

ADDRESSING SOCIAL EXCLUSION TO IMPROVE LIVELIHOODS OF RURAL POOR IN BIHAR

KEY SOCIAL INCLUSION STRATEGIES AND OUTCOMES IN BIHAR RURAL LIVELIHOODS PROJECT

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How did the Bihar Rural Livelihoods Project, known as JEEViKA, fare in mobilizing the socially excluded groups of Bihar? What were its key strategies? What adjustments were required to respond to needs and concerns of the ultra poor within its core model? What more can be done? JEEViKA has a compelling and important experience on how to address social exclusion in the context of livelihood interventions. While the initial focus was to address exclusion issues, as these interfered with achievement of livelihood outcomes, gradually it has emerged as a worthy goal in itself, pushing the project to go beyond its defined objectives, interventions and implementation models.

1. The Poorest and Excluded Communities in Bihar

Bihar presents a complex political, social and economic context for development interventions, such as JEEViKA, which have ambitious goals and targets. With 34.4 percent of the total households living below the poverty line, the challenge is to work with some of the poorest people in India. Bihar lies in the Gangetic plain area of India which is not only nationally, but globally one of the deeply entrenched poverty and hunger hotspots. The situation is exacerbated with strong caste and religious inequalities, leaving some individuals and groups poorer than others.

In India, the caste system, though abolished by law, has led to an official recognition by the Government of discriminated caste groups and a general caste category that comprises groups considered as upper castes. In rural India, caste identities are still important and influence habitation, choice of occupation, marriage, and access to social, political and economic resources and opportunities. The key categories of Scheduled Castes (SCs) (also called dalits), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Extreme Backward Castes (EBCs). Poverty mostly correlates with caste categories, and we find that amongst the ST, 59.3 percent and amongst SCs, 51.7 percent live below the poverty line. Data indicates that compared to other caste groups, the

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“We don’t own even our homestead land. So the poverty we experience is very different. We are completely without any land or assets.”

—Musahar women, Gaya district

SCs and STs are poorer by 10% and 15% point respectively. Amongst the SCs, the Census identified some dalit subcastes as *Mahadalits*, which were destitute and ultra poor. The main caste groups are *Musahars*, *Dushads* and *Raghuvanshis* and together they comprise some of the poorest groups of the State.

The *Musahars* have been one of the most marginalized communities among the SCs. They are landless and have not been able to avail of the benefits of modern education, technology and institutions. The Mahadalit Mission, constituted by the Government of Bihar, in its study found evidence of high poverty, food insecurity and chronic undernutrition among *Musahars*, often bordering on starvation. The sex ratio was low (923 females per 1,000 males), lower than the State rate, at 935. Even their literacy rates are lower than the other Scheduled Caste groups.

Bihar has had large-scale migration to other states of the country. Amongst the migrants, brick kiln labourers

form a large portion of workers in the informal sector. The workers, who are usually from the poorest sections of the society, and in the case of Bihar, mostly from the *Musahar* community, are recruited against a loan by a labour contractor or employer, which they have to repay by working for them.

Cutting across the above caste distinctions, the landless as a category constitutes an important marginalised group in Bihar. The concentration of families facing near to absolute landlessness is highest amongst the SCs (53.5%) followed by the STs at 47.98%. According to a survey conducted by Department of Revenue and Land Reforms, Government of Bihar as many as 210,437 *Mahadalit* families have been identified as families not even owning homestead land.

2. Key Strategies for Social Inclusion

There was continuous focus on social inclusion in the routine planning, implementation and monitoring cycle of the project. On the one hand the project evolved institutional mechanisms to integrate social inclusion in each of the project interventions and strategies and on the other, community institutions were encouraged to promote empowerment-based approaches to mobilise and include poorest communities.

2.1 Initiating SHG Formation from Hamlets of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes

JEEViKA took advantage of settlement of hamlets based on caste groups (caste-based tolas), which is prevalent in rural Bihar, and structured its approach to mobilization accordingly. It was mandatory for both project staff and community resource persons to first target the poorest household living in the outskirts/fringes of the villages. It was also compulsory for all field staff to stay in the villages for developing good rapport and trust of community.

2.2 Targeting of the Poorest and Poor Communities

While recognizing SC, ST, EBC and OBC households as the poor groups, during the course of implementation, JEEViKA refined its focus on three main beneficiary groups according to their assets, income,

consumption and well-being. This categorization was also useful in informing the interventions relevant for each of the categories. These groups are:

- Landless and those engaged in seasonal agricultural work and manual labourers. Households from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, women headed households, etc., formed the bulk of this poorest segment;
- Small and marginal farmers, rural artisans/weavers and those self-employed in the urban informal sector as hawkers, vendors and workers in household microenterprises. This group largely comprised the poor but not the poorest;
- Small and medium farmers engaged in surplus paddy and wheat, cotton, groundnut; and others engaged in dairying, poultry, fishery, etc. Among non-farm activities, this segment included those in villages and slums; engaged in processing or manufacturing activity, running provision stores, repair workshops, teashops, and various service enterprises.

This facilitated a continuous reflection on interventions being offered. For instance, landless households required different inputs than small and marginal farmers.

2.3 Evolving Institutional Mechanisms for Social Inclusion

Despite the prioritization of poorest hamlets during mobilization, analysis of process monitoring data suggested certain households, from poorest pockets were getting left out. The project realized the need for institutional responses were likely to have uniform and sustained results. Some of these mechanisms were:

1. *Transfer of responsibility for social mobilization to Village Organisations.* This was important as it allowed for innovative and community-based approaches to mobilize poorest households. Focused capacity development of VO subcommittees on mobilizing the left out poor, creating supportive mechanisms such as a cadre of internal CRPs and community mobilizers (CM) to handle tasks such as preparation and regular updating of the list of left-out households (extremely poor and vulnerable) who were excluded from SHGs.
2. *Scoping Community Resource Persons (CRPs).* In 2011, the project introduced exclusive scoping CRPs, who were trained in social mapping and participatory identification of poor households as part of CRPs team to ensure right targeting of rural poor households. These CRPs worked closely with VOs to identify left-out households and initiate home visits and counseling to ensure these households are brought into the SHGs, or mobilized into separate SHGs.
3. *Extending monetary incentives to the CRPs, CMs and VRP for inclusion of SC/ST households.* This allowed for greater focus on targeted household visits, understanding situations and challenges of these households and ensuring their participation in all activities of the project such as trainings, exposure visits and convergence efforts.
4. *Fixing of social inclusion as one of the seven 'quality indicators' for VO's performance assessment.* This helped VOs evolve specific strategies, such as working closely with CRPs as well as Social Action Committees, to identify and contact the left-out households. Discussions with VOs show that initially the reluctance of some households was accepted as their choice or 'erroneous judgment' and therefore not an issue about which something can be done. However, gradually with increased orientation on social inclusion, they realized that it is important to understand their reasons for not joining, and then through home visits and counseling explore options, such as flexible norms, to promote their inclusion in SHGs.

2.4 Social Mobilisation by Village Organisations

In 2008, process monitoring was undertaken to identify the numbers and reasons for left-out households so as to make any corrective measures in the mobilisation approach. This process highlighted that 15–20% of the rural poor are yet to be mobilised. Many of these were extremely poor and vulnerable, migrant and households with irregular incomes and savings, etc. Based on the findings, a systematic strategy for identifying and mobilizing left-out households through a focused campaign by involving Village Organisations was initiated across all operational blocks. The concerted efforts by VOs have resulted in higher coverage

of left-out households in the SHG fold. 499 Village Organisations were involved in the mobilisation drive and altogether 9,980 households were mobilised.

2.5 Effective and Timely Use of Project Monitoring and MIS Data to Track Excluded Households

At critical junctures, the project has paused and reflected on the data on inclusion in coverage and made mid-course corrections. This is the real power and use of data. The process monitoring reports in the year 2008–09, identified that nearly 15–20% of the rural poor were yet to be mobilized. Again in 2013, process monitoring conducted in selected three districts also made some key findings on these left-out households. Many of these were extremely poor and vulnerable households, migrant households and those households with irregular incomes and savings, etc. This use of data has been key in evolving institutional mechanisms to tackle exclusion.

3. Social Inclusion Outcomes

Social inclusion can be defined as the process of improving the terms for individuals and groups to take part in society. This process entails improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of people who have been disadvantaged on the basis of their identity for such engagement. In India, social exclusion has roots in

historical divisions along lines of caste, tribe and gender. The exclusion faced by SCs has its roots in untouchability whereas amongst the tribal people, the exclusion has emerged from their geographical isolation. The result is that they are unable to enjoy benefits of development as compared to the other groups. Though overall poverty amongst these groups has fallen, there continues to be a wide gap between the SC and ST groups and the rest of the population on key development parameters.

The social inclusion outcomes of JEEViKA need to be viewed within the context of livelihood interventions, with a focus on addressing social exclusion issues that impacted achievement of livelihood outcomes. However, mobilising the poorest and excluded communities was an important commitment in the project design and has led to some important achievements.

3.1 Increased Mobilisation of the Poor and Poorest of the Poor into Strong Community Institutions

Overall, 1,836,505 rural households have been mobilized in 154,626 SHGs and 10,445 VOs. Of these 549,875 are Scheduled Caste and 18,844 are Scheduled Tribe households, 884,675 are OBC, 221,420 are minorities and 161,805 are general households (Table 1). In BRLP districts, the SCs represent 12 to 33% of the total population, while in SHGs the participation of SC households varies from 26 to 67%.

Table 1: Coverage of SC/ST Households in SHGs under JEEViKA

District	Total Rural HH	Total SC & ST HH (Rural)	% of SC & ST in Total Rural HH	Total SHG HH	Total SC & ST HHs in SHG	% of SC & ST HHs in SHG
Gaya	596,534	214,285	35.9	343,489	132,975	38.7
Madhubani	866,808	117,523	13.6	301,355	80,168	26.6
Muzaffarpur	854,979	141,648	16.6	381,818	134,319	35.2
Nalanda	400,962	95,793	23.9	285,001	93,889	32.9
Purnia	580,237	96,914	16.7	352,648	84,329	23.9
Khagaria	312,002	48,039	15.4	172,194	42,925	24.9
Total	3,611,522	714,202	19.8	1,836,505	568,605	31.0

Inclusion % of rural SC & ST HH in SHG is 80% and 69.9% respectively [Source: BRLPS MIS & Census 2011.]

On an average more than 80% of all SC households in the districts have been brought under the fold of SHGs, which clearly reflects the pro-poor universal mobilisation and saturation in terms of coverage of poor households.

3.2 Socially Inclusive Functioning of Institutions

Systematic implementation of capacity building initiatives and strong and sustained focus on social inclusion has helped the project in successfully achieving its development objective of building “self-managed and self-reliant” and inclusive community institutions. Inclusion of the poorest and left-out households and village saturation was promoted as one of the seven quality indicators for VO performance assessment. Analysis of data from over 2000 SHGs shows that there is strong representation of SC/ST and minorities in leadership positions at the VOs and CLFs. Data trends from MIS also indicate high levels of inclusion in CBO leadership (Table 2).

3.3 Expanding Livelihood Opportunities for Various Categories of Poor Households

The project’s livelihoods interventions were spread across multiple sectors including farm, non-farm and off-farm, to ensure that such livelihood interventions are able to include all three categories of poor that (subsection 3.2) it identified during the mobilisation phase.

- *Agricultural interventions with small and marginal farmers.* 471,000 SHG households were linked with agriculture interventions related to System for Rice Intensification (SRI) which is a process of paddy cultivation which enhances the production through maximising different agronomic practices (257,111 households). Of the farmers adopting the SRI methodologies, 25 percent of the farmers are from SC and ST categories and 65 percent from other backward castes.
- *Off-farm interventions to include poor families and small farmholders.* For targeting the poorer households with smaller farms and less dependence on agriculture, the project promoted dairy and backyard poultry as viable livelihood options. The project reached out to 61,700 households under the dairy intervention. The project also reached out to more than 59,000 SHG households under its backyard poultry intervention. The SC, ST and minority households account for nearly 50 percent of all households covered under the intervention. Inclusion of marginalized section of the society into the fold of Dairy Cooperative Services (DCS) is 21% (SC 17%, Mahadalit 4%). The overall participation of SC and ST in poultry intervention is 30 percent.² Around 17 percent of the SHG members

Table 2: Percentage of SC and ST Leadership in CBOs

District	SC	ST	Minority	Other	Total Office Bearer	% of SC/ST & Minority in Leadership
Muzaffarpur	7,391	283	2,387	16,265	26,326	38.22
Nalanda	14,718	161	629	33,598	49,106	31.58
Purnia	6,117	1,800	5,027	17,865	30,809	42.01
Madhubani	9,216	271	4,013	32,011	45,511	29.66
Khagaria	2,914	48	799	12,613	16,374	22.97
Gaya	19,513	88	1,940	23,511	45,052	47.81

² Source MPPR (Poultry Intervention) July 2016—out of the total 59,149 HHs covered in the intervention. 14,644 HHs (30%) were from SC & ST categories.

linked with poultry intervention also belong to the minority community.

- *Non-farm interventions for poorest and landless communities.* The project reached to nearly 32,000 SHG households dependent on non-farm livelihoods through value chain interventions in specific non-farm commodities such as incense, beekeeping, and handicraft (jute, carpet) aimed at increasing the market share of SHG members involved in these activities. These households tend to be small holders and poorer. About 68% of participants in the non-farm interventions belonged to the poorest of the poor (POP) households with higher representation in incense stick making (85%), Jute rope making (57%) and bee keeping (34%) which did not depend on having productive land, as important for generating employment, and is of the biggest demands of the landless.

3.4 Reducing Vulnerabilities for Overall Well-being

Under its social development component, the project promoted some important vulnerability reduction measures. These are important as they allowed for more effective use and benefit from the livelihood interventions of the project.

- *Increased access to entitlements and social security.* Focusing on leveraging public resources for reducing vulnerability, the project has facilitated access to various entitlements and social security schemes helping more than 500,000 SHG members to have better access to social security pension and welfare schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) which guarantees 100 days of employment to rural poor and the Rashtriya Swasth Bima Yojana (RSBY), a health insurance scheme. The project has also reached out to more than 400,000 SHG members with individual life insurance schemes under the Aam Aadmi Bima Yojana and helped in efficient claim settlement of more than 98 percent of cases. End of project random household surveys showed that of the eligible households, 67.3 percent households were able to access respective entitlement for pension; 72 percent for widow pension

support; 40 percent for job cards and 60 percent for RSBY cards. Cluster Facilitation Teams (CFTs) were formed in 25 blocks to increase awareness on and demand for work under MGNREGA. In a pilot, the focus was to increase women's participation in MGNREGA. As a result, women's participation increased in planning processes. Under MGNREGA works, women participation in blocks where CFT was placed increased to 48% from a state average of 41% in the FY2015–16.

- *Addressing food insecurity and health risks.* To address the vulnerability arising from scarcity of food availability during the lean seasons, a Food Security Fund (FSF) was provided to more than 973,770 households that were members of 99,714 SHGs under 7,790 VOs. The fund facilitated collective procurement of food grains at bulk prices, and its distribution among the food insecure households as interest free loans. The intervention had significant impacts for the poorest sections of society who struggle with food scarcity in lean seasons. Independent impact evaluations have reported reduced incidence of reported hunger and increased consumption of food grains for the poorest quintiles. Health Risk Fund was another specialized financial product at VO to finance health related credit needs and has been implemented in 8,142 VOs. It has helped in mitigating health shocks for 1,017,750 households from among the poorest SHG members.
- *Improved knowledge and behaviours on health and nutrition.* The project implemented a Behaviour Change Communication (BCC) intervention that aimed to improve prevalent awareness and household practices related with health, nutrition and sanitation in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) and Project Concern International (PCI). Another related intervention (*Gram Varta*) promoted participatory learning and informed action around nutrition and sanitation issues. These interventions have resulted in improvements in demand for better sanitation facilities, identification of malnutrition cases and subsequent linkage of such children to local Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) centres.

4. Experience of Promoting Inclusion of Two of the Poorest Groups: Scheduled Tribes and Brick-Kiln Workers

This section highlights JEEViKA's experience with two of the most vulnerable and poor communities of Bihar, the STs and an occupational group, brick-kiln workers, primarily belonging to the Musahar community. The experiences of working with these two communities are varied but also have commonalities.

Scheduled Tribes

Bihar has nearly 1.34 million people belonging to Scheduled Tribes, with more than 94 percent of them living in rural areas. The Government of Bihar has notified a total of 29 Scheduled Tribes in the state. *Santhal, Oraon* and *Kharwar* form the majority of tribes in rural Bihar. *Gonds, Munda* and *Tharu* are the other two major tribal groups in Bihar. Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs) are extremely low in number with only about 3,500 households and are scattered across the state with specific PTG pockets existing in East Champaran, Darbhanga, Muzaffarpur, Saran and Bhagalpur. Under JEEViKA, the highest ST population was in Purnia, with two blocks, Dhamdaha and Banmankhi, having the highest number of ST households. Oraon is the most populous tribe among the major tribes in Purnia District, followed by Santhal, Munda, Lohra, Kharwar, etc.

A Tribal Development Plan (TDP) outlining some of the key priorities and strategies for inclusion of the tribal population was prepared. Some of these were sensitization of staff and community cadre on development issues of tribals, partnerships with technical service providers and organizations that have experience of working with tribal people, exploring cultural skills for alternative livelihoods, skill development and livelihood opportunities for tribal youth, and convergence with government programs to enhance benefits for tribals.

Most strategies included in the TDP were implemented as part of overall project implementation in Purnia, as well as other pockets. Of the total 1,836,505 mobilized households under the project, 18,844 are ST households. Of these, 16,494 households are from the district

of Purnia. The inclusion of STs on other project interventions also remained high. Around 113 STs are members of the Producer Company in Purnia and 1,119 are in Producer Groups. Poultry intervention has engaged around 881 ST households. One of the major concerns of food insecurity amongst tribals has been addressed as more than 7,321 ST households have availed the food security fund. The Health Risk Fund has been availed by 237 households. The project also focused on six predominantly ST villages for the Child Nutrition Centres. An important indicator of inclusion of STs is that 217 VOs in Purnia have STs in leadership positions.

Some of the key strategies to mobilize the tribal community in Purina were:

1. Engagement of tribal CRPs and CMs who could communicate in the local language ('*angika*'). This proved critical in reaching out to and communicating with the local tribal community and overcoming the language barrier, which can be an important deterrent to engaging the tribal community.
2. Use of folk and cultural media for communication on key components of the project.
3. Regular rotation of CRPs from neighboring tribal blocks by increasing honorariums to cover all tribal households.
4. Restoring tribal art. BRLP had partnered with an external agency called Banglanatak.com to pilot a livelihood intervention focused on restoring tribal culture. Under this, cultural troupes were identified and organized to perform tribal music and dance performances across and outside the state. To uplift the livelihood scope of the rural folk artists, national- and state-level festivals were organized to boost the promotion and marketability of cultural art forms. The intervention was initiated in Purnia but was replicated in other districts with tribal and non-tribal communities in Gaya, Nalanda and Madhubani.

Brick-Kiln Workers

Bihar is known for its large-scale out migration. The case of brick-kiln workers, mostly belonging to the *Musahar* community, exposed the project to experience



working with the ultra poor. The *Musahar* are engaged in agricultural labour and are typically dependent on daily wages. Brick-kilns provide them with what they considered a more favourable option with assured earnings for around six to seven months a year, which is given upfront as an advance payment. These advance payments ended up being traps of bondage, but the negative aspects were realized much later. The kilns start production operations every October and continue up to the pre-monsoon season the next year. The workers get tied to brick kilns as soon as they accept advance wages from their agents. Bringing these households was not seen as a priority by the project as they had tendency of being absent from the villages, which made it difficult for them to participate in SHGs and meetings. However, the project has found compelling examples of successful efforts to mobilise these households as well as retain their membership. The lessons from the Gaya district are encouraging. A qualitative field assessment covering six VOs of the district was undertaken to understand the strategy and early results.

“Our tribal women do not have restrictions on mobility and work freely outside the house, especially in forests. However, forest-based livelihoods do not fetch us enough incomes. When I learnt about the poultry intervention, I chose it immediately. It has helped me increase my income and now my husband has stopped migrating for long periods.”

—ST woman, Purnia

Situation assessment of benefits and negative impacts of working at brick-kilns. This required an understanding on the incomes of these households, terms of employment, benefits for workers and their family members as well as the negative impacts such as on health of workers, children’s education and other forms of exploitation. For many VO members, it was an eye opener to understand how ultra poor put in hard physical labour to meet the basic needs of their families. An excellent

Brick-kiln worker households: Why should they join JEEViKA?

What do they lose?

- Immediate and easy access to money
- No explanation for purpose of loan
- Repayment of loan through labour
- Assured labour for 6–7 months
- Food and medical facilities for entire family

What do they gain?

- Group identity
- Structured loans for livelihood enhancement
- Improved skills, knowledge for improved livelihood/productivity
- Access to other benefits and entitlements
- Health awareness and services
- Funds for food security
- Children’s education can continue without long breaks

analysis of what brick-kiln workers would lose or gain from joining SHGs has evolved due to the efforts of the VOs.

In a short study across six VOs of the Khizarsarai Block of the Gaya district, it was found that almost 24% of the SHG members migrate to other states such as Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, and Rajasthan to work in brick-kilns. In the FGD with the members, it was further reiterated that with a limited option of livelihood in the area, they used to migrate outside the state. The average earning per HHs is between Rs 5,000 to Rs 12,000 per month for the duration they work. This amount of money speaks for itself, but there are negative impacts which at times nullify this monetary benefit.

Household visits and intensive counseling. An understanding of the situation allowed for targeted counseling for the community to present an objective assessment of the benefits that the SHG model would allow. The key negative impacts on health of women and children, as well as long breaks in education of children were highlighted. Moreover, the trap of bonded labour in the form of advance payments has also been highlighted. The results of counseling have been encouraging, as large numbers of these households have been mobilized and have been able to retain membership for over a year.

Adjusting core SHG norms to accommodate their needs. This was the most challenging aspect, as it meant changing the 'Panchasutra' framework that guides SHG functioning. Members were allowed to leave their savings in lump sum with other members to deposit weekly on their behalf. However, it was interesting to note that these members always attended meetings once they came back. In some cases, these members made special visits every two months to make their payments themselves and repay their loans according to determined instalments and timelines. Though this has led to some practical challenges for the project teams, such as poor attendance registers and proxy attendance, the payments are being sent regularly. Also, for CRPs and VRPs, there is no sense of how the loans are impacting these households. Yet, since these are early changes, the project with its future interventions can evolve a mechanism to track these households.

Emerging changes and outcomes. As a result of the above efforts, there are some promising changes. These

changes are currently not being tracked, so there is no quantifiable data.

Firstly, it has built the project's faith and trust amongst the brick-kiln workers and they are able to see its relevance to their economic realities. Secondly, some very early signs of women pulling out from brick-kilns to explore other livelihood options are being seen. In these

"We were encouraged by the testimonies of JEEViKA didis and so decided to join the SHGs. We are seeing some benefits already. My personal aim is to stop working at the brick-kilns. When we come back to the villages, our health is so fragile that it takes a month to recuperate. We want to start economic activities here and need help for that."



households the men folk have continued their work at the kilns as a complete pullout would mean a drastic dip in their earnings. Thirdly and perhaps the biggest change this allows is that children can stay in the village and there will be no break in their education. This trend is on the rise and can be capitalized by the new project.

5. Key Challenges to Social Inclusion

There are been significant challenges, some that were effectively addressed and some that require more nuanced reflection and re-strategising.

5.1 Some Groups Continue to Be Left Out

In spite of all the efforts of the project to reach the poorest, there is a chance of some groups getting left out. Partly, this is also because of self-exclusion as the ultra poor feel constrained by negligible assets and resources and do not see direct benefits from livelihood interventions. Moreover, the structure of institutions of poor envisaged may not meet the needs of most poor and excluded groups. SHG 'norms' of weekly savings and meetings are difficult to adhere to. The SHG model which relies on saving, group lending, regular meeting and financial discipline may not suit the needs of ultra poor who do not have enough for even two square meals let alone saving, or other specifically vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities and migrants. Though the project has started making some adjustments, as highlighted in the case of brick-kiln workers, this change is not uniform and needs state and policy guidance for district, block and field staff.

5.2 Social Mobilization of the Excluded Groups Does Not Automatically Translate into Equitable Benefits

Focus on mobilization of excluded and poorest groups is a critical first step toward social inclusion but may not be enough to ensure they are able to benefit from interventions and project funds equitably. These poorest groups have fewer, and in some cases, no assets and take loans to meet their consumption needs, but do not see the value for bigger loans. Field observations reveal many members from the poorest households who have taken only one-time small sized loans. In some cases, there were some serious setbacks. Just one example

amongst quite a few: field teams found a Musahar woman who took a loan to buy two goats and in less than three months both goats died. She now has to repay the loan without having benefited from it. This reveals how critical it is to ensure that once they enter the institutions, poorest members are able to access all key funds and benefit from such loans in a more sustainable manner.

5.3 Community Institutions Can Start Emulating the Functioning of Dominant Public and Private Institutions

It is erroneous to assume that all community institutions established through the project will work harmoniously and facilitate inclusion of the poorest households. Though rare, there are some instances where strong and dynamic leaders of VOs and CLFs have remained presidents for prolonged periods, and are reluctant to give new members a chance. They are popular and get re-elected but this has led to favouritism in the community: visits to only those villages where there is support and conversely neglect of those where there is some resistance have also been noticed. As already discussed, there is also the problem of better-off members taking larger loans and in some cases requesting poorer members to not seek loans. This points to the need to ensure strict practice of leadership rotation and a more careful tracking of all who have taken loans and if there are only a few regular loan seekers.

5.4 Working with Ultra Poor Brings on Many More Practical Challenges for the Project

While an overall emphasis on evolving and adopting innovative measures to include ultra poor is important and desirable, it brings forth practical challenges for project teams, which it is inadequately prepared to handle. Ongoing trainings, field demonstrations and cross-visits for these members are difficult to organize and reschedule. Moreover, monitoring visits sometimes are not so helpful as certain hamlets are empty and members are unavailable for direct feedback and inputs. Within the category of ultra poor, individual cases of destitution also emerge, such as of single and deserted women, widows and old persons with no families. The project does not define strategies to work with these specific cases and there is need for more knowledge and

exposure on how to work with such cases. For interventions of sanitation, the project has faced difficulties with Musahar households who have no land for construction of toilets. This is an area that requires a lot more innovative thinking and advocacy with the government.

6. Deepening the Approach to Social Inclusion

Building on its lessons and good practices, JEEViKA needs to increase the focus to work out some internal mechanisms to plan and monitor the progress on social inclusion.

6.1 Mapping of Pockets of Poverty at the District and Block Levels

Currently, districts track the social mobilisation data, disaggregated by caste and social criteria and this is collated at the state level. Another way to use these data is to track more effectively the left-out population data and use it upfront in project meetings and reporting to allow for greater attention and actions. Another idea is to use district and block level maps to highlight the pockets of poverty and left-out populations. This can be done through use of existing secondary data from Census and SECC. An important lesson from projects such as in AP is to consolidate data regularly and track the progress. Currently, the disaggregation of data for various components does not translate into a clear picture on how project interventions are impacting the poorest of the poor/SC/ST communities. It is done only at critical evaluation junctures. The focus should be on integrating this into the current MIS and review systems.

6.2 Identifying Those Who Are Still Unable to Fully Benefit from Interventions

The MIS collects important data on loan uptake, utilization and repayment. However, a focused identification and analysis of members who have taken just one or two loans for consumption and are yet to move towards productive use of loans will be important. Field assessments show several such households who have taken small one-time loans and therefore do not show any significant change in their livelihood outcomes or income outcomes. Project staff suggest that earlier initiation of these households into well-planned livelihood interventions is required. Livelihood teams need to

work in tandem with Institution Building and Capacity Building teams, for improved microplanning and targeted interventions for landless and the ultra poor.

6.3 Spending More Time and Resources on Tribal Development Planning

The project team believes that there is need for increased understanding and exposure to working with tribal people. The neighbouring state of Jharkhand and other states such as Orissa and Chhattisgarh are likely to have important experiences on tribal development and empowerment. A focused learning on these state experiences will be useful and an important priority for future interventions.

6.4 A Separate Ultra Poor Strategy

The core model of JEEViKA has been effective in mobilising the poorest women in rural Bihar. Yet, project's ongoing data showed that 5 percent of ultra poor households get left out. This is more because they are unable to fully adhere to the 'Panchsutra' norms of the SHGs. Where VOs have made such adjustments or evolved strategies for their inclusion, positive results have been seen. One specific example is that of mobilisation of brick-kiln workers. However, this was not uniformly done and pockets of such left-out poor still exist. Although, JEEViKa has only just started a more targeted and nuanced version to work with the ultra poor, there are some important lessons and insights.

- *Initial push through community donations and encouragement to attend meetings with no expectations to save or join.* Gaya and Nalanda, where focused FGDs were undertaken to understand how the poorest members have been mobilized and impacted, brought out compelling cases of single, deserted women, widows with children, and women in deep indebtedness who have been brought into the SHG fold. It was not possible for such members to begin regular savings and nor were they in a position to take loans. It was through community donations, mostly in terms of grains and food items, so they have some money in hand to start savings.
- *Normative adjustments to allow sustained membership.* In the case of brick-kiln workers and other seasonal migrants, adjustments to existing models and institutional norms are required. Where there

has been flexibility allowed for members to save at longer intervals than regular members, the participation of these households has increased.

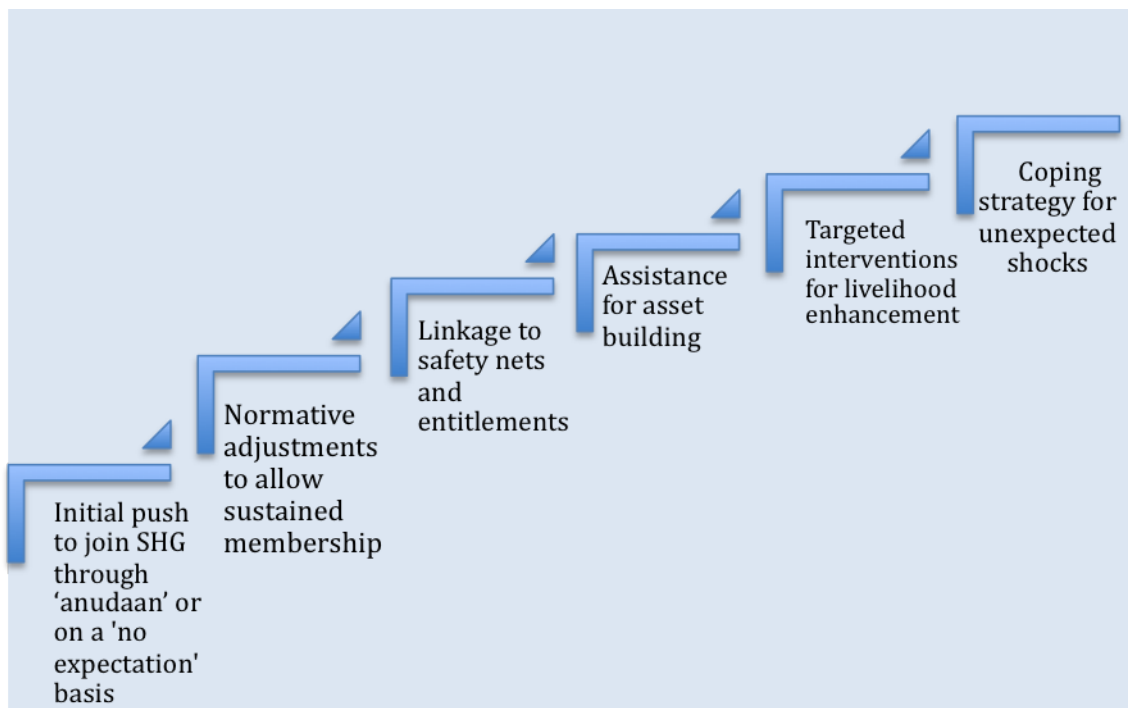
- *Linkage to key safety nets and entitlements.* This component is currently offered for all households, but is critical for SC and ST communities. For example, MGNREGA for the assetless poor and daily wage earners is more important than other landowning households. The project's experience has indicated that some of the vulnerability reduction measures, such as provisions of health risk funds and food security funds have had a greater positive impact on the SC and ST communities.
- *Assistance for asset building.* If specific funds are targeted to ultra poor to build their assets simultaneously with assistance on livelihood enhancement, this major disadvantage can be addressed. This is not an easy decision and has practical difficulties as to getting community consensus identifying those few households that qualify as ultra poor and on giving loans for creation of assets that can be interest free or given as grants.

- *Targeted interventions for livelihood enhancement.* Non-farm activities that can focus per se on the landless and ultra poor, also face challenges of sustainability, economic returns and a sustained market base. However, this is where future interventions will need to focus on in order to deepen the focus on the ultra poor.
- *Coping strategies for unexpected shocks.* Health and economic shocks can push back the ultra poor into deeper traps of poverty and debt. During micro-planning for ultra poor households, this dimension needs to be thought through. Though more a matter of counseling, promoting savings for times of crises rather than any exclusive fund or intervention, is critical as the project intends to focus on improving its impact on the ultra poor.

6.5 Learning from Other Models of Social Inclusion, Especially Working with Ultra Poor

The new priorities of increasing economic benefits for the rural poor through establishment of producer groups and organisations provide more reason for

Steps Graduating Ultra Poor out of Extreme Poverty



JEEViKA to continue to ensure that the poorest of the poor do not get left out. Focus on sanitation, for instance, will also require specific targeted interventions.

The lessons from the Poorest of Poor (PoP) Strategy of the Andhra Pradesh Rural Poverty Reduction Programme are relevant for JEEViKA. The PoP strategy had a strong focus on comprehensive identification and data collation on the most poor of poor households, numbers of these households, as well as some of the social and economic poverty characteristics. This has helped in establishment of a strong database for the project against which to measure progress. In addition, a specific fund for PoP households as well as a dedicated cadre of activists for intensive handholding have been effective strategies.

BRAC—Bangladesh’s NGO—has a well known groundbreaking ultra poor programme, which includes asset grants or soft loans, skill development, tailor-made health care facilities, and ensuring social security through community mobilisation. The Bandhan organisation’s hardcore poor project also offers strong lessons. The program’s components include—direct asset transfers, inoculation of savings habits and integration into microfinance groups.³ After identification of the hardcore poor through participatory exercises, half of the potential beneficiaries are randomly selected to receive assets. Rather than transferring cash, Bandhan purchases and distributes assets such as livestock and inventory to

beneficiaries. The grants are also used to finance other inputs, such as fodder and sheds for livestock. Following selection, Bandhan staff meet with beneficiaries to select the livelihood option best suited to the household and then provide information and training on topics related to the household’s enterprise (such as proper care for livestock) as well broader social and health issues. Additionally, beneficiaries are required to save Rs 10 (approximately US\$0.25) per week at these meetings. Initially, Bandhan disburses a weekly “subsistence allowance” of Rs 90 at these meetings. The allowance is given for 13 to 40 weeks, depending on the particular enterprise selected by the households. Approximately 18 months after receipt of the asset, the beneficiaries are “graduated” to microfinance and become eligible for regular microfinance loans provided by Bandhan.

In conclusion, JEEViKA has evolved some key institutional mechanisms to address social inclusion which are worth deepening and replicating in its future interventions under Bihar Transformative Development Project and the National Rural Livelihoods Mission. The significant social inclusion outcomes are also the result of an evident weakening of caste and feudal structures reflected through greater social cohesion and solidarity that cannot go unnoticed across the state during field visits. This is no mean achievement in one of the most feudal states of the country.

³ https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/publications/110%20November%202011_0.pdf

