

What might agricultural interventions bring to tribal people?

INDIA COUNTRY PROGRAMME EVALUATION (2009)

Support for tribal development has been a notable feature of IFAD's interventions in India, as it is the only major external donor that views this objective as a core element of its country programme. With a population of more than 80 million, tribal people comprise around 8 per cent of the total population in India, but almost 16 per cent of the poor. The encroachment of local governments and private interests on forests and mineral resources has pushed tribal groups onto increasingly degraded land, thus making their survival a constant struggle. At the same time, the tribal areas have been starved of the social and physical infrastructure necessary for the country's growing modern economy.

All these factors have led to the tribal areas becoming fertile ground for groups that oppose government control and seek the return of tribal lands. These groups, especially the *Naxalites*, have caused serious security problems and, as a consequence, have made it difficult for the Government to provide the development services needed. Over the past 20 years, IFAD has established a reputation in India as one of the few organizations willing to develop programmes in tribal areas. Even among the dissident groups, there appears to be respect for what IFAD is trying to achieve and a willingness to accept its interventions in such areas. In some states (for example, Andhra Pradesh), IFAD-supported interventions have helped to reduce conflict and contributed to promoting peace and harmony.

IFAD's Office of Evaluation (OE) has undertaken in-depth evaluations of a number of tribal development projects in the past. As a general rule, projects in tribal areas are complex and cover a wide range of activities. The first such intervention, the Orissa Tribal Development Project, encountered problems owing to its complexity, especially in promoting a culture of working with NGOs in the late 1980s. Subsequent interventions have built on lessons learned from that project and used a community development framework to determine the activities undertaken. The core of the tribal development interventions is to empower tribal communities to develop plans and take decisions on their priority needs. The post-Orissa Tribal Development Project generation of tribal interventions have usually started with the formation of groups: self-help groups (SHGs), often not exclusively made up of women; natural resource management groups that focus on forest and fisheries conservation; and village development committees set up to prepare village

development plans and determine the use of community-driven development grants for social and economic infrastructure. IFAD's institutional model of using NGOs has been particularly important in ensuring the effectiveness of these different approaches.



Primitive tribal group village in Chhattisgarh
Photo by Dr Dushmantha Kumar Giri

The Fund's tribal development operations have led to substantial improvements in infrastructure, a particularly good example here being the North-Eastern Region Community Resources Management Project. The project has invested in substantial small irrigation schemes, catchment dams and land improvements to deal with some of the erosion problems associated with shifting cultivation. IFAD has supported the establishment of natural resource management groups and water resource committees to maintain and manage these investments. The infrastructure components of the tribal development projects have been very popular among the villagers. In Meghalaya, the Livelihoods Improvement Project in the Himalayas was originally designed without an infrastructure component. However, in response to popular demand, IFAD later reallocated part of the loan funds for this purpose.

The promotion of livelihoods is not only the most important part of the tribal interventions; it is also the most problematic. The projects provide some direct loan funding for such components but most is used on expertise to design and supervise the required investments, with loans funded through commercial banks. One encouraging development is that links with government officials, particularly local representatives of line ministries, tend to be much stronger in the tribal operations than in others. Under the Livelihoods Improvement Project in the Himalayas, a local district horticulture officer has promoted the growing of flowers in the West Garo hills of Meghalaya, with support from the project management unit. The villagers have built up a significant trade in locally-produced flowers. The district animal husbandry officer has started up a hatchery for improved breeds of chickens with project support, and there has been considerable take-up of these breeds in the area. However, other investments give rise to more serious concern. The underlying market analysis was limited and the investments do not appear to be 'owned' by the tribal populations; therefore, in the absence of continued, close supervision from the project management unit, their viability is open to question.

The projects have been generally on more solid ground when it comes to on-farm development through adding livestock and diversifying crop production, especially through the reintroduction of traditional crops in the tribal areas. For many years it has been argued that the priority for improving natural resource management in tribal areas is to eliminate shifting cultivation and persuade the communities to turn to settled agriculture in valley bottoms, supplemented by terracing. The project management unit of the Livelihoods Improvement Project in the Himalayas has reached a different conclusion. Shifting cultivation is an intrinsic part of the tribal system and tradition, and, in the view of many experts, is consistent with effective natural resource management provided it is spread over a cycle sufficiently long for complete recovery of the land. The project management unit in Meghalaya is attempting to persuade villagers to change from six-to-eight-year slash-and-burn cycles to 12-year cycles. In addition, small investments are being made in water catchments and erosion prevention to increase yields from shifting agriculture.

Despite the efforts of both the Government and IFAD, tribal groups still have a limited voice in Indian society. Its tribal projects have given the Fund an important opportunity to participate in national policy debates on tribal rights. In support of Indian legislation offering land rights to tribals, in its first Orissa project, the Fund successfully pioneered an approach whereby rights to traditional forest land were given jointly to husbands and wives. However, the question of tribals' land rights has been a particularly difficult one to deal with owing to the absence of written records, the private sector's interest in gaining access both to valuable forests and to the even more valuable mineral resources often found beneath them, and, especially because administration of the law by state governments is seldom to the benefit of tribal populations.

Clearly, much still needs to be understood about the best modalities for tribal development in India and elsewhere. The arguments presented above are based on the country programme evaluation of India undertaken by OE in 2009, which emphasized the need for IFAD to continue its support for tribal development and to continue to innovate and experiment with what works best for these communities.

Further information:

Evaluation Insights are produced by the IFAD Office of Evaluation and aim to provide concise, up-to-date reflection on issues arising from IFAD evaluations. This issue is based on the Republic of India, Country Programme Evaluation, Report N° 2199-IN, March 2010, ISBN 978-92-9072-142-0, Office of Evaluation, IFAD, Via Paolo di Dono 44, Rome 00142, Italy. The full report, the Profile, and two Insights: N° 12-*What might agricultural interventions bring to tribal people* and N° 13-*Empowering women through self-help groups*, are available online at www.ifad.org/evaluation; email: evaluation@ifad.org.