

Farmer Associations – Experiences in Poverty Alleviation from Eastern India

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Introduction

To organise, to form a union, to become an alliance, is a fundamental of human social behaviour. Farming is one of the earliest examples of sustained collective livelihood. Therefore the desire for farmers to form associations constitutes an important historical tradition. No single socio-economic category holds monopolies on associating - the benefits are real and realized by rich and poor people, though rarely together. This short missive - composed jointly by the DDG (Fisheries) ICAR, the Director General of NACA and the STREAM Initiative Director relates some early exciting experiences of associations of farmers that are emerging from amongst tribal communities in the north-eastern plateau, which constitute some of the most disadvantaged in India, and the work that these organisations and other partners have conducted with *farmer associations* towards poverty alleviation through support for aquaculture.

Associations of poor people – who are they?

Three hundred and twenty million Indian people (especially in rural areas) from a population of 1.027 billion live below the Government of India's official poverty line. The Eastern Plateau region of India is characterised by poverty and inequality, land alienation and seasonal migration. Scheduled castes and tribes who farm there are amongst the poorest communities in India, with many lacking the means to produce sufficient food throughout the year. Their livelihoods are characterised by small holdings (about 0.4 ha) of poor upland, where they grow finger millet and about 400 kg of paddy (sufficient for 2.5 months consumption by 5-6 family members). (Wild) fish are a popular but rare source of vital high-grade protein, polyunsaturated fats, calcium and iodine. Without food security, their livelihoods depend on local labouring for better-endowed farmers, for a daily wage of 30 (women) to 50 (men) Indian Rupees (64-106 US cents/day). Agricultural daily labouring is most commonly available to women and highly seasonal, resulting in high (socially divisive) seasonal migration rates of 40-50%. Men or families will tend to migrate after planting work is over in June, returning for possible harvest work in September-October; there is no *Rabi* cropping (November-April) in most of the dry Eastern Plateau. Seasonal (urban) labouring opportunities in this tribal area known as Chhota Nagpur are commonly mediated through a *Sardar* who will recruit and sell the labour of 30-40 people. Piecework, perhaps at a brick-works, enables those labouring long days to earn 70 Rupees (149 US cents/day). However, power relations are skewed against migrant labourers who report exploitation and underpayment.

Under these circumstances, building social capital through association represents a means to attain food security, a process to defeat the social scourge of migration and an entry point for development and empowerment. There are few other opportunities – these are among the poorest people.

How can farmer associations be promoted and supported?

A powerful coalition recognising the potential benefits of *farmer associations* has promoted and supported the association of tribal (fish) farmers in eastern India over more than a decade. This effort has included tribal men and women from the states of Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal, the UK Department for International Development, the Krishco Bharati Co-operative, the NGO Gramin Vikas Trust (GVT), the Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR), the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) of the University of Swansea, the Institute of Aquaculture (University of Stirling) and the STREAM Initiative (Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific).

The early promotional steps in support of *farmer associations* for poverty alleviation include the establishment of a supported network of dedicated community-based professionals or Community Organisers (COs), and their extensive use of participatory approaches to develop trust and understanding of the strengths, resource use priorities and constraints of (poor) farmers and fishers. The next steps involve nurturing of social cohesion, association, building capacity for inclusion, decision-making, skills development and sharing, the development of savings and the promotion of the evolution of local micro-credit services.

Farmer associations for poverty alleviation not only require promotional support to become established-to function they need a supportive institutional environment.

Perhaps most interestingly, and a consequence of association, through *farmer associations* in Eastern India, and with facilitation, farmers are now beginning to demand the institutional support they need and even to recommend policies and approaches necessary to bring it about, including:

- Capacity-building in participatory livelihoods approaches and awareness-raising of poverty-focussed aquaculture options amongst service providers, e.g., fisheries officers.
- Institutions encouraging, though not controlling the formation of self-selected aquaculture *farmer associations* based on common interests among (poor) farmers and fishers.
- Providing support to establish group savings and micro-credit schemes among *farmer associations*, and
- Supporting *farmer associations* through the development of innovative extension and communications approaches, including the use of mass media and links with other service providers in the wider arena of Asia-Pacific.

What are some benefits of aquaculture *farmer associations*?

The following table characterises the livelihood benefits of farmer associations in the context of poverty alleviation.

| Benefits | | Indicators |
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| Vulnerability reduced | Migration reduced; local labour opportunities created High opportunity cost for aquaculture labour | Migration rates substantially reduced (40-50% down to 15-20%), less exploitation of migrant labour |
| | Food security improved; increased ability to secure entitlement to high-grade protein, polyunsaturated fats, calcium and iodine | Increased local availability of fresh fish (at subsidised rates for <i>farmer association</i> members) |
| Capital assets built | <i>Farmer association</i> formation (building social capital, as an entry-point for development) | Self-selecting, self-sustaining groups |
| | Building <i>farmer association</i> funds, and supporting development of these as sources of micro-credit (building financial capital availability) | Lower interest credit available (2-5% per month instead of 10% per month from money-lenders) |
| | Developing new livelihood skills (appropriate training, building human capital) | <i>Jankars</i> (local specialists) develop skills and experience through specialist training which they share amongst association members |

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| | Improved resource use (natural capital assets developed) | Seasonal water bodies utilised for aquaculture stages |
| | Mini-dam development (building physical capital) | New water bodies provide aquaculture opportunities |
| Policies improved | <i>Farmer associations</i> as recipients of services are beginning to play a role in defining services they need | Diverse choice in the aquaculture system they employ, control over the supply of inputs, timing of harvest, nature of credit and repayment schedules |
| Livelihoods improved | Appropriate livelihood opportunities identified; opportunities to use them provided | Sustained uptake of new opportunities; increased use of under-utilised resources; opportunities maintained and developed without continued external support |

More than 4,500 farm families, who were unable to produce sufficient food throughout the year (the majority of whom belong to scheduled castes and tribes in Jharkhand, West Bengal and Orissa), have benefited from extensive use of participatory approaches, and the formation of 193 aquaculture *farmer associations*, 25% of which are women's associations. Aquaculture proved to be one of the most successful interventions of a development effort which gave rise to a much larger number of farmer associations (which formed around other interests including soil and water conservation, small-scale livestock and forestry, as well as special issues like participatory crop varietal selection). The use of seasonal water bodies for aquaculture was a new and successful undertaking researched by *farmer associations* in partnership with DFID's Natural Resources Systems Programme (NRSP) and ICAR. The opportunity for incorporating farmer's voices and learning into policy change processes is currently being researched and promoted by the STREAM Initiative, GVT, ICAR and national and state line agencies with NRSP support.

Five hundred million people in India live on less than US\$ 1/day, representing one third of the world's poor people. India's experiences with poverty alleviation will seriously affect the success of international development targets (such as halving absolute poverty by 2015) and promoting and supporting (fish) *farmer associations* will be a key component.

For more information about the work described here visit the STREAM website at www.streaminitiative.org or contact the NACA secretariat in Bangkok.