

## **WORKING TOGETHER TO EMPOWER RURAL INDIA: INSTITUTE OF RURAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT**

**Pooja O. Murada\***

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Institute of Rural Research and Development (IRRAD) is an initiative of the S. M. Sehgal Foundation. The Sehgal Foundation commenced operations with a vision to make a positive change in the lives of rural communities under the leadership of a forward looking visionary and an action-oriented implementer, Suri Sehgal. He always had a dream to change the tattered sketch of rural India, an India which has around 600,000 villages with many unmet needs of human life such as social equality, justice and the path to vertical mobility. To realise this objective, the S.M. Sehgal Foundation was registered as a non profit trust in 1999 bringing hope to villagers in Mewat, one of the most backward districts of Haryana in India. Mewat is inhabited by Meo Muslims, who have remained backward despite being in the proximity to the millennium city of Gurgaon.

With the strong belief in integrated models of rural development, the foundation nurtured a model, called “Integrated Sustainable Village Development” (ISVD) in 17 villages through programmes of water management, income enhancement, education, health and alternative energy. As a result of these interventions, 32000 people in the villages across Mewat have been brought on the path of progress. Water harvesting structures have quenched the thirst of many villagers; several farmers gained better access to inputs, support and markets; girls who had never been to school

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Pooja O. Murada, Director, Communications, Institute of Rural Research and Development, Plot No. 34, Sector 44, Institutional Area, Gurgaon – 122002, Haryana, India. Email: [poojamurada@irrad.org](mailto:poojamurada@irrad.org)

have received skill training; and access to better health services has given a new lease of life to a large number of residents of these villages. In order to take the accumulated learning and information to newer dimensions, the Foundation came up with the IRRAD, which further catalyses large scale rural development initiatives, and lights the path of discovery of better ways to help India’s rural poor.

### **IRRAD: Vision and Mission**

The IRRAD envisions to motivate the rural people across India and to empower them to make their lives more secure and prosperous through education, better health, improved skills, and supportive governance. Its mission is to implement the ISVD model of development in selected village clusters, build capacity in rural development, undertake rural research, improve village governance, and function as a premier knowledge institution for rural development and poverty reduction in rural India.

The IRRAD seeks to pursue its mission and achieve its vision with the following specific objectives:

- Develop need-based strategy and programmes for poverty alleviation through the ISVD;
- Undertake research and create knowledge on sustainable and replicable models of rural development;
- Build capacities for rural development through training programmes, and a network of partner organisations; and
- Create awareness and study the impact of local, state and national policies on rural development, and advocate for reform as needed.

### **ISVD Model**

The IRRAD has been working in the Mewat district of Haryana, which is among the lowest in the country on some of the socio-economic indices. Village development is a complex task in India, involving many

inter-related dimensions and thus, requiring the approach to be holistic. Together with the community and through grassroots level implementation, the IRRAD conceived and launched the ISVD model over a period of seven years, and the model is now being successfully replicated in many villages. The critical element of the model is that all implementation is by the local people, who are trained by the IRRAD. Besides, various external organisations receive training on the successful components of the ISVD, as per their requirement.

Apart from direct implementation, the IRRAD has four different centres, viz., (i) Programme Implementation; (ii) Capacity Building; (iii) Rural Research; and (iv) Policy, Governance and Advocacy. These four centres of the IRRAD are making consistent efforts at *bridging the information gap* between the marginalized communities and the policy makers. The trustworthiness and dependability of information come from effective community mobilisation, which lays the foundation of all development work. Once the stage is set and the buy-in from the community ensured, the sailing becomes smooth.

## I. PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION CENTRE

Several activities are undertaken by the programme implementation centre of the IRRAD through the programme implementation teams based in the villages with the active involvement of the panchayat (the village council). Under this scheme community centres are set up as local resource hubs, which cater to the needs of a cluster of villages providing facilities for training, demonstration, information, and services including a library, computer room, life skills education classroom, farmers' information cell, and limited residential accommodation for volunteers. The activities of the centre are led by individuals who have shown natural leadership talent and initiative, and are trained to become village champions (VCs). These VCs are the driving force in implementing programmes of sustainable development of the village communities and in replicating the ISVD model in other places. The different programmes implemented through the centre under the ISVD model are (1) water management, (2) income enhancement, (3) life skills education, (4) rural health and (5) alternative energy.

## 1. Water Management

The objective of the water management programme of the IRRAD is to create water conscious communities with focus on all aspects of water management, viz. collection, conservation, purification and disposal of waste water. It involves an integrated approach to water management and covers four aspects. First is collection, recharge and dilution of water. The specific activities involved in it are construction and/or maintenance of check dams, recharge wells, roof water harvesting, ponds etc. Second is provision of safe drinking water, which involves construction of bio-sand filters, stand posts, and hand pumps with platforms. Third is waste water disposal, for which the main solutions offered by the IRRAD are soak pits and soak wells. Fourth is water literacy, which consists in activities that are meant to create water consciousness among school children, women, youth and community.

IRRAD's water management programme has shown how clean water can change the lives of the people. Rain water harvesting for groundwater recharge is being demonstrated through the construction of contour trenches and bunds, gully plugs, check dams, recharge wells, rooftop harvesting and the reviving of traditional reservoirs. Waste water is disposed of safely through 'soak pits' that filter and clean the water before it percolates down into the water table. Hand pumps, taps and stand posts have helped water conservation, reduction in water contamination and equitable distribution of water throughout the village.

The benefits of the water management programme of the IRRAD at the community level have been improved availability of water in terms of both quality and quantity for consumption and irrigation, increase in crop productivity and coverage of area under vegetable cultivation, and better percolation of water into the ground and increase in the water table. At the household level the benefits have been improved quality of water (in terms of maintaining the levels of nitrates, fluorides and iron below the permissible limits prescribed by WHO), lower incidence of water borne diseases, increased availability of ground water resulting in better crop choice, and increased soil moisture content to deeper level and increased root zone depth leading to better plant vigour and productivity. Following table shows the achievements of the IRRAD in water management till March 2009.

**Table**  
**Achievements in Water Management till March 2009**

Type of Intervention	Number of Cases	Annual Rain Water Harvested in Kilo Litres
Check Dams(21) and Ponds(7)	28	23,25,350
Soak Pits	650	47,450
Recharging Wells	33	3300
Roof Water Harvesting	28	12,365
Traditional Ponds Revived	6	4285
Farm Bunding		1,12,500
Contour Bunding		20,000

#### *Case of Rangala Rajpur*

Rangala Rajpur village has had a successful water management intervention in surface water storage under the integrated watershed development programme. Here rain water was collected in five ponds. An earthen structure (bund) was constructed four years ago, and five ponds were developed along the earthen bund to maximise its benefits to the community. In spite of the scarce rainfall this year, the village community had enough water for its consumption. This brought in a sense of relief in the community as the water management interventions revived the wells which had dried up in the past.

The tangible outcomes from the project are cultivation of additional 50 acres of fallow land, and saving of 40 acres of land from flooding and top soil erosion. The project also has a potential of putting an efficient micro irrigation system which can cater up to 300 acres of land and further decrease the burden on groundwater to a considerable extent. Other activities like *pisciculture* (fish rearing), establishment of horticulture nursery and plantation of deep rooted trees can help improve recharging water sources and contribute to the economic development of the village. Rangala Rajpur is a model project which can be replicated to deal with water problems and at the same time lead to economic development of village communities having saline ground water.

## **2. Income Enhancement**

The programme of income enhancement has the objective of generating means of supplementing the average income of the villagers in a sustainable manner. The programme is focussed on agriculture and allied activities, promotes the use of new and improved agricultural technologies, and facilitates the forward and backward market linkages. It also creates and increases opportunities for women and youth in particular for addressing the chronic problems of unemployment and under-employment.

Several agriculture based activities are carried out under the programme of income enhancement. They include: promoting water efficient irrigation techniques (such as chiselling or deep ploughing, raised bed cultivation, and sprinkler); enriching soil through vermi-composting and balanced fertilizer application; encouraging inter-cropping and crop diversification; training on integrated pest and nutrition management; and setting up farmers' associations/groups. The common land development activities include: undertaking tree plantation; promoting fodder cultivation; protecting root stocks; and promoting forest natural regeneration.

The activities of the income enhancement programme have had positive outcomes. The participatory approach, that accepts the local social capital in implementing technologies, has served as one of the key driving forces in influencing the adoption of sustainable agricultural practices. The knowledge delivery system has been regularly keeping the farmers in the knowledge of crop diversification and change from the traditional cropping system to high value cash crop cultivation, especially pulses and vegetables. Farmers have now got increased awareness on identifying good quality inputs in agriculture instead of the locally available spurious inputs. A sustainable market linkage has been established with retailers that provides the best price for their produce and increases farmers' bargaining capacity. As an illustration of the achievements it may be mentioned that in IRRAD's intervention villages in Mewat, yields in mustard and wheat increased by 12-18 per cent after adopting the balanced micronutrients application in soil.

#### *Case of Masterji from Rangala*

The life of Master Ahmed from Rangala village of Mewat changed for the better after he adopted chiselling technique in his farming introduced by

the IRRAD. Master Ahmed, earlier known as a well off farmer, stepped up his prosperity with new ideas and better techniques in agriculture. It was in 2002, when he participated in a training session for farmers, that he was introduced to chiselling. He learnt the positive effects of chiselling (deep ploughing) on the growth of the plant leading to higher productivity and income. Master Ahmed decided to adopt the practice on his 30 acre farm where he grew wheat, mustard, jowar and bajra. With an initial investment of Rs. 18,000, IRRAD facilitated him in buying the chisel plough and a bed maker.

Today Master Ahmed's income has multiplied due to the increase in his farm productivity thanks to using chisel plough. He participates in each and every training session organised for the farmer community to learn new techniques in agriculture. "Training on vegetable cultivation fascinated me so much that I started growing combinations of tomato, brinjal, onion and carrot on my farm along with the conventional crop," says Master Ahmed. "It was like ushering a new dawn for me", he adds beamingly. Not only has the farm productivity increased manifolds due to the use of chisel but also his cost of cultivation has decreased with reduced irrigation cost. He rents out the chisel machine to other farmers in the village, earning extra income, and has become a role model as many farmers come to him for consultation. His farm is a living example of the success he reaped by adopting chisel ploughing. It was a talk in the village when it was first initiated in 2002 as teams from Pusa, Delhi came to visit his farm and appreciated him for achieving the success. This continues even today with his ever increasing dedication towards the chisel concept.

### 3. Life Skills Education

The programme of life skills education is designed to "impart skills to children and youth to empower them." Its objectives are to create a favourable environment for "quality" school education; to equip youth with vocational skills; to ensure 100 per cent literacy among the girls in the intervention villages; and to instil life skills among adolescents with special focus on girls.

The specific activities under the programme of life skills education include: literacy education using the curriculum made available from the State Resource Centre (SRC) and imparting life skills to adolescent girls using the

curriculum from the Centre for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA); conducting personality development workshops and recreational camps for the youth; organising focused group discussions with parents on social issues like early marriage and gender inequality; working with schools and communities towards the realisation of the "Right to Education"; and revitalising village education committees (VECs). Entrepreneurship and skill building activities include: vocational training centres; setting up self-help groups and assisting them in business development services; and endogenous tourism at Jyotisar in Kurukshetra district of Haryana.

Since 2004, life skills education has covered more than 15,000 girls and women through empowerment activities. More than 2000 girls have graduated from the skill training centres, and over 3200 children have been reached by improved school feeding programmes. Thanks to the IRRAD intervention, the defunct VECs now meet at regular intervals to discuss the needs of their schools and accordingly avail of the entitlements given by the government.

#### *Case of Parmal: Exemplifying Courage and Determination*

Parmal was a person with restricted mobility due to polio. Her mother was a single parent of two children. They had no regular source of income. During the harvesting season the mother used to work as a labourer in the fields of others and earned Rs.100 (about \$ 2) a day to support the family of three. On account of the non-availability of resources, Parmal had to drop out from the school. Her differential ability prevented her from working in the fields. She was a liability to her family.

However, since four years things have not been the same for Parmal. Her life took a turn in the year 2005, when she got associated with the life skill training of the IRRAD. Parmal learnt machine embroidery and subsequently became a trainer. From being a burden on the family she became the principal bread winner. She is now an expert in machine embroidery, and is assisted by her proud mother, who herself is now liberated from the drudgery of agricultural labour. As a skilled entrepreneur she now earns around Rs. 5000 per month.

#### 4. Rural Health

IRRAD's rural health programme is aimed at promoting health care in the villages through creation of health consciousness in communities on reproductive and child health, hygiene and sanitation, and utilisation of health care services in village communities. The IRRAD builds linkages with service providers and facilitates access to government health assistance schemes.

The specific activities undertaken by the programme include: training in safe motherhood and childhood; educating on sexually transmitted diseases and reproductive tract infections; promoting family planning; emphasising on personal hygiene; creating awareness on good nutrition practices; preventing communicable diseases; promoting the use of latrines; dai (midwife) training; working with government sub-centres for better delivery of health services; awareness building through creation of health taskforce in villages called *swasthya sakhis* (community health volunteers).

A special activity under the rural health programme of the IRRAD is the community led total sanitation campaign (CLT) for stopping defecation in the open. The CLTs have been organised in several villages aiming at behavioural change. Villages of Notki and Jyotisar are in the race to become open-defecation-free villages.

Another special activity has been for solid and liquid waste management. Jyotisar village in Kurukshetra is an example of inducing social and personal habits in segregating waste for better management. This has been achieved through tremendous community mobilisation, largely through the perseverance of women. Women and children act as vigilantes, armed with lathis (sticks) to take up cleaning of streets from time to time.

##### *Case of Notki Delivery Hut*

In the context of the large number of women in India who do not receive ante-natal checkups during pregnancy and almost 90 per cent of the deliveries taking place without the support from trained personnel, the IRRAD took up the challenge to establish a replicable delivery hut model to promote institutional delivery practices and to ensure regular immunisation in the villages. It has also the objective of controlling maternal mortality and ensuring registration of births.

As part of making Notki a demonstration village, the IRRAD along with the panchayat set up a delivery hut in the village. The delivery hut has two rooms, one for checkups and the other for delivery. The IRRAD also drew in government's support at a later stage and the government pitched in to provide essential supplies in the form of delivery kits, along with other medical equipment and condoms. A full time auxiliary nurse midwife (ANM) is now deputed from the government to manage the activities of the delivery hut. "The fully operational hut witnesses a number of delivery cases now," says ANM Shyamwati. This has also increased community participation and awareness regarding institutional deliveries.

#### 5. Alternative Energy

The IRRAD has a programme of non-conventional sources of energy. The key focus of this programme is to provide low cost energy solutions to the villages. The major source of alternative energy popularised by the IRRAD is solar energy. An important intervention in this area has been for providing solar street lights. The IRRAD's community centre in the village runs solely on solar power and is an example for the villagers.

## II. CAPACITY BUILDING CENTRE

The capacity building centre of the IRRAD addresses the fundamental need of villagers to have stronger capacities to catalyse, plan and manage their own agenda for change through training. The centre specialises in providing training, primarily in rural development. It follows a two pronged approach in its training: (1) classroom sessions and (2) practical application at the field level. The trainers are professionals in their respective field and have considerable experience at the field level in training and facilitation skills. There is also collaboration with other training institutions.

The capacity building centre provides training and technical support to: donor agencies, non-government organisations (NGOs), panchayats, schools, students of academic institutes and corporate firms. The substantive areas of the training offered include: rural development (water management, agriculture, life skills education, rural health, alternative energy, governance, research methodology); leadership and team building; environment education and water

literacy for school children; social development for management trainees of corporates and students of academic institutions; and training and capacity building of corporates for undertaking the work of rural development.

### III. RESEARCH CENTRE

The IRRAD has a research centre that is engaged in designing and conducting research in the area of rural development. The purpose of the centre is to produce field based evidence relevant to policy and programme formulation for effective rural development. The research centre conducts empirical research with the application of appropriate qualitative and quantitative methods to address issues concerning rural development and disseminates their findings to those engaged in programmes and policies of rural development. The centre works in close association with policy makers, other researchers, students and the rural community at large. The centre has three major research themes, viz. impact assessment, poverty and livelihood dynamics, and research innovation.

#### 1. Impact Assessment

The research centre is engaged in continuous assessment of IRRAD's interventions in the villages. This is required to ensure that the impact is real and measurable. The strategy followed in impact studies is to arrive at qualitative and quantitative measurement of change through surveys and panel data sets. The results of the studies are fed back to the programmes to take appropriate measures for more effective implementation. The process of impact assessment is carried out through both internal assessment and assessment by external agency. The topics of impact assessment studies that are currently in progress include: "Qualitative Assessment of the Integrated Sustainable Village Development Model", "Impact Assessment of Livelihood Solutions through Mobile Technology" and "Need Assessment of Life Skills in Mewat."

#### 2. Poverty and Livelihood Dynamics

Another set of research studies at the IRRAD are focused on understanding poverty dynamics in the rural context. They are strategic and policy level studies attempting to throw light on vulnerability, exclusion and

marginalization in rural community. An effort is made to link the Mewat level data of the centre's research with the macro level data within India, Asia and across the world. The ultimate objective of the studies on this theme is to contribute to the larger body of knowledge on poverty dynamics. The topics of current research studies under the theme are: "Agriculture and Health Linkages in Rural Mewat: Implications for Livelihood Security", "Vulnerability Assessment of Rural Mewat" and "Water Management Opportunities in Rural Mewat."

#### 3. Research Innovation

Studies under research innovation focus on liaison with the leading academic and research institutions engaged in social science research. In such studies the IRRAD works in partnership with these institutions through joint research studies, as well as through the provision of fellowships to their doctoral/post-doctoral students and visiting professors. The centre also develops externally funded projects in line with the IRRAD's mandate. Currently a study on "Alternative Technology Options in the Era of Climate Change" in collaboration with the Indian Institute of Technology, Mumabi is in progress.

### IV. POLICY, GOVERNANCE AND ADVOCACY CENTRE

The goal of reducing poverty and empowering rural India can be achieved only with the support of proper policies and their effective implementation. The constitutional provision of a dignified and decent life for all requires pro poor policy frameworks and effective governance of programmes designed for the benefit of the common man. It is against this backdrop that the policy and governance centre of the IRRAD seeks to function. To promote the good governance practices among the public, nonprofits and private sectors for the benefit the rural poor, the policy centre has launched a *sushasan abhi* (good governance now) campaign. The activities of the centre are aimed at sensitising the rural poor about their entitlements from the government, enabling them to identify problems in governance affecting their interests and voice their concerns through representations, deposition before appropriate forums and litigations. The issues identified during the processes are then taken to policy makers for inputs, amendments and changes. Thus the centre offers a platform to empower rural communities and sensitise policy makers.

“Be the change you wish to see in the world,” said Mahatma Gandhi. The trainees under the year long rural governance training imparted by the IRRAD at the grassroots, have put the above into practice and shown the pathway towards effective rural governance. A feedback session organised on 19 January 2009 at the Ghaghas community centre, to evaluate the first four months of the training programme gave insight into some very positive and enthusing developments in their lives as well as their response to local governance issues.

### *Case of Experience with RTI Act*

Right to Information (RTI) act, hailed as a weapon to fight corruption, opacity and arbitrariness, has worked wonders at the grassroots. In village Agon, some of the households below the poverty line, who were eligible to get plots under the rural housing scheme, were denied this entitlement and our trainees took the lead in using the RTI act to find the criterion and details of the said decision of denial. As a result, the entire allotment of the plots in the village was cancelled by the district administration and the process of re-plotting is underway which included the names of these complainants.

The group also feels that their effective participation can change the abysmal scenario in governance. The group has realised that women's participation is necessary to make the development process more inclusive and holistic. Women have also come forward and are undergoing training on various governance issues. This was ensured through a lot of persuasion to villagers to involve more and more women in the programme.

The group now realises that the masses are the rightful owners of the system and the government functionaries are appointed to work for their welfare. The public distribution system (PDS), which was in a defunct state before, is now functional in six intervention villages. The ration depot holders have assured their cooperation in freeing the distribution system from corruption and other problems.

As part of the training programme, the voices of the trainees have reached the Parliament of India regarding their views on the implementation of the RTI act, 2005 in Haryana. The group has sent to the Parliamentary Committee its views on the various aspects of the implementation of the RTI act.

Juxtaposed to the helpless lot, exposed to the whims and fancies of the power bearers, we now see a group of change makers whose quest for effective rural governance is difficult to quench. We hope to witness many successes and breakthroughs in the continuing reign of people's power.

## **SUPPORT CENTRES**

The support centres of the IRRAD function for facilitating the professional activities of the IRRAD in rural development. The main support centres are those of communication, resource mobilisation, information technology, partnership and library.

### **Communication**

The mainstay of the communication team at the IRRAD is awareness, belief and purpose. The team members have been working to disseminate timely and useful information to emanate transparency and trust which the IRRAD stands for. The broad strategy is to share the knowledge and experience with the grassroots communities on one hand, and with the donors, volunteers and government on the other. The various outreach programmes are shared with the interest groups through the print, web and electronic media, as well as with other organisations and institutions through academic papers and articles, community interactions through events and meetings, and publications like annual reports, newsletters and other materials of information education communication.

### **Resource Mobilisation**

The IRRAD has created successful development models through its various programme centres over time which can now be scaled up within the region of Mewat and also extended to other regions of India. Resource mobilisation aims to raise financial and technical resources from various national and international institutional donors, government programmes and private corporations in order to take the model of integrated sustainable village development of the IRRAD to larger number of communities and organisations in the country.

## Information Technology

The overall goal of the service of information technology (IT) is to ensure that the essential information needs of villages are met through computer literacy training and exposure to web-based information retrieval. Interactive IT tools are put to use for community organisation and informal education purposes in support of the programmes under the capacity building centre of the IRRAD.

## Partnership

The IRRAD has entered into several partnership programmes with government, international organisations, NGOs, and the corporate sector. These partnerships leverage the available financial, technical and supportive resources from each other for the common objective of rural development. This approach is part of the IRRAD's commitment to pool strengths, learn from others and work with them to the best benefit of those in need.

## Library

Rural development is a top priority issue in various policies formulated at the national and state level. However, researchers often face difficulty in accessing the most up-to-date information and literature on rural development. To bridge this gap, the IRRAD has an easy-to-access library for the benefit of students, researchers, civil society organisations and advocacy groups. To strengthen the overall research capacity, the library provides online access to journals, books, data, and a range of web-based services and relevant software support.

## The Green Building

The IRRAD building has been constructed, 'to lead by example', putting the latest knowledge and technology into use. It is a 'smart' facility combining simplicity of design with environment-friendly technologies. Some of the key features of the building are: 35 KwP photovoltaic panels, energy-efficient heating/cooling and lighting, waste-water recycling and zero water run-off site.

## CONCLUSION

If it were easy to eradicate poverty, it would have been done long ago. Quick-fix, one-size-fits-all, central-directive approaches fail when applied to complex human and social problems. The IRRAD aspires to inspire and succeed to the extent possible by motivating our village partners "to be the change." With the working side by side, rather than the top down approach, the IRRAD puts the village poor in the driver's seat of development. Through self empowerment their leadership abilities blossom and the seemingly impossible become achievable.

The IRRAD's intervention in the rural community has received recognition from various agencies – government and non-government, and national and international. The IRRAD holds a consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council and is a member of the Clinton Global Initiative. The IRRAD would like to explore further possibilities of rural development and strengthen collaborative work. We will be more than happy to discuss alternatives such as technical and financial collaborations, internships, volunteering, capacity building, and many more. Website: [www.irrad.org](http://www.irrad.org); Email: [communications@irrad.org](mailto:communications@irrad.org)

## Note

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