

Agents of change in rural India – a sustainable model at last?

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India is credited with a long tradition of state led development initiatives. The constitutional provisions on the Directive Principles of the State Policy bound the government to ensure adequate livelihood and employment, nutrition and health, education and security to her citizens. The translation of these into specific development objectives and policies though appeared towards the '50s – a decade after her independence in 1947. Still, a laudable track record of half a century with a total expenditure of nearly \$7 billion. However, over a million people in India can be classified into the chronic poverty group in terms of duration, severity and deprivation. India remains the home to the largest number of one dollar a day poor in the world despite the development efforts and the sustained growth of over 7 percent in the last decade.

Why has India's development trajectory resulted in such feeble outcomes for poverty reduction? Conventionally the development paradigm in India has been employment and livelihood enhancing with near absence of any focus on agency and wellbeing. An examination into the typology of development initiatives in India would indicate entitlement facilitating programmes, asset expansion, livelihood enhancing and employment guarantee schemes, including the much acclaimed NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act).

This paper argues the need to deconstruct the conventional models deployed so far within the context of an emerging 'agency' and 'wellbeing' led development initiative in rural Bihar in India. The arguments are based on primary work by the author to study the poverty and social impacts of the rural livelihood project 'JeeVika' in rural Bihar. The state of Bihar, although rich in fertile land, exhibits the lowest HDI in all of the 15 major states of India. It is characterised with rigid 'semi-feudal' tendencies, complex social-exclusion politics and untrustworthy state structures. In recent years though Bihar under a new political leadership with a progressive mission, is attracting support for its intensive development effort aiming to enhance social wellbeing and poverty reduction. Is the initiative capturing the most deprived and is the effort sustainable? How is it different to the conventional development framework?

The conceptual model for JeeVika – a state led externally funded initiative is grounded in participatory methods within an overall 'bottom-up' approach to development. Based on 'savings-led' self-help-groups comprising the poorest and the socially excluded women, the model is conceived in terms of the following three phases: (1) individual institutional building: situated within the discourse on wellbeing, empowerment, individual and communal ownership and power (2) individual and collective capacity building, drawing on the discourse on the capability approach (3) adoption of and participation in self-selected livelihoods opportunities. The focal point of the process is the individual rural woman – the 'agency', belonging to the poorest and the most socially excluded cohort in the village. After all, it is these individuals whose lifting out of poverty is the development agenda. The 'newness' of this initiative though is embedded in its structure such that the drivers of the change are these women, the 'agency' itself.

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Could this be the sustainable way forward for rural poverty reduction?

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