

Empowering Disadvantaged Women Through Natural Resource Management Groups

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Over the last decade, the North Eastern Region Community Resource Management Project for Upland Areas (NERCORMP) spearheaded a silent revolution in community-led development and empowerment of women and indigenous peoples. NERCORMP was jointly implemented in selected districts of the North Eastern

states of Assam, Manipur, and Meghalaya from 1999 to 2008 by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Government of India.

The uplands of North East India are recognised globally for their extremely high biological and rich ethnic diversity. The region is also one of the most underdeveloped in India, with the upland communities feeling alienated and

Garro Hills, North East India



at the periphery of socioeconomic improvement due to their geographical, cultural, and political distance from the mainstream of developmental changes in India.

Over the past three decades, the central government has tried to address this disparity by facilitating a substantial flow of funds. However, much of the assistance has been considered inappropriate and ineffective, fuelling large-scale disillusionment with development efforts sponsored by the government.

With this background, NERCORMP was designed to demonstrate a new approach with interventions that were technically appropriate, culturally sensitive, institutionally effective, demand driven, and client-oriented with due recognition of the indigenous knowledge and capabilities of the communities. Simultaneously, NERCORMP would emphasise transparency and accountability. To address this formidable challenge, the project design adopted a multi-pronged strategy:

- introduce participatory planning processes and finance priority activities identified through the involvement of the entire community;
- develop self-reliant community institutions to manage implementation of project activities and sustain further development in the long term;
- strengthen the involvement of women, focusing on building up women's activities through savings and credit self help groups and integration of women into the mainstream activities; and
- change the attitudes and behaviour of the principal promoters of development in the region.

Compared to women elsewhere in India, women in these ethnic communities have greater equality and face fewer behavioural taboos, but they still lag behind men in critical areas. For example, women are active in decision making in household affairs and agriculture, but lack substantive control over property, even among the matrilineal societies, such as the Khasis, Jaintias, and Garos of Meghalaya.

All the ethnic communities of the region have traditional institutional structures with a village headman and some form of village council. Most headmen are hereditary and most councils consist of elders and clan representatives. Although decision making by these traditional institutions is said to be 'democratic and inclusive of all members of the community', women are universally excluded from these institutions and any formal participation in village affairs. Women do have their own institutions in most communities, but no say in village governance.

For the project management team, integrating women into the community decision-making processes was the most important objective during the early stages in order to gradually enhance their role in decision-making. The project had to formulate an innovative approach given the structure of traditional institutions and the practice of excluding women in community decision making. Clearly, advocating the restructuring of existing traditional institutions would be too radical an approach and unacceptable to the ethnic communities, even those having a matrilineal system.

“Integrating women into the community decision-making processes was the most important objective”

The project had to promote a new community organisation with adequate representation of women. Therefore, after the initial social mobilisation activities, it encouraged the formation of natural resource management groups (NaRMGs) in each participating village. The NaRMGs would hold regular meetings at least twice monthly to discuss village development concerns, prioritise identified needs, and plan interventions and related activities.

Each year, the NaRMGs would prepare their work plan and budget, based on discussions held earlier during the year that identified community needs. The NaRMG also had to identify and prioritise development needs by conducting a just, inclusive, and targeted selection of households for income generation activities.

Given the intended critical importance of NaRMGs, it was essential to design membership norms and regulations that could ensure participation and empowerment of women. Membership was voluntary; households had a choice as to whether they joined the NaRMGs. If the household joined, then project membership was open to all adult members of a participating household but membership of both the husband and wife was mandatory to ensure the participation of women.

Each NaRMG elected an Executive Committee on which at least two members had to be women. The office bearers of the Executive Committee had to include at least one woman. The Executive Committee had the responsibility to oversee implementation, monitor progress, and ensure corrective measures whenever

and wherever necessary. It also had responsibility for all liaisons with the project teams, district administration, line departments, and banking institutions.

In the initial years, the communities usually elected the head of the traditional institution as the NaRMG President and one of its members, as secretary. A woman would be elected to the executive, mostly because it was mandated. The participation of women in NaRMG meetings was as passive spectators, which was expected by the project teams.



Garo Hills, North East India

In order to support women's empowerment and develop their leadership, the project teams encouraged women to form self-help groups (SHGs) with memberships based on affinity. SHGs started with savings-and-credit activities, which were complemented by capacity building measures aimed at enhancing the women's abilities in simple accounting and bookkeeping. The project also conducted capacity building in leadership and livelihood activities. Exposure visits were organised for SHG members to widen their horizons. MYRADA, an NGO experienced in exposure visits and training, conducted these activities for SHGs and women NaRMG members.

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As time progressed, the SHG meetings became forums where the women discussed savings-and-credit issues and other concerns including health, hygiene, and domestic issues. As internal lending and repayments improved within the SHGs, the project conducted

assessments and categorised the SHGs according to their performance in order to advance grants matching the SHG savings. The infusion of matching grants built the confidence of the SHGs further and the purpose of internal lending gradually shifted from being for consumption needs to being for income-generating activities.

“Offshoots of this empowerment process are the numerous small enterprises”

Gradually, SHG members gained confidence and started to be more vocal in articulating their concerns and needs in NaRMG meetings, which helped enhance transparency and accountability. Today, the NaRMG executive members are elected from among the ordinary members and many NaRMGs have a larger proportion of women executives. Offshoots of this empowerment process are the numerous small enterprises managed by SHGs; institutions, such as the women's bank, in West Garo Hills, Bilcham; and the tea factory set up by the West Garo Hills Tea Farmers' Federation.

The success of the NaRMG approach in promoting a community-led, inclusive, decision-making process is perhaps seen best in the West Garo Hills of Meghalaya. This area has become a showcase of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), a flagship programme of the Indian parliament to guarantee a hundred days of employment for the rural poor. The District Commissioner selected West Garo Hills as one of the fourteen districts to pilot NREGA, knowing the effectiveness of the NaRMG as a village level decision-making body. He advised adoption of this model to form village employment councils (VECs) that implement activities under the NREGA. This led to expansion of the NaRMG model and enhanced the process of women's empowerment in the uplands of North East India.