

State of SEEDS and a Call to Make a Difference

Priyadarsan Patra

About SEEDS

Anything you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. – Goethe.

Over the decades, India's poverty has declined at a macro-level, as reported by National Sample Survey Organization, but Orissa's poverty (both rural and urban) has stayed obdurate at 47%, by far the worst nationwide. Sustainable Economic and Educational Development Society (SEEDS) was formed in 1994 to promote and advocate for sustainable, equitable and decentralized development in Orissa and elsewhere, with its fundamental emphasis on empowerment, education, self-help, and micro-enterprise based thrusts.

SEEDS, catalytically, helps development workers (NGOs) and ordinary people alike to empower and help themselves by sponsoring sustainable projects in rural areas. We are not just a funding agency. We work in partnership with the beneficiaries (rural people) and executing bodies (NGOs), before, during, and after a local project is undertaken. SEEDS volunteers, who are individuals residing in Orissa, North America, or elsewhere, periodically visit the project sites and report progress and problems encountered. They try to understand the project impact and analyze reasons for success or failure, big or small. Most of our volunteers continue to donate their time, energy and expenses so that all money donated to SEEDS can be applied to the sponsored project without any overhead.

SEEDS collaborates with other organizations that have similar goals. CanOSA has worked with SEEDS as a strong partner, funding SEEDS approved projects that are supervised by SEEDS volunteers. Two groups in California have joined hands with SEEDS organizing themselves to be self-governing chapters of SEEDS, promoting core principles of SEEDS, and extending the focus area to outside of Orissa. We have networked with other volunteer groups such as Orissa branch of AID. Following incident illustrates our collaboration: we had remitted auxiliary funds to repair check-dams in Chauldia and Khandeichappar damaged by 2003 floods. To avert the risk of work stoppage due to our checks not clearing in time, AID loaned money to the executing NGO, and the farmers thankfully had a bumper harvest this season.

Rural development is a learning process for all parties involved. Some concepts are new to many people and some people have experience to share. To foster awareness and promote intelligent debate, we conducted a one-day seminar on "Sustainable Development for Self-Sufficiency" at Ekamra Haat in Bhubaneswar in July, 2003, in cooperation with AID. This seminar was attended by many NGO and village leaders, students of social welfare, and local intellectuals. They actively participated, enthusiastically debating and articulating various points of views. Two more workshops in Western Orissa followed to promote networking among NGOs. To bring greater transparency, the workshops even tried to address the thorny, but the usually avoided, issues of NGO accountability and structural efficiency.

The following table summarizes SEEDS project activities during the 2003-04 year, showing the project goals, location and the executing NGO. You can find details of these activities at our websites, myseeds.home.comcast.net and www.seedsnet.org.

SEEDS funded projects active during 2003-2004

Place (district)	NGO	Project activity	Goals
(Jagatsingpur, Kendrapada, Puri, Cuttack)	Unnayan	Intervention after super cyclone, promote self-reliance via Self Help Groups (SHG)	Formation of pani panchayats and introduction of microcredit and sustainability
Ganjam block (Ganjam)	United Artists Association	repair cyclone-devastated school, provide better environment for education	Primary education, cyclone repair
Bagbahali (Balangir)	REACHD	Minor Lift Irrigation (LI) point, pani panchayat, income generation	Livelihood security SHG, microcredit
Kandhaichhapar, Chauhan (Bolangir)	The Humanity	Land leveling, food for work, building check-dams, composting	Livelihood security, sustainable farming
(Nuapada)	Kalahandi Vikas Parishad	Water harvesting, ponds	Livelihood security, natural resource preservation
Keutaguda (Rayagada)	Kasturba Gandhi National Trust	Supporting schools	Education in tribal area
Jhankarbahali (Sambalpur)	BISWA (in collaboration with Mrs. Ranu Mahanti)	Bamboo plantation, sustainability and micro-entrepreneurship	Livelihood security, cooperative cultivation
Mohana Block (Gajapati)	SACAL	Poultry farming training, SHG	Income generation, selfhelp, confidence building
Jagatpur (Jajpur)	SRDO	Poultry farming, goat rearing, kitchen garden	Income generation
Khurda area(Khurda)	GJS	SHGs, mushroom farming	Income generation
Mahulapada (Dhenkanal)	Indira Social Welfare Org.	Candle manufacturing, SHG, empowerment of women	Income generation
Angul (Angul)	Bajiraut Chhatrabas	Deep bore-well and hand pump	Education; Earn and Learn
Bhubaneswar (Khurda)	Unnayan/ Dhanada Mishra	Ferro-cement boat for marginal or small-scale fisher-folks	Appropriate technology development
Kodala (Ganjam)	SAIMA	School for the mentally handicapped	Special Education and "integrating the voiceless"
Utkal University, Vanibihar (Khurda)	Blind Students Project	Community donation for eye-sight restoration for the very poor college students	Targeted help for the very disadvantaged but meritorious college students

While the above table gives a glimpse into the broader area of our projects, it is best to learn about the success of our work by looking at any particular project or reading the reports of volunteers in the field. One success story reported by a volunteer is about a *milk panchayat* in Singiri, funded by our partner CanOSA and supervised by SEEDS. In the volunteer's own words, "Starting at 10 cows, 17 villagers now own cows within two years, even though out of the original 10, two cows died, two were infertile and one was sold. Moreover, a teacher at the local children's school is supported through the profits of the project. One major reason for the accomplishment is that a local project leader is deeply committed to its success, although himself not a beneficiary of the project. He is an educator and has a strong influence on the people."

Another success story is from Bagbahali village. I have made extended visits to Bagbahali and what follows is my own observation. SEEDS volunteers Sri Gopal Mohanty and Dhanada Mishra have also visited there.

Bagbahali and our partnership with REACHD

Bagbahali is situated 60 km from Bolangir's district head-quarters and 20 km from the town of Patnagarh. The total area of the village is 700 acres out of which only 150 acres are cultivable land and the rest is fallow or waste land or is covered by forests. The river Sukatel flows on the outskirts of the village. There are 350 people in 52 families of various tribes living in the village, *Ganda* being the dominant tribe.

Drought is a permanent feature in this region. Local wage earning opportunities are nearly nonexistent. Drove of people migrate to neighboring states, with or without family, in search of wages. Take for example Kailash Dharua, a poor landless farmer. He migrated to Chennai with his family in 2002 to work in a brick making factory. After a few days, he was reported missing. His wife and four daughters returned devastated to their native village. The district administration has neither found Kailash nor rehabilitated his family as yet.

Responding to such cases of despondency, REACHD (an NGO) sought a Pani Panchayat program to bring some long-term solutions to the village. With support from CAPART, in the year 1999, the NGO had introduced 11 tribal farmers to banana farming. The farmers had cultivated Green Banana (*Bhusabali*) in one acre of land each. But this seemingly good idea quickly turned to naught when drought hit the area hard in the year 2000. Thus, a *Pani Panchayat* (water council) type project was ripe for implementation under the able local leadership of Ramachandra Behera.

With financial and moral support from SEEDS in the year 2001, REACHD established a pani panchayat with 21 farmers, and a small irrigation project was completed from which 50 Acres of cultivable land is irrigated. The irrigation facility became functional late 2002. Out of the total 50 acres of land, 20 are of *Bahal* (low land), 15 *Berna* (Medium) and the rest 15 are of *Ant* (high land) category. While earlier, it was possible to cultivate only once a year in the best low lands, now, with our lift irrigation facility, two crops a year are possible in all the 50 acres. To date, the farmers have reported two good harvests using this infrastructure.

Project Results

- 21 low-income farmer families got the opportunity to strengthen their household economy and helped other villagers indirectly by creating local agro-based wage earning facilities.
- Productivity was enhanced by providing irrigation facility and yield increased from Rs.5000/- per acre to Rupees 10,000/- per acre within a year.
- Out of the 30 migratory families, 19 families did not migrate last year. As a result, more children enrolled and stayed in school.
- The farmers are now able to refund loans taken from local money lenders for their household expenses within a short span of time.
- The farmers can now stock sufficient food grains for family use though out the year.

- Also, the farmers jointly pay all expenses associated with the irrigation project: a) Rs. 23,000/- towards electricity charges, b) a replaced transformer costing Rs. 9,000/-, and c) Rs. 2,000/- towards the maintenance of the pump set.

Thus, the Pani Panchayat program has been a significant mile stone for the poor farmers and needs to be further strengthened with follow-on support to make it a lasting and reproducible model for others. The pictures below, taken by me, show the micro-irrigation mechanism, and happy farmers amidst their crops.



Broader *Pani Panchayat* and SHG work with Unnayan

SEEDS undertook a longer, larger and broader effort with field support by Unnayan, an NGO in eastern Orissa. Unnayan has recently sent a comprehensive postmortem report (you can find it at SEEDS website given at the end) studying the successes and the difficulties of pani-panchayats, micro-enterprise and self-help groups (SHG). The economic benefits to the villagers are significant. There are additional benefits, such as, enhanced self-worth and confidence in villagers, improvement of management skills among people, increase in savings, exposure to different marketing activities and events, benefiting by learning from success of individual businesses, and the motivation of others to replicate these ideas. However, there are problems and challenges too, as the Unnayan study has found:

- *“Stringent institutional regulations:* In one way or other, some members of SHGs are defaulters of bank loan. When a bank finds such member(s) involved in a SHG and the same SHG has applied for a loan, the bank authority rejects the loan application.
- *Negative political attitude:* Political affiliation of the members to different parties and the vested attitude thereof sometimes becomes detrimental to the group interest.
- *Target oriented govt. schemes.* Under the target oriented schemes of the government, women are tempted to accept loans and get involved in certain vocations decided by the government. Without considering one’s capacities and skill in that particular vocation a loan comes as an illusion. This leads to improper management of the loan....”

According to Unnayan, “A holistic approach integrating institution building, capacity development, networking, market linkage establishment, monitoring of progress, and finalizing strategic inputs would help us achieve desired sustainability of the groups.”

SEEDS Finances

In 2003, our expenses were \$12,003.00 . But, in the same year, cash donations to SEEDS amounted to only \$3086.37. Thus, declined funding remains a major concern and increase in funding is essential to the success of SEEDS. Although SEEDS has a few dedicated volunteers, it needs a larger number of volunteers. We have a goal of raising at least \$20,000 annually and of recruiting a few new active

volunteers among us this year. This year we strongly encourage younger members of our society born or brought up abroad to volunteer at some of our project sites in Orissa.

Future Plans

In 2004-05, we want to focus on micro-enterprise, water harvesting, and project follow-ups to further strengthen areas in which we are already invested. We also hope to support pilot projects such as the one proposed by SACAL for maize cultivation in tribal Gajapati district. We would like to sustain a bit longer our existing but fledgling micro-credit and micro-enterprise projects, as the beneficiaries learn to repay loans, and spread the fruits of their labor and our support. It takes a lot of effort and resource to make inroads, gain trust and traction. So, we should further strengthen our successful past projects and sites.

I also think that time has now come for us to “invest” strategically through yearly fellowships in “social entrepreneurs”, individuals who can “envision, energize and enable”, set directions, align people, motivate serious action for social development, and those who are on the field pursuing a revolutionary idea of socio-economic upliftment.

Call to Make a Difference

“Vision without action is a daydream. Action without vision is a nightmare.” - a Japanese proverb.

In SEEDS we have tried to combine our vision of an economically developed rural Orissa with our action to enable and sustain such change. We have seen small successes and faced great challenges. Our resource base in terms of volunteers and monetary donation has declined last year, but we hope and strive to keep working, facilitating, and networking to inch toward what we believe to be our common destiny.

Some of the ways in which you can support SEEDS are:

- Organize a group of people in your city to sponsor a SEEDS project either financially or by providing monitoring and evaluation.
- Learn about SEEDS and talk about it to your friends.
- If you know people in Orissa who can volunteer for SEEDS by making field visits, tell them about our work and ask them to contact us.
- Be a major donor and donate to SEEDS whatever you can every year.
- Join SEEDS and contribute your skills to the organization.

As always, we love to hear from you, and dearly hope to receive your camaraderie in this effort at true and lasting development. We also need a fresh infusion from university students to shore up “the movement” that started within academic confines a decade ago. We seek your financial and moral support, and your participation. Don't forget to check our websites myseeds.home.comcast.net and www.seedsnet.org . Let's forge ahead together for a better tomorrow.

Acknowledgement: *The author thanks the SEEDS volunteers, especially Dr. Sri Gopal Mohanty, for providing significant materials and feedback and Mamata Misra for her help with the revision of this article.*

Priyadarsan Patra lives in Portland, Oregon with his family. He is a founding member of SEEDS.