

## Field Notes # 2

### Community-led response to COVID-19

*A case study from Chachali village in Jharkhand*

#### 1. Context

The Philanthropic Initiatives team of Azim Premji Foundation has embarked on a pilot program to systematically strengthen local democracy and make the vision behind the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment act (The Panchayat Raj Act) a reality on the ground. **Partnering Hope into Action Foundation (PHIA)** is one of the partners in this effort.

PHIA is an institution that emerged from Christian Aid in 2005. They aim to work for a society free from poverty, exclusion, and discrimination. PHIA works with the network of ~50 civil society organisations, collectively known as PACS Network (from DFID's Poorest Areas Civil Society program), spread in four focus states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh. They are known for their emergency relief and rehabilitation programmes; programmes aimed at empowering communities to access their rights and entitlements.

This field note is from one of the villages where the program to strengthen local democracy is being operationalised, through PHIA.

#### 2. Preparing to respond

This year, the month of March ended with a mass exodus of millions of migrant workers from cities back to their homes, a return to a state of deep and prolonged penury in their villages. Three months later while most are still grappling to restart their life and livelihood, some villages managed to survive and come out even stronger.

Chachali village of Jharkhand is one such example. It is a small hamlet with around 70 tribal families in Chhichwani Gram Panchayat, Chainpur Block of Gumla district. PHIA has been working here since 2018 to strengthen local democracy institutions and the practice of participatory decision making through *Gram Sabhas*<sup>1</sup>. Chachali, which was now adept at managing its routine affairs through Gram Sabhas and its committees, applied this same method to manage the pandemic as well.



Fig. 1: Chachali village in Gumla, Jharkhand

Soon after the lockdown, Chachali too felt the impact of COVID-19 with a sudden pause to all economic, social activities and everyday increase in fear and anxiety due to inadequate information about the new virus, its spread and effect.

<sup>1</sup> "Gram Sabha" usually means a body consisting of persons registered in the electoral rolls relating to all villages comprised within the area of Panchayat; "Panchayat" means an institution (by whatever name called) of self-government constituted under article 243B, for the rural areas. In a 5<sup>th</sup> Schedule area, where the PESA Act (Panchayat Extension to Schedule Area Act, 1996) is applicable, Gram Sabha are recognized at the level of a habitation; Chachali village is example of this.

The community leaders and the PHIA team soon realised the need of a collective and comprehensive response at both fronts – 1) enable adequate preparation to contain immediate implications of the pandemic and 2) sustain livelihoods and ensure reboot post-lockdown.

### 3. Containing the pandemic

The first phase of response began by organising an awareness drive to pause the spread of misinformation and educating people about the safety protocols to be followed. This led to people volunteering to support the Gram Panchayat in preparing isolation wards, organising orientation programmes for the community and putting up barricades to restrict mobility in and out of villages. A community-led vigilance was soon in place to ensure everyone followed the safety protocols with respect to travel, isolation, screening, maintaining physical distance, cleanliness, and personal hygiene.

The second phase was marked by returning migrants. This sudden influx of people from cities, who were already battered and desperate to reach their homes had to be managed, including the need to keep them in quarantine for 14 days. Organising this facility at panchayat-level with the concurrence of the Gram Sabha ensured its acceptance across the community. Familiar and friendly faces ran these quarantine centres with dignity and care; hence all necessary processes were carried out without any disruption or resistance.

The third phase of the response was to address the increasing difficulties of disadvantaged families due to disruption in civil supplies and loss of livelihood. The Gram Panchayat along with PHIA organised immediate support in form of dry ration and hygiene items to such families. The list of such families had already been identified during a participatory village development plan exercise conducted earlier, in the months of January and February 2020, and was endorsed by the Gram Sabha. Hence, no extra effort was required to extend quick help to such families. The Gram Sabha further added and approved support to frontline workers - ANMs, ASHAs and AWWs<sup>2</sup> - in the form of personal protective kits and personal hygiene items to continue their work without fear.

*PHIA organised similar support across 3 blocks in Gumla. They provided dry ration kits to around 2500 families and non-food items to around 3500 families. Additionally, around 1600 frontline workers were provided with personal protective kits and soaps. This helped strengthened preparedness and response to the pandemic in the region.*

### 4. Sustaining life and livelihoods

The primary economic activity of the village is agriculture. Since they lack sufficient access to irrigation, it is rain-fed and cultivated only once a year. The rest of the year, the community depends on alternative sources such as collecting and selling non-timber forest produce and daily wage employment in and around their village, with some of them migrating to other parts of the country such as Delhi, Goa, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Punjab etc. in search of work. Employment generation schemes such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act (MGNREGA) though needed were not preferred due to challenges in implementation and delayed wage

<sup>2</sup> They are the first point of contact between the community and their department for providing health related information and services - Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs), Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) for health and Anganwadi Workers (AWWs) for women and child development department.

payments. But the pandemic forced migrants to come back without any savings and shut all other outward facing livelihood options for the community.

Meanwhile, as mentioned above, the PHIA team had been working along with the Gram Pradhan, Baishaku Baiga, and community leader, Elias Minj, to strengthen institutions for self-governance in the village. They, together with the community, had established 8 standing committees to look after development of works under different themes such as agriculture, health, education, infrastructure etc. through a participatory plan. They had set up their own Gram Sabha Secretariat which decided on the issues of importance and formed teams amongst its members for its implementation. This whole exercise had led to a wider understanding of their entitlements, roles and responsibilities as a community residing in a 5<sup>th</sup> Schedule area<sup>3</sup>.

Post-lockdown, when the state government notified the start of MGNREGA work in order to sustain livelihoods, the Gram Sabha Secretariat of Chachali soon swung into action. An orientation programme following necessary safety protocols of physical distancing was conducted by the community leader and Gram Pradhan. This convinced many households who lacked faith earlier in the scheme to join hands. The Gram Sabha identified the families including returning migrants and panchayat facilitated the process of filing new applications, renewing existing job cards, and registering demand for work. The team further coordinated with the block administration to start work plans approved in their village.

Till date, 60 families out of the 73 have already received work under the scheme. Out of these 60, 20 are returning migrant families. The assets created under this scheme included two irrigation wells and one trench-cum-bund, in order to harvest water and help increase irrigation for their primary source of livelihood, i.e., agriculture. The other work plans approved are also of a similar nature, including one trench-cum-bund, one mango plantation, one dobha (small pond), two poultry sheds, one piggery shed, one irrigation well and four land-levelling projects.

Since June, the ongoing work has generated a total amount of Rs 11 lakhs as wage payment, out of which Rs 7.56 lakhs has already been paid. This is significantly helping disadvantaged families to earn an income in their own village. This has also led to the rebuilding of trust among the villagers in the government and its programmes.

## 5. Conclusions

Chachali has managed and is continuing to manage the crisis through a participatory approach. They, in fact, have utilised this crisis as an opportunity to strengthen their institutions for self-governance and decision making. Their meetings, assemblies and processes are now ever more prudent and punctual with full participation and documentation.

The village realised the importance of the Gram Sabha in ensuring a sustainable response to any situation be it a pandemic or a livelihood crisis. One big consequence of this crisis has been the confidence of the community in themselves and in their collective decision-making, thereby empowering the grassroots institutions of democracy.

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<sup>3</sup> The effort here has been to work with the provisions of PESA Act which is applicable to these areas; by building on traditional governance institutions, the Gram Pradhan (traditional village head man), and strengthen democratic practice through the institution of Gram Sabha at the level of habitation and revenue villages.