

Getting women to choose: A case study in reducing poverty through organising poor, rural women for sustaining and diversifying their livelihood options in the eco-development zone of the great Himalayan national park in Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh in India.

Vinay Tandon

2002

forprojs@sancharnet.in

Keywords: protected areas, gender, women, ethnicity, poverty, livelihood, sustainable, development, Himalayas, India.

The empowerment of poor, rural women in historically differentiated social groups is a long process. The approach elucidated in this case study could be one among many. It will take several more years to clearly establish sustainability of the approach and its replicability. Meantime, there are indications that when poor women are incorporated and involved in poverty reducing interventions, the outcome can be very significant in just a few years. What is more exciting is the noticeable change in women to collectively articulate and represent their interests, politically, even when they are by and large poor.

Background

The livelihood dependence of rural communities, in rain-fed, agrarian economies, on forest resources like grazing land, fuelwood and timber, NTFPs in the Himalayas, as elsewhere, is well established. Within these communities, the poor are more dependent on such resources for their livelihood needs. The poorest among these poor, usually women, because of work burden, illiteracy, caste factors, health condition, remoteness of their villages and small land holdings have no other livelihood options. This makes their poverty chronic gradually degrading the very resources they depend upon (The vicious cycle of poverty!).

A typical high mountain area where such conditions obtain is the eco-development zone of the Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP) in Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh. The eco-development zone has about 141 villages / hamlets inhabited by about 12,000 people over 265 sq. kms. Literacy levels are low (please see Table 1) and lower still for women. In one Panchayat (Garaparli) of several villages there is not even one literate woman out of a total population of 175 women. Government jobs (the only permanent jobs here), held important in Himachal are very few. Subsistence, rain-fed, low-yield agriculture gives at the most 2 crops a year, making for at best 3 to 4

months of food-grain supplies. Thus dependence on daily-waged labour to make ends meet is high. But this is invariably insufficient. Dependence on forest resources for livestock grazing, fuel, timber, NTFPs is high especially in the higher hills. Herb collection for many is the major or only source of cash income. Most villagers in the eco-development zone are involved in herb collection for varying times in the year².

Rural societies in HP are highly stratified. This is more so for remote areas like the eco-development zone of the GHNP. The Scheduled Castes (SCs) are commonly excluded from access to key resources and institutional services. Literacy levels are lowest among the SCs. School dropout rates are higher among SCs than other castes. Widows and deserted women are almost universally included among the poorest category of people, but coverage under government programs like widow pension scheme is seen to be poor³. In the 11 Panchayats of the eco-development zone the proportion of Scheduled Caste population to the total population is 31.50 %, (Please see Table 1).

Recognising that in such a situation reducing poverty has to begin with the poorest and that often these poorest are women, a local Community Based Organisation, SAHARA, planned an intervention aimed at enhancing income of poor women along with their social and political empowerment through an instrument called "Women's Saving and Credit Groups". The GHNP authorities joined hands with SAHARA and the two have been working together in the area since late 1999.

Who are not the poor?

Government interventions and programs (including a 6-year World Bank Eco-development project in the area) have and largely continue to ignore social differentiation among village societies. Resultantly most benefits that have been accrued from government schemes, welfare or otherwise, have been cornered by the relatively better-off and the more resourceful options. The criteria for identification of households living below the poverty line (BPL) often exclude the deserving and include the undeserving, thus making otherwise potentially useful interventions go haywire at the very beginning. Further government schemes do not look at sustainability of rural livelihoods and the poorest in any given village will change from one set to another after a 5-year Plan period.

What has poverty to do with caste?

Historically, the Scheduled Castes have been discriminated against. This practice is more pervasive in remote, mountain societies. The SCs occupy the bottom of the caste hierarchy. SC households are located either on the periphery of villages or as separate hamlets far flung from the societal mainstream. The average SC land holding is much less than that of other

castes. Literacy levels are the worst among SCs and thus despite Constitutional provisions for job reservation, SCs in permanent government employ are very few. Participation of SC women in "Mahila Mandals" (Women's collectives) in villages is low due to discrimination norms. Access to forest resources and NTFP collection is dominated by higher castes, like for example in concessional timber distribution. Encroachment of forest land among SCs is related to social discrimination and landlessness. They are also the first ones to be evicted during eviction drives. In the handloom weaving industry which is a major income source for many households, caste taboos prevent transfer of skills to SCs. Scheduled Caste representation in Panchayats is limited to "reserved" seats and instances have been reported where SC candidates were prevented from contesting elections. The SCs are rarely considered credit-worthy by formal financial institutions. (Praxis report)³

The Target Groups: The SAHARA intervention therefore has targeted firstly, the Scheduled Castes and among them women and then other poor women. Hence Women's saving and Credit Groups were organised.

How they were / are organised & why?

House to house survey to assess the economic status of households in a village, including all SC households was carried out. Records from secondary sources including government were consulted. Further information on who are the poor was also obtained during the house to house survey. The obviously rich or better off HHs were omitted. A fair idea of the poorest in the village was formed and their women organised into Saving & Credit groups. This has been done hamlet-wise or groups of hamlets taken together depending on the population / distance.

Since caste considerations are socially important, same caste women groups were organised as far as possible. In cases, mixed caste groups had to be reformed when women of one caste were either not showing interest or had reservations about the other caste (didn't work). In other cases mixed caste groups have worked for over two years (an indicator of change!).

Sustaining the S&C groups:

The formation of WS&C groups was started in late 1999.

1. The minimum saving rate per member is Re ONE per day. When SAHARA began the group formation work, there was widespread skepticism at the capacity of poor women to be able to save one rupee a day. However, as a strategy it was insisted that if the women were to form a group the minimum acceptable level of saving would be one rupee a day. The first step was to convince the group organisers that it WAS possible for even the poorest woman to save one rupee a day. Gradually, not only was this

- condition accepted but over the last more than two years has been by and large adhered to by members of all groups. In fact 6 groups are now saving at the rate of Rs 2 per day per member.
2. One connected reason that seems to make all women to readily agree to saving a rupee a day is if the locally perceived poorest woman in the village/ hamlet becomes a member of the group.
 3. Each group elects one literate member as the group ANIMATOR. This animator is expected to (and trained) to keep group accounts and meeting records. This work is expected to be done voluntarily by the animator. In order to help the group become more sustainable, as a strategy it was insisted that the group members will pay an honorarium (which they will decide) to the animator for each meeting. This is worked, though there was some initial resistance. Now it has become the accepted norm that each animator will receive an honorarium per meeting. It has been seen that possibly as a result, very few animators have changed over the past two years.
 4. Group size, it appears has contributed to stability and regularity of meetings and nearly full attendance. It is seen (Table 2) that the average group size is not even 10. This is not only for reasons of homogeneity but to ensure that women members are easily able to attend meetings, given the tough topography and the women's preoccupation with household work.
 5. The existence of an organised group of women in the Panchayat ward seems to relate better with the Panchayat structure and dynamics. A persistent complaint in the area has been that several government programmes meant for the poor do not reach them. An organised women's group(s) that consists of primarily the poorest households in the Panchayat ward becomes difficult to ignore in surveys, census operations etc. and gradually acquires political significance. In the present case, 16 women members of S&C groups, including animators, contested the Panchayat elections in November, 2000 and out of them 7 were elected either as members of the Panchayat (representing a Panchayat ward) or some as Panchayat President¹. It is also significant that this is the first time that a sustainable village/ hamlet level organisations in the hills of Kullu have emerged.
 6. The introduction and success of an income generating activity appears to be crucial in group stabilisation. The production loans taken in most groups (Table 2) are for starting vermi-composting pits. One pit takes Rs 1200 to 1300 investment including the cost of earthworms. The Park authorities and the forest department have a ready market for the vermi-compost which is bought through the CBO, SAHARA. Some fraction of the sale proceeds goes to SAHARA (after agreement with the groups) to help the organisation towards attaining financial viability. Some other income generation activities that have shown promise include apricot seed sale and oil extraction and hemp based handicraft products. A longer terms (2 - 3 years) income generation program involves the

- planting of high value medicinal herbs on forest land allocated to one group. Group members plant and protect this Medicinal Plants Production Area (MPPA) and in agreement with the Park authorities and the Panchayat have exclusive right to harvest the medicinal herbs from it. Presently, 19 hectares of forest land involving an equal number of groups has been planted up at the rate of 22,500 plants per hectare, and the first harvest is expected to begin end 2002.
7. In the eco-zone of the GHNP, the acceptance of the CBO, SAHARA amongst the villagers can be attributed to the fact that all their staff (group organisers and the director) are locally rooted and live there. Most of the group organisers are women. And above all, the CBO has genuinely worked with poor households including scheduled castes. The composition and acquired credibility of SAHARA continue to increase the area and household coverage under the present initiative. It is clear that without the local CBO, such a program would be nearly impossible to initiate and sustain. However, the active supports of the Park authorities have helped synergise the efforts at reducing poverty.
 8. In an area that is largely illiterate the issue of building capacity at the local level remains a challenge. This is exacerbated by the fact that most training materials and resource persons easily available are in English. In most of Kullu district even Hindi is not properly understood among the illiterate and since local dialects have no script, the medium of instruction and training becomes Hindi. In the present case the training inputs over the last two years or so have been heavy. Over 10 formal trainings involving outside resource persons have been organised for the group organisers. Besides, several trainings were held for group animators and then for selected women members in skill development. In addition there are monthly meetings that include a training / problem solving session held internally by SAHARA. The costs of these trainings have been borne by either the Park authorities or other donors.
 9. Marketing support to sustain income generation activities remains an area of concern. So far for marketing apricot oil and hemp based handicrafts outside knowledgeable persons have been engaged though for small periods. Vermi-compost has sold locally. But marketing of products outside the area involves much value addition before the products become competitive and problems in either arranging sufficient funds or marketing assurance or both, persist.

The Role of GHNP Authorities in sustaining local livelihoods:

Government daily wages are important to people of the eco-zone especially in the absence of other employment opportunities. The GHNP authorities are one of the biggest providers of daily waged work in the area. This work, however, was being provided selectively and often the poor found it difficult to obtain work for any meaningful lengths of time. Women were largely engaged for nursery work while the bulk of other daily waged work went to men. After the

present initiative was taken up, it was agreed as a policy that in the eco-zone area the first preference in daily waged work would be given to members of the WS&C groups. Over the last one year this decision has helped provide several hundred woman days of work to group members in many of the Panchayats. Some groups have agreed to save one third of their daily wage and are doing so thereby greatly increasing their collective and individual savings.

The success of vermicomposting as an income generation activity can be largely attributed to the assurance given by the Park authorities to purchase the compost produced by the groups. The local Forest Department too is a major buyer of vermicompost from the SAHARA groups. Vermicompost worth over Rs 1, 40,000 has been sold so far⁴. The forest department uses vast quantities of manure in its nurseries every year. A policy decision to purchase vermicompost produced by women's groups in the area could give a big boost to this important livelihood opportunity in the years to come.

WHAT DO WE LEARN?

The present case study shows that efforts to reduce poverty need to be properly targeted for them to be effective. In the eco-zone of the GHNP, women are amongst the poorest of the poor, as in other mountainous regions. Once these women are properly identified (caste remains an important issue locally) and organised into Saving & Credit groups, it is only a matter of time (six months) before sufficient money becomes available to finance most of their household and production requirements. Since this is their own money, it is very carefully spent. Thus dependence on outside capital or continued government funding is obviated or greatly diminished. In the present case, much of the collective saving is lying un-utilised for want of suitable income generation activities or marketing problems. Suitable, usually traditional or locally resourced, income generation activities wherein the products are easily marketed are essential to increase income and livelihood opportunities. Government daily waged work is very important. Suitable policy changes can direct much of this work to the poorest and not only provide more income but also a chance to save much more as has been seen in some of the groups in this study, and thereby reduce dependence on daily waged work.

Women's Saving & Credit groups formed at the Panchayat ward level make their presence felt even in remote areas with largely illiterate populations. This is seen in the election of group members to positions in the Panchayat during the last election in the area. Groups also greatly facilitate collective articulation of women's interests and concerns at the village and Panchayat level. The establishment of about 19 Medicinal Plant Production Areas exclusively by and for women's groups with the agreement of the concerned Panchayats is a case in point.

It has been noticed that there is a perceptible change in attitude among the men of households where women have brought in money either through daily wages or as from income generating activities. Women members reported willingness on the part of her husband or other family members to share household work and facilitate their attending meetings. This change is also reflected in members' willingness to attend longer duration exposure visits and take up more activities that bring in income and improve livelihood opportunities.

Sustainability:

The continued existence and role of the local CBO as well as of the groups would require institutional and financial support especially in areas of capacity building and marketing. This combination has so far been able to improve livelihoods of the poor especially women in the Eco-zone of the GHNP. It may be too early to measure overall impact on poverty reduction. But the signals are clear though much needs to be done. Importantly, groups of poor women have caused gender biases and political outlook in the area to change. Perhaps, they can now begin to choose.

References:

1. Chandar Mamta, Aug., 2001; Review of the Projects and Initiatives of SAHARA.
2. Tandon Vinay. May, 1997: Report on Status of collection, conservation, trade and potential for growth in sustainable use of major medicinal plant species found in the Great Himalayan National Park and its environs in Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh.
3. Praxis, Institute for Participatory Practices, April-May, 2000: RURAL PROFILE STUDY for Himachal Pradesh.
4. Records of SAHARA, Jan., 2002.

**Table 1: Total Population, SC Population & Literacy Status of Panchayats in
GHNP Eco-zone
(1991 Census)**

SN	PANCHAYAT	HHs	BPL HHs	Total Population			SC Population			% age of Total Pop.	Literate Population			% age of Literate Women
				Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women		Total	Men	Women	
1	KALWARI	195	76	1132	537	595	421	199	213	37.20	518	322	196	32.90
2	SHRICOAT	78	43	417	230	187	84	49	35	20.10	174	135	39	20.90
3	NOHANDA	123	72	677	364	313	98	50	48	14.50	219	169	50	16.00
4	TUNG	245	78	1537	793	744	536	274	262	35.00	490	352	138	18.50
5	MASHIYAR	220	108	1280	647	633	376	200	176	29.40	230	171	59	09.30
6	SHILLY	137	30	812	432	380	175	97	78	21.60	223	177	46	12.10
7	SUCHAIN	202	54	1212	636	576	392	199	193	32.30	396	279	117	20.30
8	SHANGAR	111	64	618	321	297	224	109	115	36.20	223	170	53	17.80
9	GARAPARLI	116	57	592	312	280	175	93	82	29.60	27	27	0	00.00
10	SHANSHAR	302	94	1606	829	777	887	458	429	55.20	468	345	123	15.80
11	RAILA	512	100	2822	1462	1360	644	321	323	22.80	959	689	270	19.90
	Totals	2241	776	12705	6563	6142	4003	2049	1954	31.50	3927	2836	1091	17.80

Table 2: Status of Women's group formation in Eco-zone of GHNP

SN	PANCHAYAT	No of WS&C Gps. Formed	Total No of Members	Total Savings in Rupees	Consumption Loans in Rupees	Production Loans in Rupees	% age of Literate Women
1	KALWARI	4	34	20129	400	5500	32.90
2	SHRICOAT	1	11	3711	-	-	20.90
3	NOHANDA	6	52	15864	3500	1300	16.00
4	TUNG	4	29	6827	-	1350	18.50
5	MASHIYAR	None	-	-	-	-	09.30
6	SHILLY	3	28	16988	4900	1350	12.10
7	SUCHAIN	4	41	37914	29340	1350	20.30
8	SHANGAR	4	33	12732	1100	1350	17.80
9	GARAPARLI	7	60	18827	3240	1350	00.00
10	SHANSHAR	2	18	16567	4000	1350	15.80
11	RAILA	4	31	13100	2725	2850	19.90
	Totals	39	337	162659	49205	17750	17.80

Notes to readers

This paper is a case study on Sustainable Livelihoods and Poverty Alleviation. A Mountain Forum e-consultation for the UNEP / Bishkek Global Mountain Summit. 23-28 April 2002.