JEEViKA’s success in empowering the women of rural Bihar:
RESULTS FROM A RETROSPECTIVE SURVEY

This note is based on the paper *Socio-Economic Impacts of JEEViKA: A Large-Scale Self-Help Group Project in Bihar, India*, authored by U. Dutta.1

CONTEXT

Bihar has historically been one of India’s most impoverished states. The poverty headcount for Bihar was 53.5% in 2009-10, almost double that of the national index of 29.8%. In 2007-08, Bihar ranked 21st amongst 23 Indian states on the Human Development Index (HDI), with a value of 0.367, significantly below the national value of 0.467. GDP growth for Bihar in the same period, however, was 9.65%, as compared to the national rate of 8%. Approximately 89% of Bihar’s 104 million people live and work in rural areas. Most are subsistence cultivators with fragmented landholdings.

The high GDP growth in Bihar does not translate into substantial economic gains for its impoverished population, most of whom live in rural areas. The high poverty rate has particularly dire implications on marginalized groups such as lower castes and women. In Bihar, the sharp caste segregation implies a considerable correlation between being impoverished and being low caste. In an average Bihar village, low caste populations live in a separate hamlet inside the village.

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It is well recognized that such a vicious cycle of poverty is perpetuated by unavailability of credit, malnutrition and limited access to stable sources of income. Put together with poor infrastructure and availability of public amenities, this has led to abysmal income levels in rural Bihar. A large volume of literature in development economics suggests that when credit and public goods are routed through women, the household as a whole benefits, helping pull them out of poverty.

INTERVENTION

The Government of India (GoI) and the state of Bihar instituted the Bihar Rural Livelihoods Program (BRLP) in 2006, to help combat poverty and uplift women in rural Bihar. The aim of this program was to help develop scalable and sustainable models for livelihoods enhancement of rural poor households. The development objective was to reduce the Below Poverty Line (BPL) population to 22% by 2015 or by about 1.5% per year, in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) target and the GoI’s Eleventh Five Year Plan strategy which emphasized investment in women’s socio-economic empowerment, enhancing livelihood opportunities in the farm and non-farm sector, and participation of local level institutions to make service delivery more accountable.

The primary agency responsible for the project’s implementation was the Bihar Rural Livelihoods Promotion Society (colloquially known as JEEViKA). It was established by the GoB for the transformation of women livelihoods on a large scale. JEEViKA piloted in 6 blocks in 6 districts of Bihar – Gaya, Khagaria, Madhubani, Muzaffarpur, Nalanda and Purnia. With the National Rural Livelihoods Mission it expanded to all 534 blocks in 38 districts by 2011.

JEEViKA’s primary role is to organize women into Self-Help Groups (SHGs) that conduct microfinance activities and participate in other BRLP programs. SHGs comprising 10-15 women are further grouped into Village Organizations (VOs) consisting of 100-150 women, all of whom live within the same village.

Women maintain savings and are involved in inter-loaning activities within the SHG. Once such practices are established, the project provides the SHG with a one-time average loan of 900 USD, which the SHG distributes as loans amongst its members. Going forward, the SHGs get linked to banks and formal credit institutions. VOs make key interventions in food security, health and nutrition, livelihoods activities, identification and training of youth, disbursement of government schemes and pensions, as well as convergence with other government schemes. If there is a critical mass of VOs in a cluster, they are federated into Cluster Level Formations (CLFs).

Figure 1: Community Platform under JEEViKA

Source: Enhancing agricultural livelihoods through community institutions in Bihar, India - JEEViKA Learning Note Series, No. 5.

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3. Where empowerment is measured by mobility of the average beneficiary woman, her participation in household decision making and her confidence and propensity to engage in collective action when faced with issues related to the community.

4. These objectives were also attuned to the World Bank’s Country Strategy (CAS-August 2004) for India, which highlighted support for lagging states including Bihar through sustained growth, poverty alleviation and improved access to quality social services.

5. USD value from 2011.
The project sees financial inclusion and women’s empowerment proceeding hand-in-hand. It also provides technical assistance and training in agriculture and animal husbandry. Beneficiary participation in local political institutions is encouraged, with SHGs often being represented at local deliberative institutions like the gram sabha. From 2008-2011 the project mobilized more than 1.8 million poor rural women from rural households into 1,54,626 Self Help Groups (SHGs), which have been grouped together into 10,445 village organizations.

**EVALUATION DESIGN**

In early 2011, a retrospective impact survey, using Propensity Score Matching (PSM), was conducted using the 2001 Census data to match project villages with non-project villages (Box 1). The research team identified 200 villages as treatment, and an equal number of counter factual ‘control’ villages in 21 blocks in the same districts, with the intention of assessing the impact of the program over an implementation period of 3 years from 2008-2011.

A two-part survey was administered to 10 randomly selected households in all the project and non-project villages, resulting in an overall sample of 4,000 households, reflecting similar pre-project characteristics. Part I collected economic information focused on asset ownership, debt portfolio, land holding, saving habits and food safety information and Part II focused on women’s empowerment, and was addressed to a married adult woman in each household. This included information on women’s mobility, decision-making and networks. Demographic information including the caste-religion profiles of these households were captured in a demographic roster.

Since the survey was retrospective in nature, the research team accounted for the possibility of recall errors among respondents and for a change in the demographic profile of the villages in the years between project initiation and the survey. Algorithms using PSM techniques were used to extensively match the survey results in both the indicators being studied, from which certain key indicators emerged.

**KEY FINDINGS**

JEEViKA has helped women save more and access relatively low-cost credit by opening up a new avenue of credit, facilitating linkages with the formal financial sector and providing an alternative to the prohibitive interest rates in the informal sector. The debt portfolio of treatment villages shows a small structural shift towards cheaper loans and borrowing for productive needs. JEEViKA beneficiaries have retired old loans at a faster pace and significantly lower numbers of beneficiaries have taken up high cost loans. Project households take more low cost loans with average monthly interest rates, lower by almost 0.8% in treatment areas. Nevertheless, consumption purposes remain the predominant reason to borrow (around 90% in treatment areas).

Household savings increased drastically in project areas with 95% households reporting that they were practicing some kind of saving.

JEEViKA is beginning to have discernable impacts on women’s empowerment beyond the household sphere. Beneficiaries reported increased mobility and participation in household level decision-making. For instance, 5% more women go to health centers and attend regular gram sabha meetings in project areas. Significantly, in program areas 18-20% more women have a say in the political preferences of the households.

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**BOX 1: VARIABLES USED TO MATCH VILLAGES**

- Number of Households in Village
- Total Population in Village
- SC Population in Village
- ST Population in Village
- Percent Females Literate in Village
- Percent Population Working in Village
- Percent Workers Main Workers in Village
- Percent Females Working in Village
- Percent Working Females Main Workers in Village

*(Data Source: Census of India, 2001)*

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6. Although the project does not identify SHG members based on caste, project personnel approach and target low caste households since they are often the most marginalized in any given cluster. The project expanded by targeting villages with large numbers of impoverished households, mostly belonging to SC/ST groups.

7. In the 18 blocks, in the six districts in which JEEViKA was initially rolled out.
There are indications of increased literacy, a greater propensity to reach out to social networks, and greater likelihood of engaging in collective action.

Livelihood activities do not show a significantly different pattern with only a small structural shift seen among 0.5% of households moving towards animal husbandry as primary livelihood option. Since JEEViKA is not a rural employment program, it may be surmised that income earners devoted more time to their already existing livelihoods and a longer period of time may be needed to shift investment behaviour.

The wealth effects of JEEViKA on beneficiary households present a mixed bag. No effect was found on land ownership and leasing, and consumption patterns were found to be similar in control and treatment villages. No significant difference was detected in housing quality either. The reduction in acute food shortage has been marginal in treatment areas.

Ownership of amenities like mobile phones has been found to increase, but this may be the result of cheaper and wider availability of devices and connections.

**POLICY LESSONS**

Community driven approaches such as JEEViKA have successfully improved the situation of low and marginalized castes by systematically targeting the lowest income households and offering them credit and livelihood training. By improving the debt portfolio of its beneficiaries and freeing them from high-cost debt, the program not only alleviates an entrenched social malaise but also makes borrowing more productive and encourages savings.

Although increased productivity and economic benefits may be the avowed aim of an intervention, outcomes are often dictated by complex social factors. The survey found a shift towards ownership of cows in treatment areas, and a move away from the more economically feasible buffalo (which provides better milk and is a cheaper animal to purchase). As cow ownership brings social prestige, it could be surmised that people in treatment areas are seeking a better social standing, rather than purely economic benefits.

This project unambiguously corroborates the prevailing wisdom among the development community that efforts targeted at women yield more far-reaching and holistic development outcomes.

**CONCLUSION**

The socio-economic impact of such a wide scale project is difficult to assess without an adequate baseline being established prior to the project. However, the results of the retrospective survey, clearly show that the JEEViKA program has resulted in some significant positive changes in the lives of the project beneficiaries with some areas of ambiguous or insignificant results.

The mixed results of the study represented in this policy note may be a result of the short evaluation horizon and indicative of the need for an evaluation design with a multi-disciplinary approach that may capture the multi-faceted social and economic impacts of this promising community driven approach to alleviating poverty.

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**REFERENCES**


