Swadhina worked with poor, marginalised Indigenous Dalit women to reclaim fallow land in drought-prone areas for organic farming. The women became fully fledged farmers, eligible for government grants, and income-generating members of their families, while non-productive land became multi-crop farmlands. The land reclamation has also increased green cover, fodder for livestock, mulch for farming and firewood.

**ILC COMMITMENTS**

- Strong Small-Scale Farming Systems
- Equal Land Rights for Women
- Locally-Managed Ecosystems
COMPETENCIES

AREAS
- SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS
- CLIMATE JUSTICE
- GENDER JUSTICE

SKILLS
- PROJECT DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT
- RESEARCH AND TRAINING
- KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

BACKGROUND

The Singbhum district is a drought-prone and hilly forest in Jharkhand State, India. The inhabitants are primarily Indigenous and lower-caste peasant communities. They are among the poorest Indians, and the women, especially, have no secure means of livelihood as men dominate the meagre farmlands. The communities’ challenges include accessing cultivable land and not landlessness. The communities’ challenges include accessing cultivable land and not landlessness.

The lands are divided into four topographical categories: namely:

- **Tad**
  - Tad land is the uppermost layer of hilly-stony-dry slopes with almost zero water-retention capacity.

- **Baid**
  - Baid land occupies the second level of the soil. It is sandy, leached, acidic, and cultivable only during the rainy season.

- **Kanali**
  - Kanali lands are moderately low-level lands with deep and moderately fertile loamy soils. They are ideal for planting crops requiring less irrigation water. Kanali lands have better water retention and can be cultivated even during relatively dry periods.

- **Bahal**
  - Bahal lands are the lowest, riverine fertile tracts laden with alluvium from higher slopes. However, these lands are the first to be inundated during the rainy season but can be utilised during drought.

THE CHALLENGE

Poor, marginalised, Indigenous women with insecure livelihoods often shoulder a significant share of the agricultural work, yet they are not recognised as farmers. Consequently, they cannot access government schemes for farmers. As such, the challenges faced by the local Indigenous women included:

- Lack of access to fertile arable land and finances, which men often control.
- Lack of recognition as farmers.
- Lack of access and knowledge of government support programmes that provide seeds, saplings, and other farming essentials.

Additionally, there are uncultivable, fallow lands without any vegetation. The Dalit women can play a significant role in maintaining the area’s ecology by organic and environmentally friendly farming on the fallow ‘Tad’ land.

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGE

First, Swadhina met with the families repeatedly to encourage women’s access and control of the land. Swadhina then introduced land reclamation techniques using organic methods, which enabled poor, marginalised Indigenous women to cultivate over 90 acres of ‘Tad’ land. They also motivated the women to recognise themselves as fully fledged farmers and access government farming schemes.

The organic farming methods used by the Dalit women succeeded in improving the green cover of the area and produce like fruit, additional fodder for livestock, firewood, and mulch for farming. The women were empowered to plant new crops in the region, thus further enhancing the fertility of the soil. Finally, Swadhina trained the women to manage their finances better, improve their economic conditions and inspire more families in the area to reclaim fallow land.

OVERALL RESULT AND POSITIVE CHANGE IN PEOPLE-CENTRED LAND GOVERNANCE

Visible changes have been observed both at the community and family levels. Women began reclaiming fallow land to increase the cultivable area in the community. Resultantly:

- One hundred and thirty-seven families participated in the initiative, with more families joining.
- One hundred acres of fallow land were converted to arable land.
- Fifty-six composting pits were dug on communal lands.
- At least 45 families planted seeds and saplings received from the government.
- Farmers are now generating more revenue from new crops that are more profitable than traditional rice and wheat.
- Women farmers generate income from their farm produce and invest in education and livestock.
TRAINING OF FIELD STAFF
First, Swadhina held a thematic workshop for trainers, field volunteers and supervisors of the project. A renowned environment and rural development expert facilitated the training session, explained the project’s benefits, and answered the attendees’ questions. This training session was crucial in motivating key personnel to proceed with the project. Personnel were also briefed on the project’s various aspects and provided relevant documents and booklets in local languages. The three main booklets were
- Study Booklet 1: Organic Farming: A Brief Orientation,
- Study Booklet 2: Organic Pesticide, and
- Study Booklet 3: Organic Fertilisers

SELECTING PROJECT BENEFICIARIES AND SITES
The project staff and community members chose one hundred and thirty-seven beneficiaries among the volunteers from the Indigenous Dalit communities. Swadhina carefully earmarked the lands the Dalit women were to reclaim and cultivate. The trainers and supervisors worked with the women in small groups to promote cooperative work. Swadhina held meetings with local families to convince women to take up farming and assure them of technical and financial support during the project. As a result, Indigenous women are confident to participate in the project, knowing they have support from the community and project staff.

FARMING WORKSHOPS AND TECHNICAL TRAINING
The field volunteers held multiple training workshops and demonstrations on organic farming for the identified farmers. These included:
- Orientation on organic fertilisers and pest control: the project staff taught the community about the environmental impact of chemical-based fertilisers and the benefits of organic fertilisers and pesticides.
- Making organic fertiliser: using cattle dung, urine, molasses, and other natural ingredients in a container.
- Making organic pesticides: using two locally available ingredients, i.e. Neem Leaves and the skin of custard apples.
- Making organic compost pits: the women dug pits of 4’ x 3’ x 3’ dimensions and layered them with cow dung, soft soil, dried leaves, branches, straws, plant residues and other available organic matter. The manure was ready for use within a few weeks.
- Organic farming orientation: led by graduating students of micro-biology from Calcutta University.

PREPARING TAD LAND FOR FARMING UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF PROJECT VOLUNTEERS AND STAFF
In preparing the land for reclamation, the stony, hard topsoil of the ‘tad’ region was removed from the earmarked farms. The project engaged the services of earthmovers on a cost-sharing basis as the women’s nominal investment into the land. The women added manure from the compost pits to the soil to make it fertile and ready for the seedlings. Finally, farming began under the leadership and continuous monitoring of field volunteers and supervisors until the first harvest. Simultaneously, the women continued to make manure and fertilisers under the supervision of field volunteers. The field volunteers also coordinated the ethical procurement of natural ingredients and ensured the women used no harmful chemicals or artificial substances.

SUSTAINABILITY AND REPLICABILITY OF THE PROJECT
One of the key outcomes of the project was the sustainability and replicability of the project. The project’s success inspired more women to demarcate individual pieces of land dedicated to their organic farming projects. Women who received training and orientation on organic composting supported the new set of around 100 women to transform their pieces of land into organically fertile lands.

During the pandemic, when food access was difficult owing to lockdown restrictions and job losses by male family members, the women supported their families with food grown on their reclaimed land. Additionally, the women managed to sell surplus produce to support their family finances during the pandemic period. As a result, more women are joining the project.
Though women contribute majorly to agricultural work, they are seldom recognised as farmers and are thus denied benefits from farming, such as financial aid and extension services. Both men and women need to identify themselves as farmers and not just ‘helping hands’ or assistants to benefit from government grants.

Where women are concerned, it is paramount to teach them proper farming methods and financial literacy as the men previously controlled all the family income. When the income is in the hands of the women, they put it to better use, such as investing in children’s education and livestock.

Before implementing any change in a society, it is important to make plans for managing that change. Swadhina attributes a large part of the project’s success to the extensive awareness and education programmes undertaken before reclaiming the land.

Secondly, it is vital to ensure financial incentives for project beneficiaries identifying the project’s economic benefits, such as using locally-sourced materials that are freely available instead of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, is essential.

Thirdly and most importantly, Swadhina chose women farmers as project beneficiaries to empower them in a culture that prioritises men’s land rights, with women only playing supportive roles.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Though women contribute majorly to agricultural work, they are seldom recognised as farmers and are thus denied benefits from farming, such as financial aid and extension services. Both men and women need to identify themselves as farmers and not just ‘helping hands’ or assistants to benefit from government grants.

- Where women are concerned, it is paramount to teach them proper farming methods and financial literacy as the men previously controlled all the family income.

- When the income is in the hands of the women, they put it to better use, such as investing in children’s education and livestock.

MORE INFO

https://swadhina.org.in/