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A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF NORTH EASTERN REGION COMMUNITY RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PROJECT FOR UPLAND AREAS

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on the empirical findings from the Supervision Mission of a project funded by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). The Mission visited the two Project Districts from 3 May to 17 May 2004 and conducted assessment on the on-going programmes in Karbi Anglong District of Assam and Ukhrul District of Manipur. The number of villages visited in the former district is 13 and in the latter district 11. In this Mission the number of villages covered is 24. One of the main objectives of the Supervision Mission which the author of this paper is supposed to examine is the socio-cultural dimensions of poverty. It is found that the project is transforming the lives of the poor and at the same time there are other sociological dimensions like ethnic conflict and youth problems that the project is encountering.

On the 18 April 1997 the Republic of India and the International Fund for Agricultural Development signed the Loan Agreement known as North Eastern Region Resource Management Project for Upland Areas. Three States of the North East that is Meghalaya, Manipur and Assam have been selected. In three States the project activities cover two districts each, West Khasi Hills and West Garo Hills in Meghalaya, Ukhrul and Senapati districts in Manipur, and Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills in Assam. The project took off in 1999 and will come to an end in 2006. The overall objective of the Project is,

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“To improve the livelihoods of the vulnerable groups in a sustainable manner through improved management of their resource base in a way that contributes to protecting and restoring the environment”

The Mission visited the Project from 3 May to 17 May 2004, and conducted assessment on the on-going programmes in Karbi Anglong district of Assam and Ukhrul district of Manipur. The number of villages visited is 24, 13 in Ukhrul district and 11 in Karbi Anglong. The main focus of the Mission team is to assess the overall achievement of the on-going project and at the same time each member is given a specific focus for assessment. In the case of the author the socio-cultural dimensions of poverty and linkages are emphasised.

Methodology of Assessment

The Mission collected two types of data; one is secondary data in the form of Status Reports was provided by three District Societies and the Regional Society, and two, primary information was collected by interacting with Self-Help Groups and Natural Resources Management Groups (Narm-Gs) at the village level, NGO Partners and Staff of the three District Societies in particular, Senior Officers (as termed by them) of the Regional Society, with Project Managers and selected representatives of NGO Partners from the 6 District Societies of three States, and with the Secretary of the North Eastern Council and the Joint Secretary of DONER, Government of India.

The method adopted and used for collecting of primary data from the field are Focus group Discussions, semi-interview method, and informal discussions. The information gathered from both the secondary data and primary data has been compounded and interpreted in the form of a sociological analysis.

Project Organisational Structure

There has never been a project of this type ever initiated in the North Eastern Region. The reason for arguing so is because of the structural and functional arrangement of it. If we examine the structure we find that at one level there are the international organisations like the International Fund for Agricultural Development as the donor agency and the United Nations Office

for Project Services. At the level of the Government of India we have the Department of Economic Affairs, the Department for the Development of North Eastern Region and the North Eastern Council as the agencies through which funds are allocated and routed through. Under the North Eastern Council the implementing bodies are registered as societies and divided into two categories: the Regional Society and the District Societies. In each District Society, the Deputy Commissioner of the District is the chairperson, and line departments of the Government are members of the District Governing Board. The District Societies manage and implement the project along with NGO Partners, and the villagers. In the village, there is the Narm-Groups and the Self-Help Groups, but the Self-Help Groups have to go through the Narm –Groups to access the Revolving Fund of the project

Coverage of Villages under the Project

As per the records of the Status Report of the Regional Society the number of villages covered so far is 691 and the number of households is 31472. The total number of Narm –Groups is 861, it may seem that the total number of Narm –Groups is more than the total number of villages. This is so because of the peculiarity of the villages. There are many villages in the districts of Ukhrul, Senapati and West Garo Hills where the village is very big and it is difficult to form single Narm-Groups. Therefore, for practical and functional convenience the District Societies have been advised to form more than one Narm-Groups in such villages. The number of Women's Self-Help Groups formed in 691 villages is 1886.

Brief Sociological Background of the Project Areas

It is interesting to note that the Project covering three States and six districts comprises of the following ethnic groups (approximately). One has also to keep in mind and take into consideration that these ethnic groups are living in difficult mountainous terrain. It is not easy for people to move about and conduct their business and trade, or for that matter even to contact among villages located in the same belt. Living and managing their livelihoods is tough, and with

limited opportunities it is more difficult. But the other side of it is that the region is very rich in forest resources.

State	District	Major Ethnic Group	Minor Ethnic Group
Manipur	Ukhrul	Thangkul-Naga	
	Senapati	Mao, Kuki, Maram	
Meghalaya	West Khasi Hills	Khasi	
	West Garo Hills	Garo	
Assam	Karbi Anglong	Karbi	Tiwa and Khasi-pnar
	North Cachar Hills	Dimasa	Hmar, Kuki, Paite

Social Structure and Decision Making

The ethnic groups on the basis of their rule of descent can be divided into two broad categories; one category consists of the *Thangkul, Mao, Kuki, Maram, Karbi, Dimasa, Tiwa, Hmar* and *Paite* who are patrilineal based society, and the second category consists of the *Garo* and *Khasi* who are matrilineal-based society. Even though both practise different rule of descent they have one thing in common. Women are debarred from active participation in village councils and at home they are not the decision-makers. Another common feature is that the traditional institution continues to play an important role in the social life, controls and manages community lands and takes decision on behalf of the village.

Current Political Situation of Insurgent Movements in Project States

Both the States of Assam and Manipur are under the Special Armed Forces Act, meaning that the military has absolute authority in conducting any exercise desired by it and anywhere, but it is not so in the case of Meghalaya. The situation in the Districts of Ukhrul, Karbi Anglong, and North Cachar Hills is relatively peaceful since both parties, that is the insurgent groups and the Government of India have agreed on Ceasefire. But the situation in West Garo Hills is still disturbed by the on-going conflict, and in West Khasi Hills only in some villages bordering Garo Hills, the situation is tense in some areas and peaceful in some other.

Attitudes of the Insurgent Groups towards the Project

Usually the perception either by the State apparatus and the general public is that the insurgents do not allow development to take place. For years this myth has been put forward through the media and newspapers. Therefore, the government functionaries have been complaining that they cannot function in their station of work but are drawing their monthly salaries. This has been going on for years and State governments too are requesting more funds from the Central Government so that they can provide more development services and create more employment for the young people. In this Mission, special attention was focussed on understanding from the people on how the insurgents felt when the project was initiated.

Every one said that in the initial phase when the project was initiated there was some problem since the insurgents thought this is one of those programmes of the government. It seems they do not trust the government because of various reasons. This created some difficulty initially, but when they were provided with every information required and seeing for themselves the benefits people are getting, it transformed their attitudes towards the project. They not only are very satisfied with the project because it is participatory, transparent and accountable, but now and then they visit the villages and participate as observers. The most important thing is that they trusted and have full confidence on the project and told the project staff they are willing to provide any support if need be.

Ethnic Conflicts and Project Engagement

In one of the formal interactions we had with the project staffs of North Cachar Hills we were told that the North Cachar Hills District Society has not been able to cover more villages because the area was under severe ethnic conflict between the majority *Dimasa* and the *Hmars*. It was difficult to carry –out the work normally. For almost six months the project suffered and some villages under the project had to be temporarily vacated to camps. According to the Acting-Project Manager the situation is returning back to normalcy and villagers are returning back to the villages, and hopes that they can continue without any further disturbances.

The same happened in few Thangkul villages of Ukhrul district. These villages bordering with Senapati district and few yards away divided by a small river are few *Kuki* villages. According to one of the residents of the village there had been such a bloody conflict between the two ethnic groups in recent past. The scale of violence is so great that many people lost their lives and affected villages from both sides have to temporarily shift elsewhere. Today the atmosphere is peaceful and they are interacting with each other. The interaction has been more frequent especially after the project was implemented in his village (i.e., Thangkul village) because the neighbouring village too wants to learn from them. But deep down the air of suspicion and hurt still persists and a feeling of uneasiness on both sides. He hopes that they can live in peace and share their knowledge.

Contact, Diffusion and Old and New Institutions co-exist in the North Eastern Region

Prior to 1826 the contact between the people living in the North Eastern Region with the rest of the world has been limited, and except on limited scale with Burma, Bangladesh, and among themselves. But after 1826 the region came into contact with the colonial government and after 1950 they became part of the Union of India. Along with the colonial government came the Christian Missionaries and they worked in these hills by setting up educational institutions, places of worship, and gradually many became converts. The impact of the political modernisation and religion from 1826 can be highlighted as:

1. The political control and management of the region under the colonial government, and after the independence of India and the Constitution of India gives these ethnic groups special rights of protecting, conserving, and practising their customs and traditions. The traditional institutions like Village Councils, Chieftainship, or known in different local terms are legitimised. But presently, they are either under the Autonomous District Councils as per the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India (e.g., Meghalaya, Karbi Anglong, and North Cachar Hills) or under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution of India and are directly under the State Government.

2. The entry of different religious groups has led to changes in beliefs and practices of the people. Besides being a member of the same ethnic group members of the village are also differentiated on the basis of religious persuasions. This process has also brought in other elements in the attitudes of the people. Take the example of some villages in Karbi Anglong. When the District Society began the process of contact and social mobilisation it encountered some very interesting and peculiar attitudes from the villagers who still follow and practice traditional religion. The villagers doubted and thought that this IFAD project belongs to some religious organisation and this is one way of entry and gradually will convert them. It took quite a while for the facilitator to convince them. Another example in the case of West Khasi Hills in Meghalaya is the mischievous campaign by spreading rumours around that IFAD is the other biblical character "666". It created quite a fear in the minds of the simple villagers.
3. After 1950 the parliamentary system has also influenced the thinking of the people along party-based politics. According to the villages this is another agent, which at times create political factionalism amongst themselves. Through the public representatives the political system has also been influencing the people to think of themselves only as receivers of the government schemes, that too if all they get anything which majority have not.

The Gradual Process of Transformation of the Villages

The process of transformation taking place in the villages can be understood by comparing the village situation before the project and after the project. Some indicators were selected and some indicators emerged during the course of the interaction. Each indicator was separated so as to be able to understand the nature and type of change taking place in the villages. The participants were asked to share their situation before the project was implemented and this is what they said:

1. *On Solidarity and Collectivity of the Village* : According to them it takes place during festivals, rites-de-passage, difficult circumstances, religious

events, clan meetings or programmes, when called upon by the village authority, and during the agricultural season like exchange of labour for harvesting of crops.

2. *The Village Institution* : The village council or village authority or Chief is the highest authority of the village and only male adults participate and take all decisions for the village. It also controlled and managed community land and forests, and regulates the rights of using the land and forests. One example that can be cited if any domestic group or individual asks for a plot land for jhum cultivation. The village head will give but he takes a lot of time to decide.
3. *Types of Organisations and Groups in the Village* : Mostly are religious groups, party-based units, and students or youth associations.
4. *Ideas and Day-to-Day Discussions* : They discuss only their day-to-day general life and issues of political or social or religious which concern or affect them, and hardly discussed innovative ideas as such.
5. *On the Economy* : Subsistence agriculture is the main livelihood of the people. They followed from their earlier generations and continued with what they learned from them. The method of cultivation is Jhum.
6. *Savings* : The idea of savings did not seriously occur in their minds but they spend whatever they had. In case they do not have money they borrow from their relatives or friends or moneylenders and repay later.
7. *Planning* : They do not have a comprehensive plan but follow whatever they have been doing every day or year, and when they are free they lazed around. But men spend lots of their time hunting and fishing.
8. *Time* : Their concept of time is related with their agricultural cycle and besides that there is no specific time.
9. *Facilities* : There is no sanitation system, lack of proper information on health and hygiene, water is a major problem especially for the women and adult females because they have to fetch and collect water from far

away distances and it takes away lot of their time, lack of proper roads for transport and communication and lack of schools and teachers.

10. *Interaction* : Their interaction on bringing about change for the village is limited and the women have no space except in her own house, and among themselves.
11. *Kitchen Garden* : Except for few domestic groups majority do not practise kitchen garden.
12. *Concern for the Environment* : They are conscious about their environment since they depend on it and more so the forests which supply them with domestic fuel, wild vegetables and other plants.

After the Project was implemented: What is happening in villages?

The villagers said that the process of social mobilisation and introduction of the concept of participatory development both in theory and practice by forming of Narm-Groups, Self-Help Groups for women only, and the new system of Village Level Planning, and community ownership is creating a positive transformation. It is provoking their minds, thinking and action of the village community, especially the women. The project is affecting and changing their lives in various spheres like:

1. The solidarity and collectivity of the village is gradually moving beyond the confines of and from what they have been accustomed to. It is entering into the realm of developmental thinking, discussing, planning, implementing and monitoring
2. Unlike in the past the sole authority of any developmental initiatives lies only with the traditional institutions. Today, every domestic group of the village through the Narm -Groups and including women are active partners of developmental processes. It is unthinkable in any of these ethnic groups where previously the domain of women have been only as far as managing daily domestic chores and care of children. The women said, “ *We cannot imagine few years back for us to be sitting in formal meetings with men and sharing of views and opinions in the same platform* ”. Another one

said that Narm-Groups is also a platform of resolving petty misunderstanding between domestic groups or individuals or between husband and wife.

3. Narm-Groups has also affected the traditional institutions. Before it takes time and one has to wait to get a plot of land. After the project land is easily made available and in some villages the village head has already allotted enough land for the Narm-Groups to carry-out its activities.
4. The process has increased the sense of ownership, confidence, and motivation for the village population in general of the possibility of changing their situation.
5. Women are able to think, plan, act and initiate micro-related economic activities in generating employment and income independently through the Self-Help Groups. The concept of SHGs in practice has given them impetus by sharing and expressing their views and opinions.
6. The realisation of villagers on the value and benefit of savings. The idea is being practised and this change in their mindset can be expressed in the words of both men and women, *“We have understood and realised that it is very important to save money. Before we spend whenever we get money but it is no longer the same today because whatever is the amount of money we generated through our economic activities we save first and then spend. Unlike before we buy anything besides the basic items, now we calculate where to spend and what benefit we will get from the money we spend?”*
7. According to the people of the villages, *“we never discuss together and hardly apply our minds to think of new ideas and innovative ways. The Project has provoked us and all the time we are thinking and debating of new ways and methods”*.
8. Another aspect of the impact of the project is the systematic planning of their activities at the level of the domestic and for economic activities, and the use of time. The women observed that usually the men after the harvesting of crops or during the free months would spend all the time

fishing and hunting. There is a slight change in this pattern of behaviour of men. The men too agreed with their female counterparts. Women also acknowledged that they too are becoming more efficient in managing time.

9. One of the lasting impacts of the project is the facility it has created. Villagers have easy access to drinking water, toilet, and communication. It has improved their situation and their life. Women in particular need not spend hours every day collecting water. In the words of one elderly lady, “ *We now spend more time with the children and our homes are cleaner, and we have additional time for economic activities*”.
10. They shared that unlike before the level of interaction and the subject of discussions are limited. Ever since the project was introduced in the villages it changed the atmosphere. Every one is busy and the subjects of discussion are very diverse and enriching.
11. The promotion of the practice of kitchen garden and providing variety of vegetable seeds has added additional supply of food and basic nutrients in their daily food. Every one we interacted agreed that it is very helpful and they feel that their food habit is more nutritious.
12. There is an increase consciousness on protecting, conserving and use of the environment. They are recognising that their forests have rich bio-diversity like medicinal plants and it is a potential economic resource for their livelihood.

Besides the changes as cited above we also observed that the project has introduced the transition from jhum- based cultivation to cash crops plantation. The policy of introducing cash crops plantation cluster-wise for the six districts like bananas, pineapples, passion fruit, patchouli, medicinal plants and others is gradually reducing the jhum-based plantation and the result is conserving and protection of the environment and bio-diversity. The other ripple change of this policy is the shift to commercialisation of crops and agricultural enterprise. The result has led to the emerging of potential agricultural entrepreneurs. We observed in few villages: few entrepreneurs have gone much

ahead than the rest of the villagers by expanding their farm activities and obviously earning more, and re-investing the benefits for further gain. They are becoming model lead farmers.

Another aspect of change we observed that is affecting the women in particular is the internalisation of the idea and practice of the concept of SHGs.

Villages after villages we interacted with women members of Self-Help Groups and they shared similar views and opinions on the changes taking place in their life. According to them, *“The idea of group and saving never occurred in our minds even though we are concerned with the well-being of the children. After becoming member of the SHGs our knowledge and understanding of working together and to save has opened their minds. By becoming member of the group we learned and share our views and opinions. This has given us confidence to speak, reduced our shyness, and could articulate our ideas better. We now have no difficulty speaking in public and before the men-folk. We can articulate issues either concerning the village or Narm-Gs or those concerning women in particular. Gradually we have also acquired the knowledge and skills of maintaining the book of records and account. This process has also made us aware of the importance of sending children and especially female child for education”*. Lastly we asked them whether they will continue or not after the project comes to an end in 2006. This is their reply, *“Even if the project exits by 2006 we will move ahead with what we have learned and will carry on the work even on our own. We think that we can contribute to the future of our families and the village”*.

Relationship between Institutions, Organisations, Groups and People

We have already highlighted earlier that in project villages we have the informal groups like the Narm-Gs and SHGs and traditional institutions. The co-existence of both in one village shows that the village authority has accepted the new concept and practice. When we asked the participants on the relationship between the two they said, *“ All male members of the village council are also members of Narm-Groups. There is no problem since they compliment each other and work for the development of the village”*. The only difference here is that the latter enjoys higher status and the Narm-Gs is still an informal group.

We have also been informed that in the case of some big villages with more than 300 plus households there is more than one Narm-Gs. We enquired from the District Society staff and they said that they were advised to do so, and therefore they went ahead implementing it. How exactly is the relationship amongst Narm-Gs on onehand, and on the other among them and the traditional institutions is a matter of concern, and what it is going to be in the future?

The other type of relationship in the village is between the Self-Help Groups and Narm-Gs. According to the members of SHGs comprising only women said that at the moment they are managing their group and run their own activities independently. But as far as accessing the Revolving Fund is concern they have to go through the Narm-Gs. They expressed that at times it slows them down a bit since they have to wait for Narm-Gs decision.

The relationship discussed above seems to be complimenting each other but it was also observed that there are emerging challenges in the relationship among various bodies in the village. It is accepted that the project has been successful in introducing the concept of Narm-Groups in the village and the village head/council/ authority is also actively involved. We have been informed that Ukhrul district is the dominant region of the Thangkul-Nagas, and there is a body that is considered by the society as the highest authority. It is known as Thangkul Long, and this body has the power to regulate or control and people to follow its decisions. This is a body comprising all the village authorities of the community. In some of its meetings the issue of Narm-Groups has been raised and what will follow one cannot say. It seems that it perceives Narm-Groups as potential threat to its survival and the survival of the traditional institutions. This has come about because village authorities of some project villages have complained to it.

In the case of the Karbi Anglong district the Karbi Anglong Autonomous District Council (KAADC) is very powerful and under it there are two types of Headman, one is a village *Goan Bura* and another is *Sorkari Goan Bura*. The villagers select the village *Goan Bura*, but the *Sorkari Goan Bura* is elected by the KAADC. The *Sorkari Goan Bura* controls a cluster of villages. So far the

relationship with Narm-Groups is good but people are not exactly sure what will happen in the future and how exactly the KAADC will respond or act. The staff of the North Cachar Hills District Society shared similar concern. He said that the North Cachar Autonomous District Council has lots of grants/schemes for community development. It has been forming SHGs but without following the process and nor does it have systematic system of monitoring and grading. Without any grading the Council has been funding such SHGs. This is having its own repercussion in the villages including project villages because SHGs formed under the project do not easily get access to the Revolving Fund unless they have gone through the process. In the case of SHGs formed by the Council fund is easily accessible. Using the same concept but two divergent positions at the level of application.

The most disheartening relationship we observed in the project is between the line departments of the Government and the project. The district of Ukhrul in the State of Manipur is a classic example of government *in absentia*. Though there are some government offices, hardly are they actively engaged with the people. Their presence is so minimal that one's begin to wonder and question where is the State government and its machinery. According to the Project Manager of the district there has been 12 Deputy Commissioners in just one year or so. One can imagine the condition and plight of the district and more so the poor villagers living far away from the district headquarters. Unless the district gets a Deputy Commissioner really interested for the development of the poor it will be of no use in expecting too much on linkages with line departments. The situation in Karbi Anglong seems better than the former because the presence of the government is there. But active engagement of line departments here too is still not satisfactory. The only exceptional district is West Garo Hills in Meghalaya, it is because the present Deputy Commissioner is actively involved and engaged with the project and that makes the difference.

Of all types of relationship discussed so far the most interesting feature in this project is the gender relationship. The social structure of these ethnic groups positioned women in the lower category as compared with men was discussed earlier. Men take most of the decisions related with the affairs of the domestic group and their off-springs, and for the village. There is very little

space for women as active participants in the domestic groups and the village. They play only passive role. With the formation of Narm-Gs and SHGs and the infusion of participation of both men and women has gradually affected the traditionally structured minds and perceptions of men towards women. We can cite few examples, according to the women, *"We are being consulted and asked for opinions in the house, and we discuss together before any decision is taken. This has helped a lot because we do not quarrel any more like before. As women we feel we are accepted as partners in these groups and our voice is heard and listened to, and therefore, we feel our position is slightly better than it was before. But still we think men are higher and this is also because of our traditions"*. The most interesting case is regarding with the views of Tiwa women and men, *"As per the traditions only men take part in any public affairs. Women are not allowed to do so. The project has affected us (men), today as husbands we are sending our wives and asking them to take active participation"*. All nodded in agreement and one man also stated, *"This project is transforming our women, they are dressing well and keeping themselves beautiful since they are attending meetings or training"*. This made every one laugh in agreement.

We wanted to make sure as to how far the project has actually transformed the minds of men towards women. We did this by asking them in the presence of women in many of the meetings. The answers are not forthright because the men took time to say. Even if they did reply by saying that they are beginning to realise the importance of women in decision making, it is not convincing enough.

Other Issues Affecting the People

One agrees that the project is transforming the life of the poor in six districts of the north eastern region of India. But during the course of the Mission visit and interactions with project villages, number of other issues was brought into focus. They shared with us and according to them they feel that these issues are significant and need to be considered. One is the issue of further support after 2006. People seem to request for more support from the project. If we are judgmental we may probably mistake this for dependency. But if one

examines further one finds that it is not dependency but the historical experiences that the people of the districts have been undergoing has created this condition in their minds. There are three reasons to explain this factor. One is that they have never experienced in their life a project of this type and nature where they are given opportunity to think, plan and act on their own. Two, as far as the government intervention for the districts is less said the better. The villagers have never been given any opportunity. Therefore everything is new to them and they require more inputs and confidence building measures from the project to manage on their own, and three, political leadership has been providing wrong orientation to the people about government grants and schemes. Take for example, the project is building and ensuring community involvement and ownership, but political leadership is also communicating with them and making the people to depend on them by giving grants in one form or the other. This creates confusion because they are getting two divergent orientations and are finding it difficult to comprehend in their minds. It is a struggle of the mind.

Another area of concern of the people is the youth population. According to them it is the critical factor of societies now and in the future. One of the major issues mothers and even young people themselves shared with us are the problems faced by young people. They are caught in the political struggles of their ethnic groups; parents are poor and illiterate and therefore do not have the skills to deal with them, and lack of opportunities for the youth to enhance their educational career or vocational training. Adding all these factors majority of the youth across villages are dropping-out from schools at various levels of their education. This has brought new problems for the family and for the villages. Take the example the youth in Karbi Anglong district. They shared that the political movement for autonomous state and other issues has politicised the youth population to such an extent that those attending schools between class eight and nine joined the movement and ultimately dropped out of school. After dropping out they do not know what else to do with their lives. One of the participants in the discussion said and this is very revealing; *“after the project came into our villages it has affected us and the way we think. Today we are conscious and able to decide better, and many youths are beginning to question on their active participation in such movements. But this is happening*

only in project villages and not in all villages". Another youth who also had dropped out of school said, "I wish I get the opportunity of attending vocational training". In Ukhrul district women and youths shared that, so many dropped out of school because of poverty and lack of opportunities. These dropout youths and without proper guidance are becoming vulnerable and victims of unhealthy lifestyles like drug abuse. But the critical problem is early marriages and this is putting parents in difficulty because most of them are too young and are not capable of providing the basic needs. Parents landed up caring and supporting additional members and it eats up whatever little resources they generated. It is like a vicious cycle of poverty.

One youth narrated his story, "I was studying in class eleven in the district headquarter, my father passed away and only my mother is the bread earner. I was very young then and my mother recalled me back home. I was very angry since I wanted to continue my studies. I came home and assisted my mother. After a while my mother started insisting me that instead of roaming here and there why not get married. It went on and on and finally I got frustrated and married but deep in my heart I did not want to because I still want to study. Now I am a father of two sons but still thinking of studying. There are so many young people like me living life full of predicaments and frustration".

Similarly a mother shared about her own son, "He dropped-out of school since we cannot provide enough. Every day we take him along with us to the fields so that he can help us. We realised that he is not able to work and has no motivation. Most of the time he is more of a nuisance in the field and we told him to stay at home. But he is not staying at home the whole day he is roaming with his friends. We feel pity and hapless since we do not know what to do?"

We also delve on the issue of active youth participation in the project. According to the views and opinions of the participants, the youth are yet to be actively engaged in the project. There are some interactions and few programmes but by and large the project is more concentrated for elder males and females of the village. Exceptions are there where we observed few active youths as members of Narm-Groups.

Concluding Remarks

It is difficult to draw any conclusion on an on-going project. Yet, there are some remarks we can picture as lessons for any future intervention in the North East of India. One of the most important contributions of this project is the message that it sends across that change is possible even in the most difficult terrain and difficult political situation when people are directly involved and engaged. What could not be done in last decades has been achieved in such a short span of time. It is very clear from what we observed in the field that social transformation is taking place gradually. The project has infused and catapulted the power and confidence of the people that they can reduce poverty and change their situation, and exogenous partners can only provide necessary assistance for the change wanted by the people. We have to give credit to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the North Eastern Council and DONER of the Government of India, the various societies at the Regional Office and District Offices, the NGO Partners for their efforts.

Having said this there are also other interesting dimensions that this particular project has provided so far. Let us take the project organisational design, it is very unique because in one sense it is quite an interesting experiment. The process of implementation involves layers of partnerships, and more interesting is the hierarchy of decision-making processes on one side and the concept of bottom-up approach on the other. With this type of organisational design the operation and function of the project is relatively smooth and at the field level social transformation is taking root slowly. The way that the project has built network of collaboration and partnerships between the District Societies, NGO partners, and the villagers (*Narm-Gs and SHGs*) and traditional institutions without too many complications is an achievement. It is also to be noted that in most of the Districts it is difficult to find professional based NGOs of that type that one can think of as in the rest of the country. Yet, the project has been able to address issues of livelihood of the poor effectively, and has also contributed by shaping, nurturing, orienting and transforming the NGOs towards professionalism. As a note of caution one would not suggest replicating this kind and type of organisational design in the future. It is too complicated and may hamper and stymied the very purpose enabling the poor from poverty.

We are aware that the region is facing one of the most difficult problems and that the conflict between the nation-state versus the insurgent groups. This type of conflict has serious implication on developmental processes. In the case of this particular project we observed that the trust and confidence of insurgent groups by not hampering the process of implementation is a great achievement and success. The reason is because insurgent groups believed and accepted that this project is unlike other projects. The people are benefiting and there are changes visible in the villages. Besides that, the major reason is because the project is transparent and accountable. We also need to consider the fact that project districts are politically very sensitive. At the moment because of the ceasefire agreement the atmosphere is relatively peaceful. If in case the ceasefire agreement collapses and both parties enter into conflict it will hamper easy movement of people and goods. This will affect villages in their day-to-day business and trading of their produce and products. Another conflict that may slow down the pace of project implementation is ethnic tension and violence. We observed that in one district it was difficult for the team to continue project engagement for a while. This issue is very serious in the region and can be an impediment for social transformation and whatever the project has been contributing may be stunted by this factor. The need of educating various ethnic groups to co-exist and solve any misunderstanding by democratic processes is of utmost necessity.

If we take the changes at the level of economic activity the introduction of cash-crop plantation in place of *jhum*- based cultivation may be profitable since farmers can generate more income. As we have seen in the field this initiative has catapulted the emerging of lead farmers. These enterprising individuals are exploiting the opportunity more than the rest of the population of the villages. The only danger is that such enterprising farmers may also begin to acquire more land and that may create sharp income differentiation. The other impact of cash crop plantation on *jhum* land and the society is the process of gradual conversion of such lands to private ownership. This is because many villages have not yet formulated judicious and progressive rules and regulations so far. In those villages where lands have been given on lease to use there may arise tenancy problems because the leased land may be discontinued or even in case if it continues high rent may be imposed on the

users. Shifting from *jhum*-based-cultivation to cash crop-based-plantation has another dimension. It is a shift from subsistence based economy towards a market-oriented economy. It requires knowledge, linkages, and assessment of market and its fluctuation. This is beyond the control and power of the producer. Till date we observed the project is yet to seriously address this aspect. Villagers themselves are not knowledgeable about the market and its linkages, and the ways and means to operate. The critical aspect is that community needs to understand and accept that the market price of produce and products fluctuates, and therefore they need to be aware and understand that their investment may fetch them good price or bad price and have to deal with it. Except only if States of the region take pro-active measures so that producers get atleast minimum price.

The concept of SHGs and Narm-Gs has transformed the people. This is because we observed that those ideas of participation, community ownership, collective thinking, planning, and collective action is gradually getting internalised in the minds of the people. The only possible danger is that these ideas and practices may become vulnerable to exogenous agents who are diffusing contradictory concepts and practices. The people may succumb to such pressures because they have very limited opportunities and little information on government policies, schemes, and do not exactly understand the role and function of representatives. Another aspect is the sustainability of the socio-economic transformations post-project. This can happen only when there is continuity of good ideas and practices from one generation to the next. It can only be sustained when younger generations become part of the process and are also actively engaged in it. As of now they are still in the periphery and yet to be totally involved. Since they are in the periphery issues concerning them are not getting enough and serious attention. It seems that the gravity of youth problems has not been addressed by the project. On the other side these youth problems are putting tremendous pressure on the youth themselves, their families and the village. Sidelining this population and their problems may constrain the speedy process of social transformation and sustainability.

On the issue of women's participation in decision-making it is visible and at the same time there is the invisibility aspect of it because it seems that in the minds of men there is still some problem of acceptance. On the other hand

women themselves have this feeling that men are more superior. The gender issue and especially issues concerning women have many gaps.

Lastly, the formation of Narm-Gs and SHGs in the villages has drastically transformed lives and relationships. Quality of life of the people is better and one can see these changes. But the lack of systematic and pragmatic approach in defining and demarcating autonomous organisational and group boundary, role and responsibility, and function of relationships between the Narm-Groups and Self-Help Groups, between different Self-Help Groups in the village, amongst Narm-Gs in a village, and between Narm-groups and traditional institutions can lead to unnecessary strain and tension in the future.

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