The Road Ahead

FPA India envisions a future where sexual and reproductive health is universally accessible, stigma-free, and recognized as essential to dignity and social justice.

The organization plans to deepen its work among underserved populations while strengthening youth leadership, digital innovation, and locally responsive healthcare systems. Emerging challenges such as climate vulnerability, migration, misinformation, mental health concerns, and gender inequality are expected to shape future programming approaches.

At the center of this vision is a continued investment in people and communities. By combining healthcare access with trust-building, local participation, and entitlement-based engagement, FPA India is helping create systems where individuals can make informed decisions about their health and futures with confidence and dignity.

Kolkata Sanved

In many communities, emotional wellbeing remains one of the least visible dimensions of development. Young people may navigate stress, uncertainty, social pressures, violence, economic hardship, or limited opportunities without having safe spaces to process their experiences. While these realities often shape confidence, relationships, aspirations, and participation in community life, conversations around mental health are frequently constrained by stigma, silence, or lack of accessible support systems.

Kolkata Sanved approaches this challenge from a distinctive perspective that healing, expression, and leadership can emerge through the body itself. Using Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) and creative expression as a tool for creative wellbeing, the organization works at the intersection of mental health, arts, and social development, creating spaces where individuals can reconnect with themselves, express emotions, build confidence, and gradually become agents of change within their communities.

Through its work in North Bengal, Kolkata Sanved has focused particularly on young people from tea garden communities where economic uncertainty, limited opportunities, and social inequalities can shape everyday experiences. Rather than defining these communities by their challenges, the organization builds on their existing strengths such as resilience, cultural expression, relationships, and the potential of young people to support one another and lead change from within.



Image Courtesy - Kolkata Sanved

The Power of Movement as a Language of Healing

Through its early work with survivors of gender based violence (GBV) and trafficking, the organization observed that many individuals carried deep emotional pain and trauma but often lacked safe avenues to express and process those experiences. Words were not always enough. Movement, however, opened a different possibility.

Dance Movement Therapy emerged as a way for individuals to reconnect with their bodies, explore emotions, reduce stress, and regain a sense of control over their own lives. Over time, this understanding became the foundation of the organization's broader mission of creating inclusive and dignified spaces where healing and empowerment could happen together.

This philosophy continues to guide the organization's work today. Every session begins with the assumption that individuals already possess strengths, capacities, and possibilities within themselves. The role of facilitation is not to "fix" participants, but to create conditions where those strengths can emerge.





Working with Youth in North Bengal

Under this project, Kolkata Sanved works in the districts of Jalpaiguri (Dooars) and Kalimpong (Gorubathan) in North Bengal. The primary focus is on youth from tea garden communities, many of whom face limited educational and livelihood opportunities alongside broader social and economic uncertainty.

The intervention extends beyond young participants themselves. Families, schools, community organizations, teachers, social workers, Panchayati Raj representatives, and other local stakeholders are engaged to create a wider ecosystem of support around young people.

Importantly, the approach is adapted to local realities. Session design takes into account language, culture, daily schedules, and community contexts. Partnerships with local organizations strengthen outreach and help ensure that the work remains grounded in community needs.

The project's central objective is to support a longer-term journey in which young people develop self-awareness, confidence, emotional literacy, and eventually leadership capacities that can contribute to collective care and wellbeing.

From Participants to Peer Leaders

One of the most significant outcomes observed by Kolkata Sanved has been the gradual transformation of participants into leaders.

The organization's model follows a structured pathway of change. Young people initially engage in Dance Movement Therapy sessions as participants. Within these safe and supportive spaces, they begin exploring self-expression, emotional awareness, body connection, and interpersonal relationships.

As confidence grows, some participants start taking more active roles. They support peers, contribute to activities, facilitate group processes, and gradually assume leadership responsibilities. For some, this progression leads to becoming peer leaders, facilitators, or therapeutic movement practitioners.

The organization views this evolution as a movement from individual healing toward collective care. Young people who have experienced the value of safe spaces become contributors to those spaces for others. This principle is reflected in one of Kolkata Sanved's core learnings which says that survivors can become healers.

Building Communities of Care

As young people gain confidence and emotional awareness, they contribute to the creation of informal peer support systems within their communities. Safe spaces emerge where participants can connect, listen to one another, and discuss experiences that might otherwise remain unspoken.

Families and community members also become increasingly aware of the importance of emotional wellbeing. Over time, this contributes to a gradual reduction in stigma around mental health and creates greater acceptance of conversations around emotions, stress, relationships, and self-care.

Rather than introducing entirely new structures, the project strengthens existing community relationships and encourages a culture of mutual support. In tea garden communities where opportunities for mental health engagement are often limited, these spaces become important community assets in themselves.

Growth Beyond Numbers

Kolkata Sanved recognizes that many of the changes it seeks to nurture such as confidence, self-expression, emotional awareness, belonging, and leadership, cannot be understood through numbers alone. As a result, the organization combines quantitative tracking with qualitative reflection and documentation.

Key indicators include:

- ▶ Number of youth participants engaged in Dance Movement Therapy sessions
- ▶ Number of youth trained as peer leaders and therapeutic movement facilitators
- ▶ Number of community members and families reached
- ▶ Attendance and participation levels
- ▶ Changes in confidence, emotional awareness, and self-expression
- ▶ Stories of change shared by participants

The organization complements these indicators with session documentation, structured reflection spaces, facilitator observations, participant feedback, and periodic programme reviews. The organization pays particular attention to indicators of leadership emergence, increased participation, stronger peer relationships, and greater emotional literacy among participants.



Learning Through Practice

One of the strongest findings is the importance of consistency and safety. Young people engage most deeply when they feel respected, accepted, and free from judgement. Trust-building therefore remains central to the entire process.

The organization has also observed that the body, through movement and creative expression, can be an effective medium even for participants who initially appear hesitant or reluctant. Because Dance Movement Therapy creates non-verbal pathways for expression, individuals often find ways to communicate emotions that may be difficult to articulate verbally.

Another significant insight relates to youth leadership. When young people take ownership of activities and processes, outcomes become stronger and more sustainable. At the same time, Kolkata Sanved emphasizes patience. Personal growth and emotional healing rarely follow linear timelines. Meaningful change often unfolds gradually and requires flexibility in responding to participants' realities.

The organization also highlights the importance of addressing broader issues such as gender norms and sexual and reproductive health awareness, recognizing that emotional wellbeing is closely connected to wider social experiences.

Facilitator development is another critical learning. Creating safe spaces requires skilled practitioners who can respond sensitively to participants while maintaining an inclusive environment. Continuous training and support for facilitators therefore remain essential.



The Road Ahead

Kolkata Sanved envisions a future where access to mental health support is more widely available, community-based, and integrated into everyday life.

The organization plans to continue nurturing local youth leaders in North Bengal and expanding opportunities for young people to engage with movement-based wellbeing practices. A key aspiration is that participants continue using these practices independently and share them within their own networks, creating wider cultures of care and openness.

The organization also sees potential for deeper connections between this work and systems such as education, community institutions, and local governance structures. Such integration could expand access to creative wellbeing approaches while strengthening community support systems.

As challenges related to inequality, emotional distress, and limited opportunities continue to affect many young people, Kolkata Sanved views its work as part of a broader movement, one that places healing, dignity, self-expression, and collective care at the center of community development.

Its experience demonstrates that when young people are provided safe spaces to move, connect, and express themselves, they often discover capacities that were already present within them. In doing so, they not only transform their own journeys but also contribute to more supportive and resilient communities around them.

Project Concern International, India

In the tea garden communities of North Bengal, generations of families have built their lives around landscapes shaped by hard work, strong social bonds, and a shared sense of identity. These communities possess deep cultural traditions, resilient social networks, and a remarkable ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Yet economic uncertainty, geographic isolation, and limited access to support systems can often constrain opportunities, particularly for women and adolescent girls.

Project Concern International (PCI) India's work in Darjeeling's tea gardens begins with an important recognition that lasting change emerges when communities themselves become central actors in shaping safer, healthier, and more equitable futures. Through Building Safe Spaces – Empowering Women and Girls in West Bengal's Tea Gardens, supported by the Swiss Philanthropy Foundation, PCI India is strengthening community-led systems that enable women and girls to access support, build confidence, exercise greater agency, and participate more fully in community life.

The initiative reflects PCI India's broader philosophy of co-creating solutions rooted in local realities. The programme builds upon existing community institutions, women's collectives, adolescent networks, and government systems to create sustainable pathways for wellbeing, protection, and empowerment.

A Legacy of Community-Centred Development

Since beginning operations in India in 1998, PCI India has worked with a vision of creating a happy, healthy, safe and sustainable world for all. The organization's journey started with a strong focus on health and nutrition among women, children, and underserved populations. Over time, its understanding of development expanded to recognize the interconnected nature of health, livelihoods, gender relations, access to services, climate change and community agency.

A defining feature of PCI India's work has been its commitment to strengthening community institutions as vehicles for long-term change. Through large-scale partnerships with governments, the organization demonstrated how women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and federations could become platforms for financial inclusion and livelihoods as well as for health awareness, social mobilisation, and collective action.

Building Safe Spaces draws directly from this institutional experience. The programme leverages trusted community structures to strengthen women's agency, adolescent wellbeing, and access to support systems in tea garden communities where such services have traditionally been limited.





Building on Community Strengths

The programme is implemented across five tea gardens in Darjeeling district—Dhotrey, Lower Kalej Valley, Upper Kalej Valley, Balasun, and Tungsung. These locations were selected because of intersecting challenges including irregular wages, economic uncertainty, migration pressures, psychosocial stress, and limited access to gender-responsive services.

The communities served are primarily Nepali-speaking tea garden populations whose livelihoods and social structures have evolved around the tea estate economy over generations. While these communities face structural constraints, they also possess strong collective identities and community institutions that provide a foundation for positive change.

PCI India's approach builds upon these strengths rather than focusing solely on deficits. Existing Self-Help Groups, Cluster Level Federations (CLFs), Panchayati Raj Institutions, and traditional community structures serve as key partners in programme implementation. This approach helps ensure that support systems are embedded within familiar and trusted community spaces.

Women participate through SHGs, while adolescent girls engage through peer groups and dedicated community-based platforms. Together, these spaces create opportunities for dialogue, mutual support, leadership development, and collective learning.

Creating Safe and Trusted Community Spaces

At the heart of the programme is the understanding that meaningful support must be accessible, trusted, and locally rooted.

One of the initiative's most significant innovations has been the establishment of Gender Facilitation Centres (GFCs), which have evolved into Community Empowerment Hubs. This adaptation emerged directly from field learning. Early implementation revealed that explicit violence-focused branding could discourage participation in communities where gender-based violence is highly normalised and associated with stigma or social risk.

By repositioning these centres as broader community empowerment spaces, the programme created more welcoming entry points for engagement. Within these hubs, women and girls can access counselling, information, referral services, guidance on government entitlements, and connections to formal support systems such as District Legal Services Authorities (DALSA), One Stop Centres, Panchayats, and State Rural Livelihood Mission structures.

The hubs function as community resources where conversations around wellbeing, dignity, aspirations, decision-making, and rights can emerge organically.

This emphasis on trust-building has become one of the programme's most valuable lessons. Rather than beginning with discussions of violence, engagement often starts with themes such as emotional wellbeing, self-confidence, aspirations, and everyday life experiences. Over time, these conversations create space for deeper reflection on rights, relationships, safety, and help-seeking.



Supporting Women's Agency and Adolescent Wellbeing

A central strength of Building Safe Spaces is its integrated approach. The programme recognizes that women's safety, confidence, and decision-making power are closely linked to economic realities, social norms, emotional wellbeing, and access to support networks.

Women participating through SHGs are encouraged to engage in discussions around dignity, leadership, wellbeing, entitlements, and collective action. Existing group structures provide opportunities for peer support and community engagement while also serving as channels for information and referrals.

Adolescent engagement follows a similarly strengths-based pathway. Early implementation demonstrated that adolescents respond most positively when programmes begin with themes such as self-identity, confidence, emotional wellbeing, and self-expression rather than rights-based messaging alone.

This insight has informed programme design, enabling adolescent girls to explore aspirations, build confidence, and strengthen psychosocial wellbeing in ways that feel relevant to their lives and experiences.

Measuring Change Across Multiple Levels

PCI India employs a structured Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEAL) framework to track progress and understand outcomes at individual, household, community, and institutional levels.

The programme tracks a range of quantitative and qualitative indicators, including:

- ▶ Number of women and adolescent girls participating in SHG sessions, adolescent groups, counselling services, and awareness activities
- ▶ Participation and retention rates across engagement platforms
- ▶ Changes in awareness and attitudes regarding gender norms, entitlements, support services, and wellbeing
- ▶ Increases in confidence, self-efficacy, decision-making ability, and psychosocial wellbeing
- ▶ Number and type of cases accessing counselling, referral support, legal aid, health services, and One Stop Centres
- ▶ Utilisation and footfall at Community Empowerment Hubs
- ▶ Evidence of peer support and collective action within SHGs and CLFs
- ▶ Strengthened convergence with systems such as SRLM, DALSA, Panchayats, and protection services

Beyond numerical indicators, PCI India documents case studies, reflective narratives, and community feedback to better understand shifts in attitudes, behaviours, and community responses.





Learning Through Adaptive Implementation

One of the most important lessons emerging from implementation is that effective gender-based violence prevention and response requires a community-embedded approach rather than standalone awareness activities.

Field experience demonstrated that aspiration-led and dignity-centred entry points create stronger engagement than direct discussions of violence. Communities participate more actively when programmes acknowledge their strengths, aspirations, and wellbeing rather than approaching them solely through the lens of risk.

Another important learning is the close relationship between economic insecurity and women's vulnerability. The programme's formative assessment highlighted how income dependence and financial stress influence women's choices, mobility, and ability to seek support. This reinforced the importance of linking gender programming with livelihood convergence and economic empowerment pathways.

The project has also shown the value of leveraging existing community institutions. By working through SHGs and Cluster Level Federations, the programme benefits from established trust, local ownership, and structures that are likely to continue beyond project timelines.



The Road Ahead

PCI India views Building Safe Spaces as an opportunity to demonstrate a practical, community-owned model for strengthening women's agency, adolescent wellbeing, and support systems within underserved tea garden settings.

The organization aims to deepen engagement with women's collectives, strengthen peer support mechanisms, and expand opportunities for leadership and collective action. Adolescent programming will increasingly focus on leadership development, psychosocial wellbeing, and future aspirations, while engagement with men, boys, panchayats, and traditional community structures will support broader shifts in community norms.

The programme will also continue strengthening convergence with public systems such as Mission Shakti, SRLM platforms, legal aid services, and One Stop Centres to improve sustainability and institutional integration.

By generating evidence and implementation learning from tea garden contexts, PCI India hopes to contribute to wider conversations on gender-responsive programming in underserved geographies across India.

At its core, Building Safe Spaces demonstrates that transformative change begins with trust, participation, and locally owned systems. When communities are supported to build on their own strengths and institutions, they create environments where women and girls can access support, exercise agency, and pursue their aspirations with greater confidence and dignity.

Swaniti

The tea garden regions of North Bengal are home to workers, many of whom are employed on informal terms, experience low financial literacy, limited mobility, and a long history of neglect in public service delivery. Despite the expansion of India's social protection architecture over the past two decades, the gap between policy intent and on-the-ground access remains wide in these regions.

Through its project, Swaniti aims to strengthen the last mile of social protection delivery where vulnerable communities often remain excluded despite being eligible for multiple government welfare schemes.

This intervention operates within a context where India has significantly expanded its social protection architecture, yet last-mile delivery gaps persist in geographically and socially marginalized regions. While schemes for pensions, scholarships, and livelihood security exist, access is uneven due to administrative fragmentation, documentation barriers, digital exclusion (online application systems and apps), and limited grievance redressal capacity. Tea garden communities face compounded vulnerabilities where women, elderly persons, and marginalized caste groups are particularly affected.

Closing Gaps from the Ground Up

This project is guided by a systems-strengthening and participatory governance framework that combines evidence, community engagement, and regular monitoring. At its core is a last-mile delivery model that identifies gaps between policy intent and implementation realities, and works to institutionalize solutions rather than provide one-time service support.

Evidence informs each stage of implementation. The project begins with baseline assessments and community-level mapping to identify eligible but unenrolled beneficiaries, bottlenecks in documentation, and delays in approvals. This data is aggregated to provide insights to Panchayat, Block, and district officials, enabling targeted follow-ups and administrative course correction. Continuous data monitoring allows the team to measure improvements in enrollment, grievance resolution, and processing timelines.

Community participation is central to the model. Local representatives and trained community champions facilitate awareness, support documentation, and surface systemic issues through structured feedback loops. This ensures that marginalized groups are being heard to enable institutional closing of service gaps.



Image Courtesy - Swaniti
Capacity-Building Session for ASHA Workers on the Ayushman Bharat (PM-JAY) Application



Image Courtesy - Swaniti
Tea Gardens

From Entitlements to Tangible Security

The core impact of this project lies in closing the gap between entitlement and access to social protection schemes in the tea garden regions of North Bengal, especially the districts of Alipurduar, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, and Kalimpong. While multiple welfare schemes exist, many eligible individuals remain excluded due to barriers such as lack of awareness, documentation challenges, digital inaccessibility, and delays within administrative systems.

Over the course of this project, Swaniti has encountered elderly individuals waiting months for Old Age Pensions, widows unaware of their eligibility, and families unable to navigate digital or app-based systems meant to simplify access. Government outreach camps exist, but daily wage earners cannot afford to forgo income to attend them.

Despite submitted applications, benefits continue to be delayed and grievance mechanisms are poorly understood or inaccessible. The issue is not the absence of schemes, but gaps in last-mile delivery, coordination, and accountability.

This project is motivated by the need to close that gap. It seeks to strengthen the interface between communities and the state using data, structured feedback, and institutional collaboration to ensure that social protection schemes function as intended. At its core, the project is about restoring trust in public systems and ensuring that entitlements become tangible security for vulnerable households.

Strengthening the Last Mile

The core impact of this project lies in closing the gap between entitlement and access to social protection schemes in the tea garden regions of North Bengal.

This project addresses the existing systemic gaps by strengthening last-mile delivery and improving coordination between communities and government institutions. The primary beneficiaries are vulnerable households who depend on timely access to pensions, and other social security measures for basic financial stability. By identifying “eligible but unenrolled” individuals, supporting application processes, and enabling grievance resolution, the project ensures that these entitlements translate into real benefits.

Beyond individual access, the project aims to drive systemic change. This is done by ensuring that Panchayats and frontline workers are better equipped to support beneficiaries, while Block and district administrations ensure community-friendly decisions based on-ground data by Swaniti, enabling faster decision-making and improved accountability.

Tracking Access, Efficiency, and Responsiveness

Swaniti measures impact by tracking improvements across access, efficiency, institutional responsiveness, and equity in social protection delivery. At the access level, key indicators include:

- ▶ The number of eligible individuals identified versus successfully enrolled in schemes such as pensions and scholarships
- ▶ The reduction in eligible-but-unenrolled households
- ▶ The total number of applications supported.

Swaniti also tracks the number of grievances registered and resolved, reflecting improved accountability within the system.

To assess efficiency, the project monitors the average time taken from application submission to approval, the reduction in repeat visits required by beneficiaries, and the volume of service requests tracked through data collected. Institutional strengthening is measured through the number of Panchayat representatives and frontline workers trained, the frequency of administrative review meetings, and the extent to which government departments actively use data for decision-making and follow-ups.



Learning What Makes Access Work

A key learning from implementation is that access gaps stem from weak last-mile coordination, limited awareness, and documentation barriers. When structured data collection is combined with direct community engagement, enrollment rates improve significantly. What worked particularly well was creating clear feedback loops between communities and Block-level administrations. Regular review meetings have helped officials prioritize pending cases and reduce approval delays. Training Panchayat representatives and frontline workers also proved effective in building local ownership of service delivery improvements.

A surprising insight was how much exclusion is driven by small procedural hurdles such as minor documentation errors or digital application mismatches. These can keep the applications pending and prevent beneficiaries from availing the benefits for months. Another was the extent to which daily wage earners miss government outreach camps because of income loss, highlighting the importance of flexible, community-based Government outreach.

For the wider sector, the strongest takeaway is that technology alone does not solve exclusion; it must be paired with human facilitation and institutional accountability.



The Road Ahead

Looking ahead, the next phase of this continued work is about deepening institutional resilience and expanding from improved access to sustained social security outcomes. For the communities, the goal is not only timely enrollment in schemes, but greater confidence in navigating public systems independently. Strengthening awareness, documentation readiness, and grievance literacy and access will be critical to ensuring long-term inclusion.

For the project itself, the focus will shift toward institutionalization. This will include embedding on-ground data collected by Swaniti and its partner orgs into routine administrative reviews, strengthening Panchayat-led monitoring, and refining feedback loops so that systemic gaps are addressed proactively rather than reactively. There is also scope to integrate livelihood and financial security linkages alongside social protection, ensuring that welfare access translates into broader economic stability.

Scaling this model will prioritize institutional alignment over parallel delivery. The strongest enabler is early and sustained partnership with district and Block administrations. Embedding the model within existing government workflows rather than operating as an external service provider ensures ownership, legitimacy, and long-term sustainability. A second key enabler is reliable, structured data. Clear identification of “eligible but unenrolled” households, tracking of pending cases, and simple data that administrators can easily interpret are critical. However, technology must remain facilitative, not burdensome, and tools should align with government capacity and digital literacy levels.

Community participation will remain essential. Training Panchayat representatives, frontline workers, and local champions builds trust and improves outreach, especially among women, elderly persons, and marginalized groups. Without community buy-in, enrollment efforts risk being short-term. Key risks include administrative fatigue, shifting policy priorities, and over-reliance on individual champions within government. Conditions for success include effective government systems at the district level that are flexible to adapt to local contexts, and continuous learning loops.

At a broader level, the work contributes to a growing movement toward accountable, data-driven participatory governance. As India continues to digitize welfare systems, ensuring that technology reduces rather than deepens exclusion, the future lies in models that combine community voice, real-time evidence, and government partnerships so that social protection becomes a dependable foundation of dignity and security for vulnerable households in the tea-garden regions of Bengal.

ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability, South Asia

The complex ecosystems of Darjeeling Himalayas are shaped by social and infrastructural inequities where communities face weak service delivery, water scarcity, and climate risk. In this region, several hamlets lie beyond the formal water supply system, leading to communities depending on springs and informal arrangements for water access and maintenance. It has been observed that spring discharge has declined and become seasonal over the years due to climate change and water intensive tourism industry development patterns.

The Community-led Action Plan (CLAP) project by ICLEI Local Governments for Sustainability, South Asia (ICLEI SA) aims to address water security in some of the remote hamlets of the region. These hamlets, nestled between tea gardens, have not yet been brought under the purview of Jal Jeevan Mission, a flagship government water supply mission. Beyond the infrastructure gaps, policy initiatives often falter at the last mile due to limited awareness, fragmented coordination, and power asymmetries that exclude the most impacted communities from the decision-making processes. Local communities are rarely involved in the critical aspect of water resource management by local governments.

The CLAP project intends to strengthen how water is understood, managed, and governed locally in these hamlets. The project is grounded in the reality of declining spring discharge, which has forced communities to rely on distant sources along steep slopes and informal arrangements for water access.

Moreover, the gender aspects of water use and management are seldom considered in water project plans. These systemic challenges make community-led, systems-focused interventions critical. The project responds to these challenges by addressing root causes rather than symptoms, positioning communities as partners within the ecosystem rather than beneficiaries at its margins.

Communities at the Heart of Water Security

Within the Darjeeling Himalayan region of West Bengal, India, the project focuses on the Darjeeling district, specifically in the Community Development (CD) blocks of Jorebunglow-Sukhiapokhri and Kurseong. It has been implemented in four tea garden hamlets within these two blocks.

These hamlets were selected as the project sites as they represent different hydrological, geographical, and settlement conditions within the hills. These include Daragaon (Nagri Farm TG) and Bahidardhura (Dhajea TG) in Jorebunglow-Sukhiapokhri block, and Kothidara (Rohini TG) and Godamdhura (Gidda Pahar TG) in Kurseong block.

The project works in partnership with the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA), the Public Health and Engineering Department (PHED), tea estate management, and Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to advance water security across the tea garden hamlets of the Darjeeling Himalayas. Its primary beneficiaries are the tea garden communities, who are among the most water-vulnerable populations in the region. The project is co-creating Water Security Plans (WaSPs) with the communities and project partners for each of the four project hamlets, with ICLEI SA piloting one demonstration intervention per plan. A central element of the project is the formation of a Barefoot Hydrogeologist Corps (BHCs) alongside Water Committees in each hamlet, both serving as institutional platforms for locally grounded water governance. The Barefoot Hydrogeologists are a part of the Water Committee for their respective hamlets.

The Barefoot Hydrogeologists are trained to monitor spring discharge and local hydrogeological conditions, equipping communities with the technical knowledge needed to assess their own water resources. In this way, both the Corps and Water Committees form the backbone of a locally led community-owned system that is oriented toward impact-driven change.



Image Courtesy: ICLEI - FGD - Gidda Pahar_Nov 2024

Grounding Action in Evidence and Experience

The project's framework is anchored in an approach that integrates evidence, participation, and adaptive learning to strengthen both institutional and community systems.

Implementation began by developing a foundation of robust evidence base to ensure that design choices were grounded in lived realities rather than assumptions. This foundation was developed through participatory diagnostics, including Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRAs), household surveys, focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews, spring discharge measurements, and baseline assessments, which provided a granular understanding of water conditions and community needs across each hamlet.

As the project progressed, adaptive learning and management practices guided course corrections in real time. Regular field feedback, community reviews, and technical observations formed a continuous loop that informed adjustments to implementation.

Findings were captured within the project's Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) framework, and complemented by shared outcome harvesting journals that document behavioral shifts, institutional changes, and emerging signs of community ownership. Together, these mechanisms allowed the team to trace evidence-based systemic change and the depth of community engagement over time.

Community participation was embedded throughout the project lifecycle. Communities have co-designed interventions, validated data, and constituted Water Committees as local monitoring and oversight bodies. This sustained involvement builds the local ownership that is essential to ensuring outcomes endure well beyond the life of the project.

An example of the impact can be seen in Godamdhura, where in a particular hamlet, the spring source fell within forest jurisdiction. Obtaining a No Objection Certificate (NOC) from the Department of Forests typically takes up to three years. Rather than waiting, the community proactively engaged with forest officials, organized a site visit, and successfully secured the necessary permission. This demonstrated that strong community ownership can accelerate bureaucratic processes and highlighted the value of investing early in community capacity and agency.

Image Courtesy: ICLEI - Spring Discharge Measurement Training - Rohini_Feb 2026



Making Change Measurable

The project tracks progress through a combination of quantitative and qualitative indicators spanning both technical water systems and community-led planning processes.

At the resource level, key indicators include spring discharge, seasonal source variation, and the gap between water demand and supply, derived from discharge monitoring, household surveys, pilot performance, and community dialogues.

At the process level, the project tracks WaSP implementation, the number of trained barefoot hydrogeologists, and the continuity of community participation through Water Committees. Key indicators are:

- ▶ Number of barefoot hydrogeologists (BHG) who maintain monthly spring inventory and use this data to interpret spring discharge trends.
- ▶ Number of water committees that meet regularly, document discussions/ decisions, and lead community-level discussion of local water issues and follow-up actions for water security planning in project hamlets.
- ▶ Hamlet-level water committee meetings are regularly documented through basic records (date, participants, key issues discussed or key decisions taken).
- ▶ Number of WaSPs are used as a reference during planning discussions with the GP members on local water security priorities and feasible interventions.
- ▶ Number of selected WaSP-recommended interventions are considered within GPDP.
- ▶ Number of joint discussions held between water committees and PRI members on WaSP-identified interventions.
- ▶ Number of pilots that meet defined technical performance benchmarks (e.g. flow, storage, coverage) at commissioning.
- ▶ Number of pilots for which community members participated in construction activities.
- ▶ Number of pilots functional six months after commissioning
- ▶ Number of BHGs who carry out routine checks using the pilot monitoring tool.
- ▶ Incident reporting records maintained for each pilot, with the water committee.
- ▶ Percentage (%) target households report improvement in one or more improved water security dimensions after pilot completion.



The Road Ahead

This project has reinforced that systems change requires top-down enabling mechanisms and bottom-up community engagement to work in tandem. Institutional support holds significant value when a meaningful change is to be seen on the ground, along with the involvement of local people who demonstrate the potential for improvement. Community ecological awareness and resource management knowledge cannot be assumed, and structured training and capacity building are essential to strengthen the understanding of local hydrology and hydrogeology. Equally important is aligning project activities with local priorities and aspirations to sustain community interest.

This project has demonstrated that durable change requires trust, time, and the simultaneous strengthening of community ownership and institutional enabling environments. The months invested in listening, participatory mapping, and joint analysis were foundational to everything that followed. Without that relational groundwork, the conflicts and bureaucratic hurdles encountered along the way could easily have derailed implementation.

Communities that once operated at the margins of decision-making are now generating evidence, engaging institutions, and taking ownership of their water sources. This shift, from demonstration to embedded practice, is the most significant outcome of the project, even as more time and continued investment are needed to consolidate these capacities so they endure beyond any single intervention.

At a broader scale, this project positions the Darjeeling Himalayas as a potential model for other spring-dependent landscapes, and positions ICLEI SA as an organisation capable of stewarding such place-based, community-centred water security initiatives. The path forward lies in consolidating the tools, learnings, and partnerships developed here and enabling local governments and tea estate managements to adopt and scale these approaches independently.

Video Volunteers

Communities in West Bengal's tea gardens and beyond face chronic failures of governance that often result in unpaid wages, denied land rights, collapsing health centres, and schools without teachers. These issues go unreported, unaddressed, and unknown to the wider world. In 2010, when Video Volunteers started their IndiaUnheard program, they uncovered that only two percent of issues covered in the mainstream Indian press relate to rural India.

As a community media organization, Video Volunteers has centered this project in West Bengal and Jharkhand to ensure that the voices of the most marginalized communities are heard by their governments, the media, and the wider public. Their approach relies on training and supporting Community Content Creators (CCs), who are community locals, mostly women, from tribal, Dalit, and minority communities. The CCs document the problems in their own villages on video to bring visibility and then work relentlessly to get them resolved.

The work of Video Volunteers is founded on the observation that the people most affected by injustice are also the most capable of documenting it. They aim to provide the tools, training, and belief that the voice of the communities matters.



Image Courtesy: Community Content Creators (CCs)

Building Visibility, Voice, and Access

The core issue that Video Volunteers is addressing is the invisibility of Adivasi and Dalit tea garden workers, women, and those in remote areas with no prior access to media or redress. They are primarily working across West Bengal and Jharkhand, with a particular concentration in the North Bengal tea garden belt. This spans the districts of Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, Kalimpong, and Darjeeling, and in the Sundarbans region.

Since 2020, the CCs have reported from more than 80 tea gardens across these districts, as well as from Bankura, Bardhaman, Birbhum, Bishnupur, Cooch Behar, Dakshin Dinajpur, Hoogly, Howrah, Kolkata, Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia, Paschim Bardhaman, Purba Bardhaman, Paschim Medinipur, Purba Medinipur, Purulia and North and South 24 Parganas, Uttar Dinajpur.

Over the five years from 2020 [from Jan 2020 to Dec 2025], the CCs in West Bengal and Jharkhand have produced 2264 videos and achieved 694 documented impacts that directly benefited the marginalized communities.

The scope of communities served within this project includes many belonging to Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), as well as women, migrant workers, and communities in low-lying areas that are vulnerable to climate change. Women make up more than half of the CCs, reaching communities that had no prior media representation and limited access to formal grievance redress.



When Communities Tell Their Own Stories

In the tea gardens alone, 4,299 Kumai tea estate workers received unpaid wages after a CC filmed their 50-day struggle. In another case, two girls were rescued from trafficking as a direct result of awareness talks conducted by CCs. Beyond individual impacts, the project has led to workers accompanying CCs to block offices to speak to government officials. Young women who started their training without prior video-making skills are recognized as community journalists.

It has been recorded that community members, given a camera and the confidence to use it, analyze the root causes of the issues. The collected evidence is used to organize and meet with officials to systematically address local issues.

The project has documented:

- ▶ 5.45 million people impacted in a single year (2022–23)
- ▶ 3.3 million people impacted in 2024–25 (April 2024–June 2025)
- ▶ 478 community meetings held in a single year attended by 8158 people (2022–23)
- ▶ 1400+ people attended 35 trainings that were conducted on land rights, filing RTIs or career counseling for young people (2022-2023)
- ▶ 685 visits made to government offices in a single year (2022-2023)
- ▶ 185 videos were screened to 5145 people in a single year (2022-2023). In 37 cases that year communities themselves filed formal written applications to government departments with CC's support and encouragement.
- ▶ Land rights claims filed: 30-35 thousand applications were filed in the tea garden areas (2022–23). Within a year of this campaign, the Chief Minister had to announce that the workers will be allotted 5 decimal of land (each decimal is one-hundredth of an acre) and Rs.1.20 Lakhs in cash. The Chief Minister visited the area thrice in that year and in the following year the state claimed that more than 20,000 people were allotted land.
- ▶ 1,050+ people reached through 31 anti-trafficking TED-style video screening talks in WB including 22 tea gardens (2022–23), in order to organize anti-trafficking teams.

Image Courtesy: Community Content Creators (CCs)



Measuring Change, One Story at a Time

Video Volunteers track impact through a custom-built internal database. For every video produced, data is entered on the issue reported, the number of people affected, the action-seeking steps taken, and whether the issue was resolved. Resolution is documented through a follow-up impact video showing the changed situation on the ground.

Key indicators tracked:

- ▶ Number of issue videos produced
- ▶ Number of impact videos produced (documenting resolved cases)
- ▶ Resolution rate (resolved cases as % of resolvable cases)
- ▶ Lives affected by issues reported
- ▶ Lives impacted by resolutions achieved
- ▶ Community meetings held and attendance
- ▶ Government office visits made
- ▶ Applications filed by community members
- ▶ Officials met by community members

From Voice to Action

Video Volunteers' work is guided by a community media model that follows a 'Report, Mobilize, Solve' process. A CC identifies a problem in their community, produces an issue video documenting it, and then works alongside the affected community until the situation changes. This can involve filing applications, meeting officials, and organizing screenings. Once the desired outcome is achieved, they produce an impact video visualizing the before and after.

This model relies on several principles. First, lived experiences are the most reliable form of knowledge, and communities are not passive complainants but active problem-solvers. Second, the CC must be from the community they report on. Third, impact requires sustained follow-through, not just documentation.

In recent years, this model has evolved. Based on the findings from a research study conducted in partnership with the University of Virginia, they established that statistically, the Video Volunteers' videos increase officials' empathy and responsiveness. This has informed a shift toward a more collaborative approach with local government, rather than purely adversarial. CCs are now trained to build ongoing relationships with Block Development Officers and other local officials, framing their role as partners in development rather than watchdogs.

As the work has evolved, technology has increasingly been incorporated as part of the framework. The organization has introduced an AI-powered research bot to analyze video transcripts to surface community insights at scale, and a Community Voice Annotation Schema has been developed to ensure that community knowledge is coded and preserved in a way that ML tools can eventually help amplify.

Image Courtesy: Community Content Creators (CCs)



Insights from the Ground

With over five years of intensive work in West Bengal, the project has highlighted several insights about the wider sector:

- ▶ **Peer leadership is irreplaceable.** The most important factor in the success has been Harihar Nagbanshi, a field mentor who grew up in a tea estate. His close understanding and experience of the region was singular, as no external staff member could have comparably built his trust, network, or vision. However, it also becomes a risk when one person carries too much. It is necessary to have a rigorous pipeline to find genuinely motivated people who are pushed by the belief that change is possible.
- ▶ **The pipeline matters as much as the program.** CC attrition was a persistent challenge until Buland Bol, a free community media training program that now feeds a steady stream of trained, motivated people into the CC network. Since Jan 2022, more than 1600 people from West Bengal and Jharkhand have applied to this program. Of this, 400 are from the four tea garden districts of North Bengal.
- ▶ **Collaboration with officials works better than confrontation,** but only when CCs have enough standing and evidence behind them. The shift to a collaborative approach has improved impact rates, but it required years of relationship-building first.

- ▶ **Community media is not just about complaints.** Our analysis of 2225 videos found that 97% identified the root cause of an issue, 93% showed community members as empowered, and 96% captured community insight. The data conclusively refutes the assumption that citizen voice is merely grievance-driven.
- ▶ **Long-term planning is essential.** The issues covered by the CCs typically run for five years or more. Resolution rarely happens quickly. Therefore, funders and partners need to understand that the program cannot guarantee results within a twelve month timeline.
- ▶ **Build local leadership explicitly.** The program cannot depend on external staff, therefore it is essential that local mentors are identified and invested in to carry the vision even when organizational support fluctuates.

The biggest risk is dependence on a single person or a single funder. Any such similar program should prioritize diversification for both, deliberately and early.



The Road Ahead

In the civil space, the corporate nature of the mainstream media often leads to the structural absence of rural India from public discourse. Video Volunteers' work in building community-led CCs aims to bridge this representation gap as well as the information gap that necessarily arises in media dark areas of the country.

The tea gardens of North Bengal are at a turning point. For the first time in generations, land rights are being discussed at the highest levels of state government. A Private Bill drafted by the organization's campaign team, calling for improvements to the Plantation Labour Act and for codified rules on land rights and fair wages, has been submitted to the Vidhan Sabha. The Chief Minister has spoken publicly about the rights of tea garden workers. These are the results of years of sustained, community-led pressure.

Looking ahead, the organization plans to expand the CC network in the tea gardens, with ten new correspondents in 2026–27, covering blocks that have had no community media presence until now. Their work on gender justice continues, through Khel Badal, a new program training young women from Adivasi and Dalit communities to become digital storytellers. Alongside their partnership with researchers at the University of Virginia, they are building the evidence base to accelerate and scale this model.

In Conclusion | Understanding Where the Shift Occurs

Across the tea gardens of West Bengal, all 13 shared outcomes that partners are working towards record change. The strongest gains are visible in the ability of tea garden workers and their communities to act on local concerns, claim rights, and engage with institutions.

Child protection shows the most developed change. Work has moved beyond awareness-building and individual case responses towards organised mechanisms involving child protection committees, children's collectives, Gram Panchayats, and district-level coordination. Para-legal volunteers and other community-based support have also strengthened workers' ability to file grievances and RTIs and pursue claims related to provident fund, wages, and government schemes.

Change is also visible in livelihoods, climate resilience, water security, and women's rights. Households and communities are diversifying livelihoods through livestock, kitchen gardens, black pepper cultivation, and skill-based work. Communities are engaging with Panchayats on climate and water concerns, including through measures such as solar lights, water filters, and tanks. Women's awareness and confidence around workplace sexual harassment have grown, with more women speaking up and reporting concerns.

The evidence also highlights areas where change remains less developed. Unsafe migration continues to be addressed largely through child protection and case-level responses rather than through a dedicated safe-migration system, and the available evidence remains limited. On workplace sexual harassment and sexual and reproductive health, the gaps lie partly beyond community action: there is limited evidence of employers establishing their own prevention and response mechanisms, or of government translating engagement into increased health budget allocations.

Overall, the tea gardens show substantial progress in community-level action and access to rights and services, alongside a continuing need to strengthen institutional responses. The next phase will require building on these local gains while extending change into employer practices, government systems, and the wider structures that shape workers' lives and livelihoods.

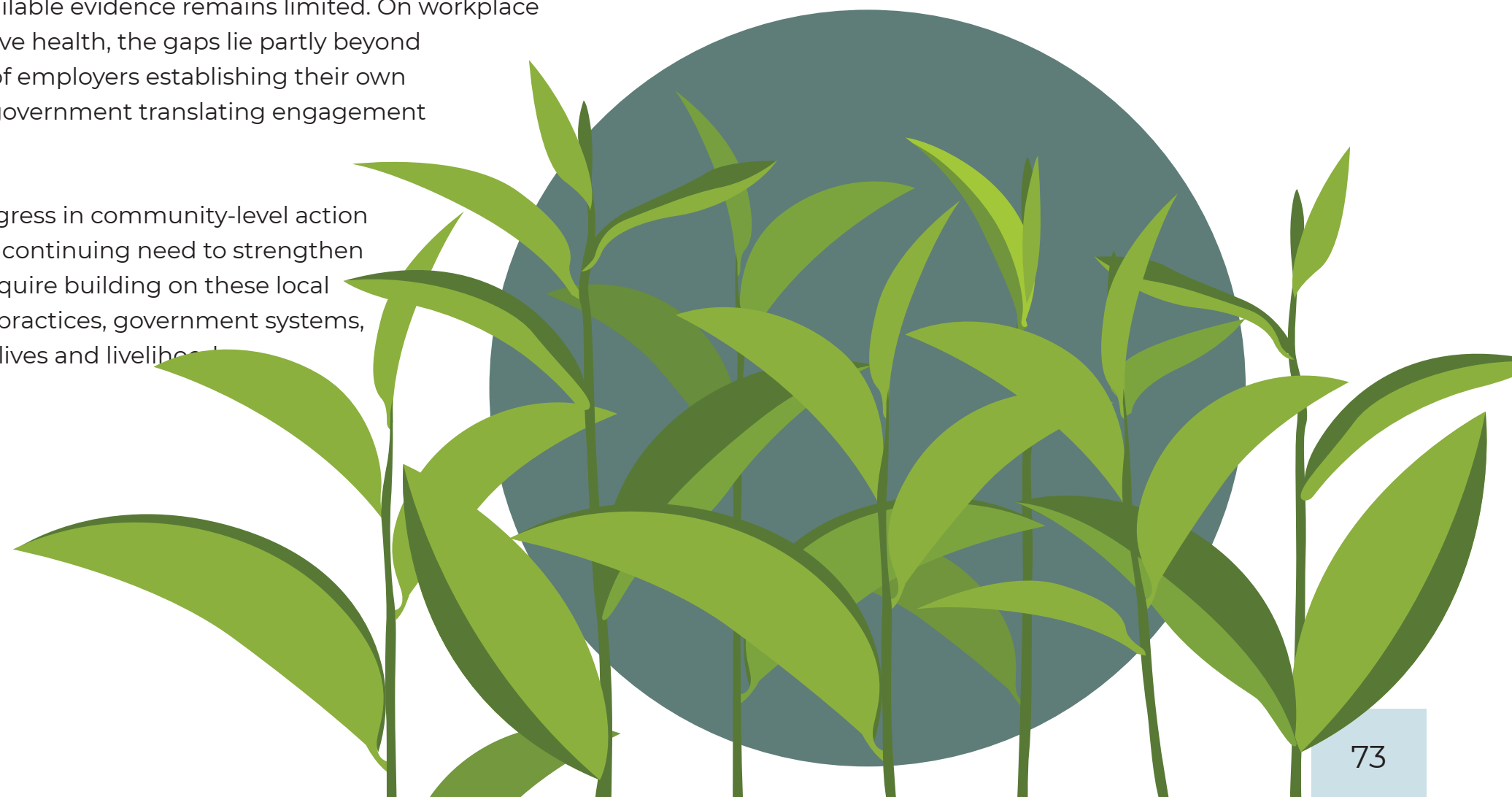


Image Courtesy: ICLEI - Community discussion - Dhajea 2026



Image Courtesy - Kolkata Sanved



Image Courtesy: Community Content Creators (CCs)

Image Courtesy: Community Content Creators (CCs)



Indigenous Communities



Across West Bengal, Indigenous communities live in diverse landscapes ranging from the forested hills of the northern districts and the foothills of the Himalayas to the lateritic plateaus and undulating terrain of the western districts. These regions are shaped by distinct climatic conditions from heavy monsoon rainfall and cooler temperatures in the north to hotter, drier conditions in the west and by forests, rivers and agricultural landscapes that have long been closely connected to community life. Many Indigenous communities depend on these natural resources for their livelihoods, culture and everyday well-being, drawing on generations of knowledge and practices shaped by their surroundings. Yet changing environmental conditions, limited access to resources and essential services, and persistent social exclusion can make it harder for communities to sustain their livelihoods and preserve their cultural identities. They also continue to face barriers to accessing entitlements and to being represented in spaces where decisions affecting their lives are made. Strengthening community agency therefore means creating greater opportunities for Indigenous communities to claim their rights, participate in decision-making, preserve their identity and culture, and shape development on their own terms, with dignity and inclusion at its core.

Environment Conservation Society (SwitchON Foundation)

Large sections of the population in West Bengal, particularly smallholder farmers, tea garden workers, and rural women, remain highly dependent on climate-sensitive livelihoods that are increasingly affected by erratic rainfall, rising temperatures, and resource degradation. Economically, limited access to affordable finance, clean energy, market linkages, and enterprise support constrains upward mobility. Youth unemployment and distress migration further weaken local economies. While multiple government schemes exist to promote agriculture, renewable energy, and entrepreneurship, awareness gaps, fragmented delivery systems, and limited last-mile facilitation reduce their effectiveness.

At a policy level, India's commitments to climate mitigation, renewable energy expansion, and women-led development create a strong enabling environment. However, translating these priorities into grassroots impact requires integrated, community-driven models.

Within this broader ecosystem, the Environment Conservation Society (SwitchON Foundation) acts as a catalytic intermediary, bridging policy intent and community adoption through research, capacity building, and decentralized climate-resilient solutions that strengthen livelihoods and local institutions. SwitchON Foundation operates primarily in West Bengal, with focused interventions across diverse agro-ecological and socio-economic contexts. Its programs currently span districts Nadia, Purulia, Bankura, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Jalpaiguri.

As part of the “Ensuring Energy Security in Tea Gardens” project, they are operating two core programs. Firstly, the Distributed Renewable Energy (DRE) enables decentralized solar and clean energy solutions for irrigation, processing, storage, and household use, improving productivity and reducing dependence on unreliable power supply. Meanwhile, for Udyamini, the women-centred part of the project, their program, Rural Women Entrepreneurship (RWE), focuses on enabling women-led enterprises across agriculture, food processing, bio-inputs, handloom, and clean energy services by providing skills training, infrastructure, working capital linkages, and access to markets.



Powering a More Resilient Tea Garden Ecosystem

As part of the “Ensuring Energy Security in Tea Gardens” project, SwitchON Foundation conducted primary research covering 550 households, 26 FGDs, and 21 KIIs, identifying a critical gap. Over 81% of respondents were unaware of Distributed Renewable Energy (DRE) solutions, and only 0.18% had adopted them.

Through its Climate Resilient Agriculture–Distributed Renewable Energy (CRA-DRE) framework, the project promotes decentralized solar-powered lighting, irrigation pumps, and clean energy systems that reduce diesel dependence, lower fuel costs, improve irrigation reliability, and enhance household lighting, thereby strengthening productivity and resilience.

Keeping women at the forefront of the clean energy transition, SwitchON supports women-led green enterprises, builds capacity in solar system management and value addition, and facilitates access to finance and revolving funds. By strengthening women's leadership and income control, Udyamini helps ensure that clean energy adoption translates into equitable economic participation.

Together, the project integrates infrastructure, skilling, enterprise development, and gender inclusion. It positions renewable energy not merely as a technical intervention, but as a community-driven development engine that advances economic stability, environmental sustainability, and social equity within the tea garden ecosystem.

Measuring What Matters

For this project, SwitchON has measured the impact through a structured Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) framework that integrates quantitative metrics, qualitative insights, and participatory assessment tools. This multi-layered approach ensures that impact is measured not only in numbers but also in resilience, empowerment, and long-term systemic change.

- ▶ **Baseline–Endline Comparisons:** A detailed baseline survey capturing socio-economic status, income levels, energy access, productivity, and enterprise readiness. Through periodic endline and midline assessments, they track measurable change over time.
- ▶ **Output and Outcome Indicators:** Monitoring indicators such as increase in household income, crop yield improvements, reduction in input costs (e.g., diesel substitution with solar), number of women-led enterprises established, DRE systems installed, youth skilled and employed, and scheme linkages facilitated. Climate indicators such as reduction in carbon emissions and water-use efficiency are also tracked where relevant.
- ▶ **Enterprise and Market Metrics:** Assessing business plan development, credit access, revenue growth, profit margins, market linkages, and enterprise survival rates for entrepreneurship programs.
- ▶ **Institutional and Behavioral Change:** Evaluation of women's leadership roles, collective action strength, technology adoption rates, and decision-making autonomy through FGDs and participatory rural appraisal tools.
- ▶ **Learning and Adaptive Feedback:** Regular review meetings, digital dashboards, and stakeholder consultations ensure continuous learning and course correction.



Connecting Energy, Water, Agriculture and Livelihoods

SwitchON Foundation is guided by integrated, systems-based frameworks that align climate resilience, clean energy access, and livelihood development. Central to this approach is the Energy–Water–Agriculture–Livelihoods (EEWA) framework, which recognizes the interdependence among natural resources, decentralized renewable energy, agricultural productivity, and rural enterprise growth.

Program design: Programs are developed through participatory diagnostics, engaging farmers, women's groups, youth, and FPOs to assess local risks, institutional gaps, and market opportunities. This co-creation process strengthens contextual relevance and community ownership.

Program operations: At the operational level, SwitchON applies a seed-to-shelf model that integrates sustainable production, local processing, storage, enterprise incubation, and market linkages to structurally anchor income gains.

Program implementation: The foundation follows an adaptive management process supported by MIS-based monitoring, periodic reviews, and stakeholder consultations. Quantitative metrics on adoption, income, and access are complemented by qualitative insights from case studies and enterprise journeys, enabling continuous learning and course correction.

The evidence from pilots informs convergence with government schemes, financial institutions, and ecosystem partners. Through a build–replicate–scale pathway, the program ensures scalable, institutionally embedded, and locally owned development outcomes.

Learning Along the Way

Key learnings from the implementation journey of SwitchON Foundation reaffirm that sustainable impact is driven by systems alignment, not isolated interventions.

- ▶ Institutional anchoring determines longevity and projects that invested in strengthening FPOs, women's collectives, and youth-led enterprises delivered more resilient outcomes than stand-alone technical deployments. Community ownership significantly increased adoption, accountability, and continuity beyond project cycles.
- ▶ Market integration is non-negotiable, as field evidence shows that productivity improvements translated into income growth only when supported by aggregation, processing, buyer linkages, and access to finance. Technology adoption accelerated when farmers had clear income visibility rather than subsidy-driven incentives.
- ▶ A practice-led demonstration outperforms theory-led training. Local proof points, peer learning, and cluster-based pilots built confidence and accelerated uptake of climate-resilient agriculture and decentralized renewable energy solutions.
- ▶ Adaptive management, such as flexible timelines, phased rollouts, and real-time feedback mechanisms, allowed programs to respond to climatic variability, migration trends, and market shifts.
- ▶ Finally, youth and women as enterprise leaders emerged as strong multipliers in strengthening service ecosystems, improving maintenance reliability, and driving inclusive growth.

These learnings underscore that catalytic capital must prioritize ecosystem building, institutional capacity, and market convergence to unlock long-term, scalable impact.



The Road Ahead

Scaling is most effective when models are locally owned, financially viable, and aligned with policy, turning pilots into embedded ecosystem solutions rather than short-term projects.

SwitchON Foundation sees the next phase of impact focused on deepening ecosystem convergence and accelerating climate-resilient livelihood transitions. The emphasis will shift from isolated cluster successes to district- and state-level integration—embedding clean energy, regenerative agriculture, and rural enterprise development within mainstream development planning.

A key priority is scaling youth- and women-led enterprise platforms that manage decentralized renewable energy systems, bio-input production, processing units, and service-delivery models. Strengthening these local economic actors will help ensure technology adoption is sustained through viable business ecosystems rather than project dependency.

The organization also aims to leverage digital monitoring systems and data-driven decision-making to enhance transparency, improve outcome tracking, and attract blended finance. Partnerships with government departments, financial institutions, and private-sector actors will be critical to unlocking scale capital and strengthening policy convergence.

Ultimately, the path forward lies in institutionalizing community-owned models that reduce climate risk, increase rural incomes, and generate dignified employment. By aligning innovation with ecology, markets, and social inclusion, SwitchON seeks to contribute to a just, locally led transition toward resilient rural economies.

In Conclusion | Understanding Where the Shift Occurs

Across West Bengal, all seven shared outcomes specific to indigenous communities record change, alongside progress across cross-cutting areas such as health, education, and gender norms. The strongest gains are visible in agroecology, cultural knowledge, women's participation, and community engagement with rights and entitlements.

Agro-ecological practices have reached considerable scale, with farmers adopting indigenous seeds, organic farming, kitchen gardens, bio-inputs, water conservation, and climate-resilient agriculture. Some of these practices have continued across multiple reporting phases, suggesting that they are becoming embedded in community practice. At the same time, indigenous knowledge and cultural traditions are being renewed through folk practices, indigenous crops, mangrove knowledge, and traditional farming methods that strengthen community identity and support natural resource management.

Change is also evident in women's confidence and engagement with institutions. Women report greater exposure and a stronger voice in household decisions, while increasingly approaching institutions to access entitlements. Communities have also prepared and submitted individual and community forest rights claims under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), demonstrating growing engagement with formal rights processes.

Yet, the evidence points to an important gap between claim-making and institutional recognition. There is very limited evidence of FRA claims being approved or titles being issued. Local governance institutions feature in the evidence, but the Forest Department and other administrative bodies responsible for processing and recognising forest rights are far less visible. The shared outcomes on FRA agency coordination, district-level implementation, and access to reliable FRA information each record only one change. A similar pattern emerges around gender: while women's participation and confidence have grown, evidence of their influence within village councils remains limited.

The progress therefore remains strongest at the community and household levels, while deeper institutional change and long-term sustainability are still emerging. None of the interventions in this focus area has yet reached a stage where it can continue independently of external support. The next phase will need to build on established community practices while strengthening institutional pathways, particularly around forest rights, local governance, and women's participation in decision-making.



Migrant and Unorganised Workers



Migrant and unorganised workers across West Bengal live and work across a diverse landscape that stretches from the densely populated urban centres and industrial corridors to the riverine plains, coastal areas and rural districts of the state. The state's rivers, fertile agricultural lands, extensive coastline and network of towns and cities support a wide range of livelihoods, including agriculture, construction, domestic work, small-scale trade, fishing, transport and other forms of informal employment. Many workers move seasonally or permanently between rural and urban areas in search of employment, while fishworker communities and others whose livelihoods depend on natural resources are closely shaped by the rhythms of rivers, wetlands and the coast. These communities are often particularly exposed to floods, cyclones, extreme heat and other climate-related disruptions that can affect work and income. Alongside these environmental pressures, workers may face unsafe working conditions, insecure employment, limited social protection and difficulties accessing welfare and justice systems. Strengthening their resilience therefore involves more than securing livelihoods—it also means building worker collectives, improving access to rights and entitlements, enabling safer migration, and creating pathways for communities to have a stronger voice in the systems and decisions that affect their lives.



Global Fund for Children

Across the climate-vulnerable landscapes of the Sundarbans delta and the tea garden regions of North Bengal, migrant communities navigate a complex intersection of environmental fragility, economic insecurity, migration pressures, and social inequality. Cyclones, flooding, soil erosion, declining agricultural stability, irregular wages, and unsafe migration patterns affect not only livelihoods, but also the safety, education, wellbeing, and future opportunities of children and young people.

Yet within these same regions, communities continue to demonstrate strong local knowledge, mutual support systems, and a deep commitment to protecting and nurturing younger generations. The Global Fund for Children (GFC) has built its work around recognizing and strengthening these existing community capacities.

Founded in 1997, GFC partners with grassroots and community-based organizations that are closest to the realities children and youth face. Rather than imposing externally designed solutions, the organization focuses on flexible funding, long-term partnerships, peer learning, and strengthening local leadership.

Through the Addressing Root Causes (ARC) initiative in South Asia, GFC has supported community-led processes that move beyond responding to immediate symptoms of vulnerability. Instead, the initiative works with local organizations and communities to understand and address the underlying social, economic, environmental, and structural conditions affecting children and young people.



Strengthening Community Leadership Through ARC

The ARC initiative works with 21 community-based organizations across Bangladesh, India, and Nepal. In India, GFC supports a cohort of five partner organizations working across the Sundarbans delta and North Bengal tea garden regions. These partners collectively renamed themselves “Mangrove Hills,” reflecting a shared identity rooted in their local geographies and experiences.

The initiative operates in remote islands, tea plantation communities, and rural settlements where families depend on agriculture, fishing, tea garden labour, and seasonal migration. Communities served include marginalized Muslim, Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Santal, and Nepali-speaking populations who face recurrent flooding, erosion, school dropouts, trafficking risks, limited services, and livelihood insecurity.

What makes the ARC initiative distinctive is its emphasis on community-led visioning and action. Communities are encouraged to identify the issues that matter most to them, imagine the futures they want, and collectively design pathways toward those aspirations.

This process creates space for people to recognize their own strengths, relationships, and local assets. GFC and its partners facilitate this journey through participatory methods rooted in Constellation’s SALT methodology and the Community Life Competence Process (CLCP).

The process operates simultaneously at three interconnected levels:

- ▶ Across the cohort of partner organizations;
- ▶ Within each organization’s internal culture and practices;
- ▶ At the community level.

This layered approach recognizes that sustainable social change requires shifts within communities as well as within institutions that support them.

Image Courtesy - Global Fund for Children

Communities Defining Their Own Priorities

One of the strongest learnings from ARC has been the power of community ownership. When communities were given the space to define priorities themselves, participation deepened significantly. Across project locations, communities began taking collective action around issues they considered most urgent and meaningful:

- ▶ Environmental protection
- ▶ Livelihood strengthening
- ▶ School retention
- ▶ Mental health and wellbeing
- ▶ Reduced mobile phone dependency
- ▶ Inclusion of persons with disabilities
- ▶ Gender relations and social equity

Several community-led shifts emerged organically through these processes. Women negotiated greater mobility and began using smartphones independently. Some women entered paid work for the first time. Others enrolled in higher education or participated more actively in local decision-making spaces. In certain communities, widows increasingly participated in social and religious events, wore jewelry openly, and explored remarriage without the same degree of stigma they previously experienced.

These shifts were not driven through externally imposed campaigns. They emerged gradually through dialogue, collective reflection, peer support, and growing community confidence.

The initiative also fostered stronger relationships among participating organizations. NGOs that previously worked independently began exchanging learnings, supporting one another, and building collaborative problem-solving approaches across geographies.



Learning Through Participation and Reflection

A defining feature of GFC's work is its commitment to participatory learning. The organization recognizes that communities are experts in their own realities and that meaningful learning must emerge from lived experience rather than external assessment alone.

Within the Mangrove Hills cohort, community facilitators themselves designed and implemented baseline research processes. For many field staff, this was their first experience conducting research and analysing data directly.

This shift from externally driven evaluation toward community-owned inquiry strengthened local confidence and skills in research, documentation, and reflective practice. Facilitators reported becoming more patient listeners, more appreciative of community perspectives, and more collaborative in their interactions both within organizations and with families.

The ARC initiative also demonstrated that social challenges are deeply interconnected. Conversations around livelihoods often naturally expanded into discussions around migration, gender relations, safety, education, mental health, and environmental stress. This reinforced the need for flexible, adaptive approaches rather than narrowly siloed programmes.

Image Courtesy - Global Fund for Children



Measuring Impact Through Ecosystem Change

GFC approaches impact measurement differently from many traditional development models. Because the organization's role is to strengthen community-based organizations rather than directly implement programmes itself, its measurement systems focus on relationships, organizational resilience, participation, and ecosystem strengthening.

At the organizational level, GFC tracks indicators such as:

- ▶ Partner satisfaction
- ▶ Funding flexibility
- ▶ Strength of trust-based relationships
- ▶ Value of peer-learning networks
- ▶ Organizational adaptability and resilience
- ▶ Community-centered programming practices
- ▶ Advocacy and network engagement

These indicators are measured through quantitative and qualitative partner feedback, reflection processes, and portfolio-level analysis.

At the community level, outcomes are monitored through partner reporting and participatory assessment systems. Key indicators include:

- ▶ Youth participation in decision-making
- ▶ Demonstrated youth leadership
- ▶ Community-led initiatives and actions
- ▶ Access to safety and opportunities for children and youth
- ▶ Participation of marginalized groups
- ▶ Collective action around local priorities

For the ARC initiative specifically, GFC uses an “outcome harvesting” approach rather than predefined indicators. Because communities identify their own priorities and pathways, outcomes are documented as they emerge rather than measured against externally fixed targets.

This allows the initiative to capture subtle but important social changes that may otherwise remain invisible within conventional monitoring systems. The organization also tracks learning and change through regular reflection sessions, partner exchanges, and adaptive learning practices across the regional ARC network.

Building Systems Rooted in Trust

One of GFC's central learnings has been that long-term social change requires corresponding shifts within organizations themselves. When staff members experienced greater participation, shared decision-making, and strengths-based facilitation internally, they became better equipped to support genuine community leadership externally.

The initiative also reinforced the value of moving away from deficit-based narratives. In contexts where communities often feel defined by crisis, vulnerability, or scarcity, strengths-based approaches helped reignite confidence, aspiration, and collective motivation.

GFC's model recognizes that communities already possess knowledge, relationships, survival strategies, and leadership capacities. The role of external support is not to direct change, but to resource and accompany locally led processes.

This philosophy is particularly important in regions facing repeated environmental and economic shocks. Communities that have already organized themselves collectively are often better prepared to respond to floods, migration pressures, social tensions, and livelihood disruptions.



The Road Ahead

As climate vulnerability, migration pressures, and social uncertainty continue to shape life across South Asia, GFC sees increasing importance in place-based, community-led change processes.

The organization plans to continue strengthening youth leadership, community ownership, peer learning ecosystems, and local organizational resilience across the region. Future efforts will deepen work around climate resilience, youth participation, safety, wellbeing, and locally rooted systems change.

At the center of GFC's vision is a continued commitment to shifting power toward communities themselves. Rather than pursuing rapid expansion or externally defined outcomes, the organization emphasizes long-term trust, adaptive learning, and locally driven transformation.

Its work demonstrates that sustainable change is strongest when communities are supported to imagine their own futures, build on their own strengths, and move forward at a pace shaped by their own realities and aspirations.

Society for Direct Initiative for Social and Health Action (DISHA)

Fish cannot live without water and fishworkers cannot live without fish. Small-scale fisheries have evolved in harmony with the natural rhythms of aquatic ecosystems, seeking to avoid ecological disturbance. Over time, this has generated rich traditional knowledge—shaping fishing crafts, gears, techniques, and operations. With passive equipment and a limited scale of operation, small-scale fisheries generally have a much smaller ecological footprint. Socially, their patterns of small ownership and shared partnerships also tend to promote more equitable distribution of benefits than large-scale fisheries.

However, fisheries policy in India has gradually shifted since independence from resource-based, livelihood-oriented small-scale fisheries toward investment-driven large-scale highly mechanized operations. The boom in fish production thus achieved has been associated with severe disruptions and disturbances in the natural and social ecosystems.

Inland aquatic systems face serious threats from pollution, encroachment, siltation, and disrupted water flows, while the marine sector is further affected by eco-destructive industrial fishing operations of ports and maritime navigation, tourism, sea floor mining and so on. These pressures undermine ecosystems, livelihoods, and the social security of fishing communities.

In the course of the last 30 years, the Society for Direct Initiative for Social and Health Action (DISHA) has actively worked on different issues pertaining to the protection and promotion of the environment, natural resources, natural resource-based livelihoods, and human rights. In the last few years, its work among the communities has branched out to include child and adolescent empowerment.

In this project, DISHA primarily focuses on inland water areas, with limited engagement in the marine sector, particularly concerning women's participation. The initiative works closely with fishworkers, including traditional fishers, fish cultivators, fish vendors, and workers engaged in different sectors of fisheries value chains. Special emphasis is placed on the collectivization and leadership development of women fish workers to strengthen their social, economic, and institutional participation, while promoting their rights, visibility, and access to livelihood opportunities and social protection schemes. DISHA works to improve the socio-economic conditions of small-scale fishers by promoting sustainable fisheries based on healthy aquatic ecosystems.

DISHA operates in various riverine and inland districts of West Bengal, namely, Murshidabad, Nadia, Paschim Medinipur, Jalpaiguri, Dakshin Dinajpur, Jhargram, Alipurduar, and parts of Cooch Behar. These districts cover various aquatic ecosystems, including both peninsular and Himalayan river systems such as the Subarnarekha, Kangsabati, Keleghai, Ganga-Padma, Mahananda, Teesta, Torsha, Jaldhaka, Raidak, among others, as well as reservoirs, canals, wetlands, tanks, and ponds.



From Fishing Livelihoods to Resilient Communities

Technologically, the future of small-scale fisheries depends on non-intensive and non-destructive practices that allow ecosystems the space and time to regenerate. Economically, therefore, they are unsuited to large investments seeking high returns. Low investment and modest returns that are linked to sustainable production and equitable income distribution have long been their defining features.



Image Courtesy - (DISHA)

Its approach emphasizes developing and strengthening replicable models of sustainable small-scale fisheries management, alongside advocating for supportive policy changes. Recognizing existing vulnerabilities, DISHA also supports supplementary livelihood options that do not jeopardize traditional fishing practices.

The project targets small-scale and traditional fishworker communities engaged in fishing, fish farming, fish retailing, and ancillary activities such as fish grading and net making and repairing. Women fishworkers have received more attention as they constitute about 50% of the fishworkers and are more marginalized than the men.

The organization prioritizes awareness building and capacity development, while sharing project learnings with fishworker collectives within and beyond the project area. Central to the strategy is the belief that small-scale fishers must lead the change themselves. Ongoing dialogue, exchanges, visits, and consultations at the state and national levels further strengthen collective action and sustainable fisheries governance.

Building Power Through Collectives

DISHA's work is guided by a framework that focuses on supporting fishing communities in building resilient fisher collectives as the key to change. The project is based on a collectivization model that identifies organized fishworkers as the key to unlocking rights, entitlements, and sustainable fisheries governance.

The strategy integrates awareness building, leadership development, and institutional engagement. Collective petitions, deputations, public campaigns, and dialogue meetings with government departments help build bargaining power and administrative responsiveness. Equal attention is given to women's participation to ensure their representation in leadership and decision-making forums.

The method that is seen as ideal is to begin organizing from the village level, create village-level units, and gradually move upwards to form district-level units. However, this rarely happens. Work usually begins with a group of fishworkers in a district, who then begin organizing themselves based on their localities.

Ongoing mentoring, inter-district learning and awareness building, and community reflection meetings at different levels ensure that collectives are always active and adaptive and owned by the community. This approach promotes community sustainability actions by empowering fishworkers to independently negotiate and defend their livelihoods and organizations.

Image Courtesy - (DISHA)



When Collective Strength Becomes Change

Impact is measured primarily through qualitative changes in collective strength, empowerment, and institutional responsiveness. However, numerical indicators also play a role in providing the process of evaluation with more measurable yardsticks.

The evaluation focuses on how small-scale fishers shift from being fragmented individuals to organized collectives capable of asserting rights and engaging with governance systems. Increased awareness of sustainable fishing practices, the Right to Water, and entitlement schemes is assessed through community meetings, reviews, and discussions. Behavioral changes, including reduced destructive fishing practices and greater participation in conservation efforts, indicate ecological impact. In addition, fisher and fishworker enrollment in government databases, number of members accessing government schemes, various benefits received by the community—these are spheres providing measurable outputs.

Institutional responsiveness, such as engagement with petitions, inspections, and grievance redressal, reflects improvements in the state-community interface. Women's participation in meetings, leadership roles, and collective actions signals shifts in gender norms. Case stories and observations help capture changes in confidence, negotiation skills, solidarity, and community bargaining power over resource governance and livelihoods.



Advancing Change Through Community Partnerships

DISHA's work in the region has yielded many points to learn from. One of the most important ones is the fact that community initiative is essential to building the capacity and self-empowerment of communities. Developing a common agenda across community collectives on shared issues maximizes impact, and sustained, coordinated engagement makes policy-level change achievable.

Inter-community partnerships, especially with citizens' groups, farmers' groups, and other communities, further strengthen this effort. Women's participation has proven particularly transformative; when women are actively involved in meetings and entitlement processes, collectivization becomes more stable and accountable, and women's leadership helps consolidate both livelihood and social justice dimensions of the movement.

Moreover, ecological advocacy is most effective when tied directly to livelihood concerns, such as campaigns against destructive fishing and pollution, which have gained greater community support and administrative response when framed around people's livelihoods. Throughout, continuous engagement with government fisheries departments and related agencies remains vital to sensitizing them to community needs and ground realities.



The Road Ahead

The geographical scope of the present project is largely confined to inland water areas, with a limited engagement in the marine sector in relation to women's involvement. Inland aquatic ecosystems face severe threats from multipoint pollution, encroachment, siltation, and disconnection from natural sources and outlets. These pressures place fishing communities at serious risk of ecological degradation, livelihood loss, and social marginalization. In some areas, traditional fisherfolk have been forced to shift almost entirely to other occupations, very often to that of migrant labourers. The reality is grim.

Despite these challenges, DISHA seeks to focus its efforts on developing and strengthening replicable models of sustainable small-scale fisheries management, alongside advocating for necessary policy transformations. Simultaneously, they recognize the urgency of supporting supplementary livelihood options, without abandoning traditional occupations.

Meaningful change must be led by small-scale fishworker communities themselves, although support and guidance from NGOs and citizens groups are also very important. Sharing project learnings with fishworker collectives within and beyond the project area remains central to this approach. DISHA continues to engage in dialogue, exchanges, visits, and consultations at the state and national levels to strengthen sustainable fisheries and fishworker collectives.

Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee

Across West Bengal, many families navigate everyday uncertainty shaped by informal work, fluctuating incomes, migration, climate-related vulnerabilities, and limited access to public services. While government schemes for food security, nutrition, maternity support, livelihoods, and social protection are available, accessing them often requires navigating complex procedures, documentation gaps, digital systems, and repeated follow-ups. For communities already balancing daily economic pressures, these barriers can make essential services feel distant and difficult to reach.

Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) has built its work around addressing this gap through a community-led approach grounded in dignity, participation, and practical support. Established in Kolkata in 1995, DMSC has evolved into a collective of more than 40,000 members and their families. Over the years, the organisation has expanded its work across West Bengal through initiatives focused on health, education, financial inclusion, social protection, livelihood security, and community leadership.

DMSC strongly believes that communities themselves have the resources to understand their realities and shape solutions. The organisation, thus, invests in local leadership, community facilitation, and collective participation. Through trained volunteers, Gram Sathis, local women leaders, researchers, and partner organisations, DMSC has created systems that help communities better understand and access services while also building confidence and agency at the local level.

Saturday, April 27, 2024
KOLKATA

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GROUND ZERO

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Workers at the Nagaisuree Tea Garden in Jalpaiguri, West Bengal. SHIV SAHAY SINGH

Building Practical Bridges Between Communities and Services

Under this project, DMSC works across diverse geographies in West Bengal, including North Bengal, South Bengal, tea garden areas, the Sundarbans, forest fringe regions, border areas, and urban settlements. The organisation works with communities facing multiple forms of vulnerability, including informal workers, tea garden workers, migrants, tribal communities, single women, elderly persons, and households experiencing food and livelihood insecurity.

The organisation's work adapts to local realities. In tea garden regions, the focus includes wages, nutrition, and social protection access. In the Sundarbans and rural districts, the work centres around food security, livelihood support, and access to public services. In urban settlements, support often focuses on documentation, awareness-building, and scheme facilitation.

DMSC's role is not to replace public systems, but to help communities engage with them more effectively. Volunteers and facilitators support families in understanding schemes, preparing documents, completing applications, and following up with relevant offices. Community meetings, awareness sessions, and field visits create spaces where people can ask questions, clarify doubts, and learn from one another.

This facilitation has helped many households move from uncertainty to informed participation. Families that once struggled with missing documents, procedural confusion, or lack of confidence are now more aware of available services and better equipped to take action for themselves.

Leadership That Grows From Within Communities

One of the defining strengths of DMSC's work is its investment in local leadership. Gram Sathis, women leaders, and young volunteers have emerged as trusted community anchors who support neighbours, organise meetings, document local issues, and guide people through administrative processes.

The organisation has learned that trust plays a central role in access. Community members are often more comfortable approaching someone from their own locality who understands local language, relationships, and practical challenges. By building leadership from within communities, DMSC has created a support system that remains grounded, accessible, and sustainable.

This leadership model has also strengthened participation among women and young people. Volunteers who initially joined as participants have gradually taken on facilitation and coordination roles, becoming active contributors within their villages and neighbourhoods.

The organisation's work demonstrates that community leadership grows through consistent engagement, responsibility, and the confidence that comes from helping others navigate everyday systems successfully.

Learning Through Documentation and Reflection

DMSC places strong emphasis on documentation and field-based learning. The organisation has found that small administrative issues such as spelling errors, missing papers, digital mistakes, or incomplete records, can significantly delay access to services. To address this, volunteers maintain field notes, case summaries, and local reports that help identify recurring challenges and improve follow-up systems.

The organisation also undertakes thematic studies and fact-finding exercises on issues such as tea garden livelihoods, maternity benefits, childcare services, food systems, and social protection gaps. These studies help strengthen programme planning while also creating grounded evidence from the field.

Weekly discussions and quarterly reflection meetings are central to DMSC's implementation process. These reviews help teams understand what is working, identify emerging needs, and adapt approaches according to local realities.

The organisation's model combines community participation, facilitation, documentation, and learning into an integrated process that remains responsive to changing contexts across districts and communities.

Measuring Impact Through Participation and Community Learning

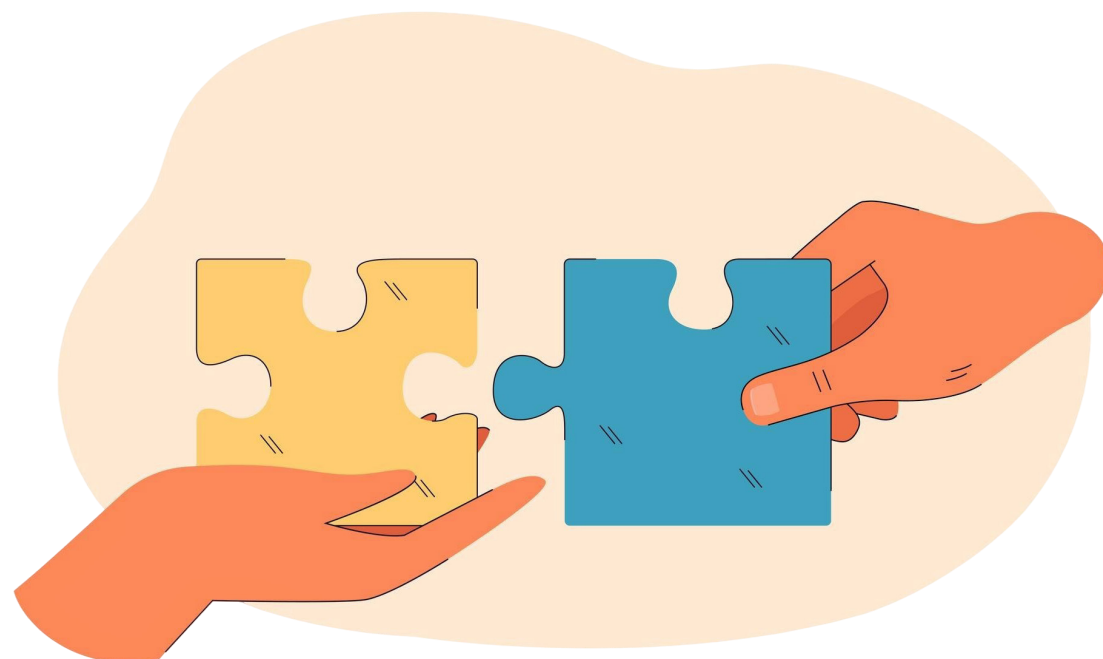
DMSC measures impact not only through outreach numbers, but also through changes in participation, confidence, and local coordination.

The organisation tracks several key indicators, including:

- ▶ Number of community meetings and awareness sessions conducted;
- ▶ Number of people reached through field activities;
- ▶ Number of volunteers, Gram Sathis, and community leaders trained;
- ▶ Number of households supported with documentation and follow-up;
- ▶ Number of field visits, reports, and case summaries prepared;
- ▶ Number of districts and blocks covered;
- ▶ Number of partner organisations and community groups engaged;
- ▶ Number of research studies and thematic reports completed.

Alongside quantitative indicators, DMSC also documents qualitative changes such as increased confidence among community members, stronger participation of women and youth, improved understanding of schemes, and better coordination between local groups and institutions.

Photographs, field updates, case documentation, and reflective discussions are used to continuously assess learning and improve implementation quality.



Partnerships and Collective Learning

Another important feature of DMSC's approach is collaboration. The organisation works with community groups, researchers, students, local organisations, and academic institutions to strengthen both implementation and learning.

These partnerships have helped deepen field research, improve documentation quality, and bring multiple perspectives into programme design. The organisation has learned that collaborative ecosystems are especially valuable in complex social contexts where no single institution can address every challenge independently.

At the same time, DMSC emphasizes keeping systems simple and accessible. Local language materials, practical guidance, step-by-step facilitation, and human interaction remain central to the organisation's work. While digital tools support documentation and information sharing, the organisation recognizes that technology is most effective when combined with trusted local facilitation.



The Road Ahead

DMSC's future vision focuses on strengthening local leadership, expanding community-based learning systems, and improving access to information and services across West Bengal.

The organisation plans to continue supporting communities in areas related to food security, nutrition, maternity support, childcare services, livelihoods, and social protection. A key focus area will be building a stronger network of trained volunteers and young community leaders who can continue facilitating support within their own regions.

DMSC also aims to strengthen its digital documentation systems to make training materials, circulars, and field learnings more accessible in simple formats.

At its core, DMSC's work demonstrates that meaningful change often begins with practical support delivered respectfully and consistently. By building local confidence, strengthening participation, and investing in community leadership, the organisation is helping create systems where people feel better informed, more connected, and more capable of shaping their own wellbeing.

Jan Sahas

Migration has long been a pathway to opportunity for millions of Indian workers. Yet for many migrant and informal workers, mobility also brings new challenges of navigating unfamiliar systems, accessing social protection, and coping with economic shocks far from home. While government welfare programmes and labour protections exist, migrant workers often struggle to access them because of limited awareness, and the realities of informal employment.

Through the Migrants Resilience Collaborative (MRC), one of its flagship initiatives, Jan Sahas is helping bridge this gap. The organization's work is rooted in the transformative idea that resilience is not built solely through emergency support. It is built when workers can reliably access the protections, services, and opportunities that already exist around them.

Established in 2000, Jan Sahas emerged from a commitment to challenge exclusion and expand dignity for marginalized communities. Beginning as a small group of five volunteers, the organization grew through its work addressing caste-based discrimination, manual scavenging, trafficking, forced labour, sexual violence, and other forms of exclusions. One of its early milestones was supporting the liberation of more than 72,000 women from manual scavenging, helping demonstrate how community mobilization and rights-based action can create large-scale social transformation.

Today, through MRC, Jan Sahas applies the same commitment to migrant workers and vulnerable households, focusing on strengthening resilience at both the individual and systems level.

Seeing Migration Through the Lens of Resilience

The Migrants Resilience Collaborative (MRC) operates at the intersection of migration, labour, and social protection. Rather than viewing migrant workers only through the lens of vulnerability, MRC recognizes them as active contributors to local economies, communities, and development.

MRC addresses the barriers the migrants face by strengthening both sides of the equation. This means that MRC helps workers navigate systems while simultaneously improving how those systems function.

At the household level, the initiative supports migrant and unorganized sector workers to access food security schemes, social protection benefits, worker protections, grievance redressal mechanisms, and other entitlements. At the institutional level, it collaborates with government departments, industry actors, and local stakeholders to improve responsiveness, coordination, and service delivery.

This dual approach allows immediate needs to be addressed while also contributing to longer-term systems strengthening.

Reaching Workers Where They Are

MRC currently operates across 13 states and 89 districts, including 68 districts in source areas and 21 districts in destination locations. In West Bengal, the programme spans multiple districts including Kolkata, North and South 24 Parganas, Nadia, Purba Bardhaman, Birbhum, and Murshidabad.

A field team of approximately 75 staff members works directly with communities through a door-to-door engagement model. This approach recognizes that trust is often the most important prerequisite for service uptake.

Community outreach includes:

- ▶ Household visits
- ▶ Social security awareness campaigns
- ▶ Application support camps
- ▶ Safe migration awareness sessions
- ▶ Worker entitlements education
- ▶ Referral and grievance support
- ▶ Linkages with government departments and local institutions

The programme works closely with a range of stakeholders including the Labour Department, District Legal Services Authorities (DLSAs), Panchayati Raj Institutions, Block Development Offices, and community-level actors.



A Last-Mile Delivery Model Built Around Access

One of the defining strengths of MRC is its emphasis on last-mile service delivery.

The programme combines community outreach, frontline facilitation, helplines, District Migration Resource Centres (DMRCs), and mobile outreach services to create multiple pathways through which workers can access support.

A key enabler of this approach is Resilience Connect, a technology platform that helps identify scheme eligibility, support applications, track progress, and improve service delivery efficiency. The platform complements frontline efforts by making information and processes easier to navigate. The result is a model that combines technology with trusted community engagement.

This balance has proven particularly valuable for migrant workers who often face documentation challenges, limited awareness of scheme processes, and difficulties navigating administrative systems.

Measuring Change Beyond the Numbers

MRC's approach to impact measurement combines quantitative indicators with qualitative learning.

The organization tracks whether workers are successfully accessing social protection and improving their resilience over time. Monitoring spans government engagement, industry partnerships, worker protection initiatives, and social security interventions.

Key quantitative indicators include:

- ▶ Number of social security applications facilitated
- ▶ Number of unique workers linked to government schemes
- ▶ Number of households receiving benefits under at least one scheme
- ▶ Number of social security benefits delivered
- ▶ Number of Pre-Departure Training (PDT) sessions conducted
- ▶ Value of unpaid wages recovered for workers
- ▶ Participation levels in awareness and outreach activities

However, MRC intentionally goes beyond numerical reporting.



The programme also captures stories of change, worker experiences, shifts in awareness, improved decision-making, and enhanced confidence among communities. This allows the organization to understand how their lives and resilience capacities changed as a result.

Learning Through Outcomes Rather Than Activities

To better understand long-term change, MRC uses approaches such as Most Significant Change (MSC) and Outcome Harvesting.

The Most Significant Change methodology collects stories from workers, communities, government stakeholders, and industry partners about meaningful changes they have experienced. These stories are reviewed and analysed collectively to identify the outcomes considered most valuable by those closest to the intervention. Outcome Harvesting focuses on documenting observable changes and understanding how MRC contributed to them.

Within administrative systems, this includes tracking outcomes emerging from initiatives such as:

- ▶ Shram Suraksha Sanglap platforms
- ▶ Social security camps
- ▶ Joint awareness programmes
- ▶ Coordination with departments such as DLSA, Child Welfare Committees, and Labour Departments

Examples of outcomes include:

- ▶ Improved responsiveness among officials
- ▶ Better coordination across departments
- ▶ Easier access to entitlements for workers
- ▶ Strengthened institutional collaboration

Within industry partnerships, MRC documents improvements in workplace practices, stronger support for worker entitlements and new employer-led initiatives responding to worker needs.

Findings are compiled into outcome journals, analysed across stages of change, and enriched with case narratives and field reflections. This process helps identify emerging patterns and continuously strengthen programme design.

Experiences from the Learning Grounds

One of the most important lessons from implementation has been the power of combining community engagement with institutional convergence.

Regular awareness campaigns, application support camps, and safe migration sessions have significantly increased community knowledge of entitlements. At the same time, partnerships with government departments and local institutions have improved access pathways and service responsiveness.

Another important learning has been the gradual growth of trust. As communities experienced successful outcomes and reliable support, willingness to engage increased substantially. Workers who were initially hesitant to approach institutions became more confident in seeking assistance and asserting their value.

The programme has also observed growing sensitivity among government stakeholders toward the challenges faced by migrant and informal workers. This has created opportunities for stronger collaboration and more responsive service delivery.

At the same time, implementation has highlighted ongoing challenges such as documentation gaps and delays in benefit delivery. These experiences have reinforced the importance of sustained engagement, adaptive approaches, and continuous system strengthening.



The Road Ahead

As climate change, economic uncertainty, and labour market volatility increasingly affect informal workers, resilience is becoming more important than ever.

MRC envisions enabling 10 million informal workers and vulnerable households to become resilient to economic, social, and climate shocks by 2030.

The organization's future strategy focuses on three interconnected priorities:

- ▶ Strengthening access to social protection through improved last-mile delivery and portability of benefits for migrant workers
- ▶ Expanding climate risk insurance, including affordable parametric products that provide timely support during extreme weather events
- ▶ Advancing community-led climate adaptation, including cooling solutions, emergency preparedness systems, and climate-linked finance

At its core, Jan Sahas's work through the Migrants Resilience Collaborative demonstrates that resilience is built when people can access the systems meant to support them. By combining community trust, technological innovation, institutional partnerships, and evidence-driven learning, the organization is helping migrant workers move from uncertainty toward greater security, agency, and opportunity.

SEWA Bharat

Across West Bengal, thousands of women sustain households and local economies through informal work. They roll beedis, weave textiles, segregate waste, work as domestic workers, cultivate agricultural land, and engage in a range of home-based occupations. Their work contributes significantly to local markets and livelihoods, yet they often operate within fragmented labour systems that provide limited recognition, protection, or bargaining power.

SEWA Bharat works with these women workers through a model rooted in collective organization, leadership development, and access to entitlements. As a federation of membership-based organizations of women workers, its approach is based on a simple principle that when women are informed, organized, and connected to institutions, they are better positioned to negotiate fairer conditions, access social protection, strengthen livelihoods, and participate in decisions that affect their lives.

Under the Swashaktikaran project, SEWA Bharat works with approximately 40,000 women workers across West Bengal. The initiative focuses not only on improving access to services and opportunities, but also on strengthening the confidence, leadership, and collective agency that enable women to shape their own futures and contribute to community development.



Strengthening a Sense of Security

SEWA Bharat's work combines grassroots organizing with practical support systems that strengthen economic security and social protection. The programme engages women working in diverse trades, including beedi rolling, weaving, domestic work, waste segregation, agriculture, and forest-based livelihoods.

The organization's approach begins with collective organization. Women come together through local groups and trade-based networks where they discuss shared concerns, identify priorities, and develop collective responses. These platforms create opportunities for women to build awareness of their rights, access information, and engage with institutions that influence their livelihoods.

The programme also focuses on improving access to welfare schemes and social security. Through community-based support structures and field-level facilitation, women are connected to government programmes, registration systems, and entitlements that can strengthen income security and reduce vulnerability to economic shocks.

Alongside social protection, SEWA Bharat supports livelihood enhancement through market linkages, skill development, and access to new opportunities. In the weaving sector, for example, women are connected to alternative marketing channels that improve market access and support income diversification.

A distinguishing feature of the programme is its emphasis on long-term engagement. Rather than delivering isolated services, SEWA Bharat works to strengthen the capacities of women workers to engage with employers, contractors, government systems, and markets independently over time.



Bringing Change Through Community Leadership

Community leadership is central to SEWA Bharat's model. The organization invests heavily in the development of grassroots women leaders known as Aagewans. These leaders emerge from within the communities they serve and play a key role in mobilizing workers, facilitating access to information, and supporting collective action.

Aagewans act as connectors between communities and institutions. They help women navigate welfare systems, support enrollment in schemes, facilitate awareness sessions, and encourage participation in local decision-making forums. Since they are rooted in the same social and economic contexts as other workers, they bring local credibility and trust to the process.

The programme recognizes leadership as a capacity that can be developed through participation and experience. As women become more engaged in collective processes, many take on greater responsibilities within their groups and communities. This creates a cycle in which local leadership strengthens community organization, and stronger organization creates further opportunities for leadership.

The emphasis on community leadership has also enabled women workers to engage more actively with local governance spaces such as Gram Sabhas and to participate in discussions that affect their livelihoods and wellbeing.

A Firm Focus on Collective Action

One of the strongest examples of change emerging from the programme comes from SEWA Bharat's work with beedi workers in West Bengal.

Through collective organization and sustained engagement, women workers strengthened their ability to negotiate with contractors and advocate for fairer compensation. Rather than addressing wage concerns individually, workers engaged through organized groups that enabled them to present collective demands and negotiate from a stronger position.

As a result, beedi workers in several areas of West Bengal secured wage increases ranging from 21-35%. Beyond the financial benefits, the process strengthened workers' confidence and demonstrated the value of collective

action. Women who had previously engaged with labour systems as isolated workers became part of organized groups capable of negotiating, advocating, and engaging with institutions more effectively.

This experience reflects a broader theme within the programme: when women workers organize collectively, they can influence outcomes that may be difficult to achieve individually.

Measuring Change, Building Resilience

SEWA Bharat measures progress through a set of outcome-oriented indicators that capture changes in social protection, income security, occupational wellbeing, and collective strength.

The organization tracks:

- ▶ Number of members accessing central and state welfare schemes
- ▶ Enrolments facilitated through community support systems
- ▶ Changes in wages across different trades
- ▶ Participation in collective negotiations
- ▶ Engagements with employers and contractors
- ▶ Registrations and service access for migrant workers
- ▶ Participation in occupational health and safety initiatives
- ▶ Access to referrals and treatment services
- ▶ Livelihood diversification and alternative income opportunities
- ▶ Income changes among women workers
- ▶ Formation and growth of women-led collectives
- ▶ Production, sales, and market linkages

Programme monitoring combines physical registers, digital tracking systems, field-level documentation, and monthly reporting processes. Baseline assessments and ongoing field engagement help identify emerging needs and guide adaptation.

The programme has documented several significant outcomes:

- ▶ Approximately 40,000 women workers engaged across intervention areas in West Bengal
- ▶ Wage increases of 21–35% among organized beedi workers in several locations
- ▶ More than 2,000 domestic workers registered on the e-Shram portal, improving access to social protection systems
- ▶ Market linkages facilitated for more than 100 women weavers, supporting improved price realization and income diversification
- ▶ An overall 55% increase in average incomes between 2020 and 2024 among participating women workers

These indicators are complemented by qualitative evidence that captures changes in confidence, awareness, leadership, and community participation.

Lessons Learnt Along the Way

The first lesson the organization realised is the value of collective organization. Women who participated through organized groups demonstrated stronger negotiating capacity, greater awareness of entitlements, and increased confidence in addressing workplace and livelihood challenges.

A second learning is the importance of investing in local leadership. Aagewans have proven highly effective in supporting mobilization, information dissemination, and service access because of their strong community relationships and continued engagement.

The programme also found that access to welfare schemes can generate immediate improvements in income security and resilience. While livelihood enhancement remains important, social protection often provides early gains that help households stabilize and navigate uncertainty.

Another insight is that different occupational groups require tailored approaches. The needs of beedi workers, domestic workers, weavers, and other informal workers vary considerably, making locally responsive strategies more effective than standardized interventions.

Finally, the experience reinforced the importance of combining grassroots organizing with broader institutional engagement. Sustainable change requires both community-level action and continued efforts to strengthen systems that affect workers' lives.



The Road Ahead

SEWA Bharat aims to deepen and expand its work with women in the informal economy by strengthening grassroots institutions and improving access to secure livelihoods.

Future priorities include strengthening local support structures, continuing leadership development among Aagewans, expanding skill development opportunities aligned with market demand, and deepening market linkages for women workers. The organization also intends to continue supporting access to social protection, occupational health services, and labour-related entitlements.

At a broader level, SEWA Bharat sees its work as part of an ongoing effort to strengthen recognition and support for women working in the informal economy. Through continued collective organization, community leadership, and engagement with public systems, the organization seeks to contribute to stronger livelihood security, improved working conditions, and greater resilience among women workers and their communities.

In Conclusion | Understanding Where the Shift Occurs

Across West Bengal, partners working with migrant and unorganised workers are addressing 14 shared outcomes, with change recorded against 13. The strongest progress is in collective action and access to social protection, with workers and communities taking an increasingly active role in securing entitlements, addressing livelihood concerns, and engaging institutions.

Social protection represents the largest and most advanced body of change. Programmes have supported migrant households to register for schemes, apply for benefits, and access multiple entitlements. Fisher collectives have similarly organised around the protection of fishing resources, exploitation, river restoration, and pollution. Their efforts have contributed to reported improvements in river conditions and incomes, greater access to fisher entitlements, and reductions in harassment and illegal tolls. Community institutions are also creating avenues for workers to participate in local governance.

The evidence, however, reveals a significant gap in institutional responsibility for worker protection. The one shared outcome with no recorded change concerns government bodies providing safety nets on their own accord. Across the focus area, gains in social protection are largely mediated by partners or community collectives rather than delivered independently through state systems. Outcomes that depend on government and employers—strengthening policies and practices for dignified and equitable work, and supporting workers' access to documentation and schemes—show only a small number of recorded changes compared with the much larger body of change around community-led claiming.

This pattern points to a clear next step: moving from enabling workers to claim their rights towards strengthening the systems that are responsible for delivering them. The limited advocacy with the government, identified as a gap at the outset, remains visible in the evidence. Sustained engagement with government and employers will therefore be critical to converting community-level gains into more consistent and institutionalised protections for migrant and unorganised workers.



Scaling Community-Led Change

Deepening Impact Across Geographies and Communities

The experience of the SPF India Programme offers a useful lens for understanding how community-centred, multi-party approaches can be carried into new geographies and contexts. Across the Sundarbans, tea garden communities, indigenous communities, and migrant and unorganised worker communities, partners have worked with people whose lives are shaped by multiple, interconnected forms of vulnerability. The experience suggests that taking such work forward is not simply about replicating activities or expanding reach. It is about carrying forward the principles that make community-led change possible, while allowing the approach to evolve with each context.

Seen in this light, the experience offers several reflections on what makes this kind of work relevant across contexts. It highlights the importance of understanding communities and their contexts in their full complexity, of recognising relationships between different forms of vulnerability, of building on existing community institutions, and of creating connections between the different actors who shape people's lives.



Beginning with the Context, Not the Intervention

There is no single pathway to change. The realities of a tea garden worker, a migrant family, an indigenous community, or a household living with repeated climate shocks may overlap, but each also has its own histories, institutions, relationships and aspirations.

The programme experience points to the value of understanding these realities through multiple forms of knowledge: community conversations, local organisations, frontline workers, existing data, local institutions and the experiences of people who have lived in the context for years. Such an approach can surface not only vulnerabilities, but also capabilities, existing leadership, local knowledge and community-led responses.

What emerges from this is not a fixed model, but a way of approaching new contexts with enough flexibility for the priorities, relationships and solutions to develop locally.

The Value of Community Spaces

Across the programme, community-led change has been shaped by institutions and collective spaces such as women's groups, worker collectives, adolescent platforms, community-based organisations and local leadership.

These spaces can play an important role in sustaining change beyond individual projects, providing opportunities for people to articulate priorities, exchange knowledge, respond collectively to emerging issues and engage with institutions outside the community. The experiences also highlight the importance of making space for voices that may otherwise remain less visible, including women, young people, informal workers and other groups facing multiple forms of exclusion.

Deepening impact therefore involves looking beyond participation alone, towards the ways in which communities build confidence, collective agency and greater influence over decisions that affect their lives.



Making Learning and Evidence Work Harder

Not all meaningful change is immediately visible through numbers. Increased access to services or incomes may be easier to measure, while greater confidence, collective action, stronger relationships with institutions, local leadership or the ability to respond to future challenges can be less visible.

The experiences in this compendium demonstrate the value of qualitative approaches alongside quantitative measures. Community conversations, case studies, outcome harvesting and participant reflections can help capture how change happens, whose contributions make it possible, and whether it is sustained.

Looking across these different forms of evidence also creates opportunities to ask questions that extend beyond whether an activity was completed or a target was reached: what changed, for whom, how did it happen, and what appears to be sustaining that change?

Sustaining the Journey

The experience across the programme points to the time and patience required for community-led change. Strengthening local institutions, building collective agency and influencing wider systems rarely follow the timelines of individual projects. Different forms of change can emerge at different points, and some may remain emergent for longer than others.

This makes flexibility, continued learning and sustained relationships important to the process. It also means recognising that the conditions for change may look different across communities and that approaches may need to evolve as circumstances change.

Ultimately, scaling community-led change is less about reproducing a model and more about creating the conditions in which locally rooted change can take hold. The experience of the SPF India Programme offers a set of principles rather than a blueprint: starting with local knowledge, recognising intersecting realities, strengthening community agency, working across systems, and creating space for learning and adaptation. Each new geography and community can then shape what these principles look like in practice.

FROM INDIVIDUAL EFFORTS TO COLLECTIVE CHANGE

The experiences captured in this compendium point to a clear lesson: meaningful and lasting change rarely comes from the work of one organisation acting alone. It emerges when communities, civil society organisations, public institutions, funders, researchers, and other ecosystem actors are able to contribute their distinct strengths towards a shared purpose.

Across the geographies and communities represented here, partners have worked on different issues and through different approaches. Yet, several common threads are visible. Community voices are becoming stronger. People are organising around their rights and priorities. Access to entitlements and public services is improving. Women, young people and community institutions are taking on greater leadership. At the same time, the challenges remain interconnected and cannot be addressed through isolated interventions.

This is where multi-partner collaboration becomes particularly important.

The sector needs to move beyond partnerships that are limited to funding arrangements, project implementation or periodic coordination. What is required is a deeper form of collaboration, built around shared learning, complementary capabilities and collective accountability for outcomes.

Such collaboration begins with a common understanding of the problem, while allowing each partner to bring its own knowledge, relationships and ways of working. A grassroots organisation may bring trust and proximity to communities. A resource organisation may contribute technical expertise or evidence. A public institution may help institutionalise change. A market actor may create pathways for livelihoods and enterprise. A funder may provide the patient and flexible capital needed to sustain the process. None of these contributions is sufficient on its own, but together they can create the conditions for deeper and more durable impact.

The sector also needs to invest more deliberately in the infrastructure of collaboration. This includes spaces for partners to reflect honestly, share failures, adapt strategies and build relationships beyond individual projects. It requires shared outcome frameworks that recognise both measurable improvements

and less visible shifts in agency, confidence, collective action and institutional responsiveness. It also calls for funding models that support learning, organisational strengthening and long-term accompaniment, rather than only short-term deliverables.

Importantly, collaboration must remain accountable to communities. Communities should not be seen only as participants or beneficiaries, but as knowledge holders, decision-makers and co-creators of solutions. Their priorities and interpretations of change must shape how programmes are designed, assessed and adapted.

As this work expands into new geographies and communities, the objective should not be to replicate models mechanically. It should be to carry forward the principles that have enabled change here: trust, local ownership, flexibility, collective action and sustained engagement. Each new context will require listening, adaptation and the building of new relationships.

The next phase of development work will demand greater cooperation across boundaries, including organisational, sectoral and institutional boundaries. The opportunity before us is to build partnerships that do more than deliver projects. We must build collaborations that strengthen local systems, enable communities to exercise greater agency and make change more likely to endure.

This compendium is both a record of what has been achieved and an invitation to continue learning together. The work ahead is significant. It will require patience, humility and a willingness to share responsibility. But it is through such collective effort that isolated successes can become wider and more sustained change.

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