



Image: Mahila Mates training in Dobhi, Bihar

Image: SHG meeting in Budhni, MP

Image: SHG women in a VO meeting in Bijadandi, MP

Enhancing Women's Empowerment Within India's Complex Rural Development System

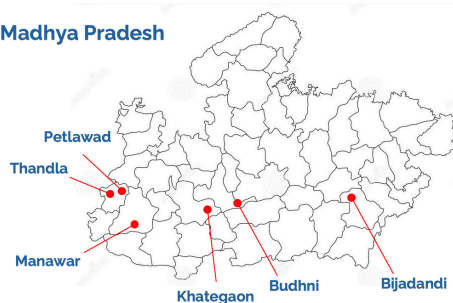
Learnings from a project on the convergence of India's major rural development programs

Over the past two decades, the Government of India's flagship rural development programs, the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), have focused on rural income generation and women's participation. NRLM helps organize women into Self-Help Groups (SHGs) for economic and social advancement, while MGNREGA provides up to 100 days of rural employment annually at a set wage

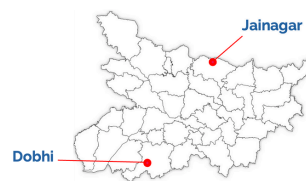
To reap synergies, the government has promoted the **"Convergence"** between these and other programs, often linking with village-level democratically elected institutions for self-government, or Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs)

This evaluation sought to learn from a BMGF-supported project to support convergence in Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Bihar, led by Transform Rural India Foundation (TRIF) and Project Concern International (PCI)-India, respectively

Madhya Pradesh

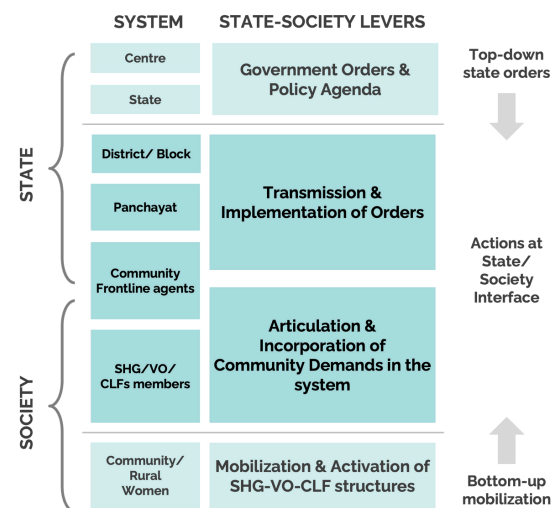


Bihar



The "sandwich" between top-down policies/government orders and bottom-up mobilization of SHG women

State	Convergence Interventions	Intervention Blocks
Madhya Pradesh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrate community demands - collected through SHG-driven Village Poverty Reduction Plans (VPRP) - with village development planning process (i.e., Gram Panchayat Development Plan or GPDP) Increase access to govt. schemes and entitlements through gender resource centers called Nari Adhikar Kendras (NAK) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bijadandi Khategaon Manawar Petlawad Thandla Budhni
Bihar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrate community demands (VPRP) with village development planning process (GPDP) Increase employment via Mahila Mates (female supervisors) who form SHG labor groups and oversee MGNREGA worksites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dobhi Jainagar



DESIGN OF THE PROJECT AND EVALUATION

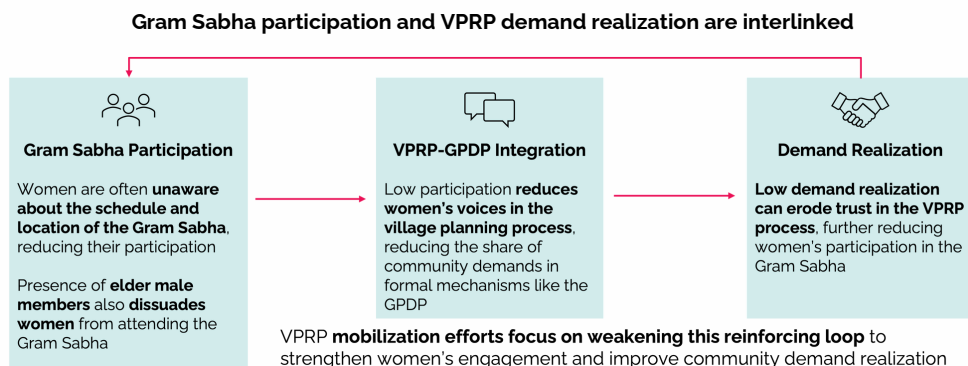
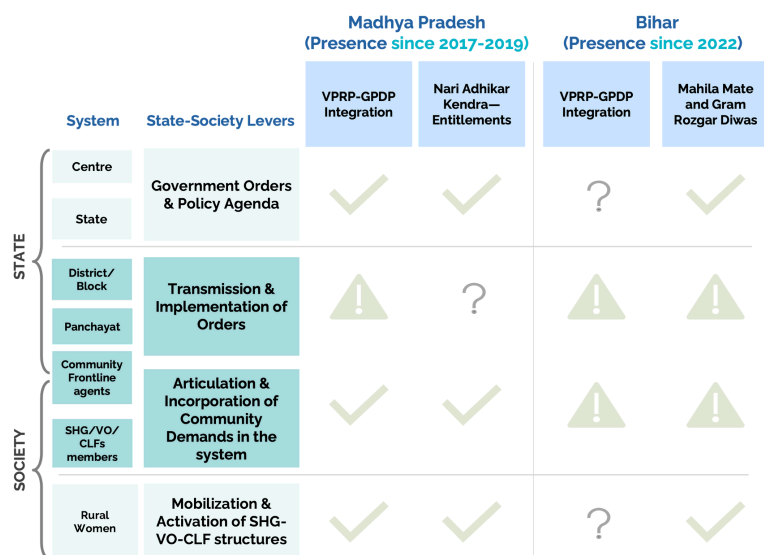


KEY FINDINGS

- Convergence involves change in a complex system. This is a long, multi-year process with many sources of inertia and resistance
- The core design is of a "sandwich" between top-down policies/orders and bottom up mobilization of SHG women. Much of the real action is both within the state and at the state-societal interface
- TRIF and PCI engaged in both system-wide government orders and local experimentation in selected block and panchayat levels to prototype stronger linkages between the state and the SHG movement
- The "adaptive" evaluation involved two core approaches: "system diagnosis" to understand levers for change and blockages, and "process tracing" of activities to understand what happened, how and why
- Mixed methods (both qualitative and quantitative) were used throughout

- Major progress at the top, in the form of well-designed government directives, and at the bottom, in women's mobilization through SHGs
- Change has been slower...
 - in the middle of the system—due to coordination, execution and payment issues
 - in incorporating village-level demands—due to issues of information, procedural roadblocks, and local resistance
- Outcomes show most progress in provision of village-level public resources and individual entitlements. There were limited gains in livelihood assets or in workdays through MGNREGA under the project
- Survey data indicates overall progress in household assets and women's agency, likely reflecting long-term developments in the state
- MP is at a more advanced stage in the process. Bihar started more recently and is earlier in the transition

Across interventions and states, major challenges lie in transmission & implementation of orders, and articulation and incorporation of community demands in the system, both of which are crucial levers



GDP planning largely emphasizes community-level assets. Individual livelihood assets under MGNREGA remain limited due low asset expenditure, constrained by supply-side challenges, particularly inadequate material budgets to create such assets

"There are guidelines on Category B assets stating that the work can be taken up under MGNREGA...But these [actions] are driven by decisions made at the district and block level...We do not take requests for Category B work as we cannot submit it in the GPDP"

- A Sarpanch in MP (asked about Category-B livelihood asset requests in the VPRP)

While the inclusion of livelihood assets in the GPDP has been limited, some individuals managed to navigate the system effectively by leveraging their connections with panchayat leadership or utilizing the SHG network



"As the Chairperson of my SHG, I led the application for the goat shed. The support from other members and my position helped me navigate the process and complete it successfully"

However, general payment issues may afflict asset acquisition, forcing beneficiaries to bear high out of pocket expenditure, often relying on SHG loans or informal borrowing



"We received partial construction materials for the poultry shed. To complete the work, we borrowed ₹5,000 from our SHG...These costs added financial pressure, but we managed to complete the shed on time"

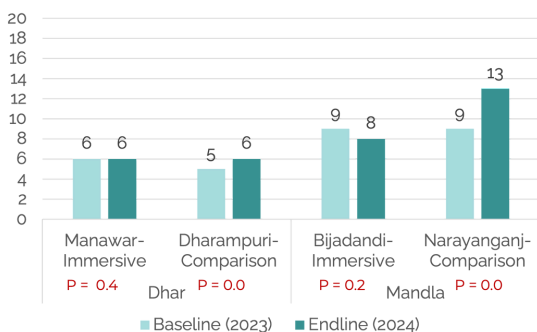
Acquired assets, including sheds for livestock, land improvements, and particularly housing, contributed to enhanced quality of life and supported economically productive activities



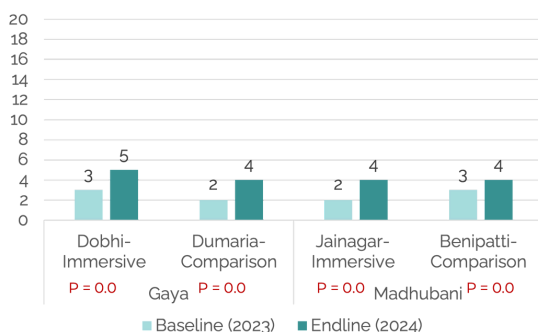
"It is a good thing that we got a pucca (sturdy) house made. We run our tailoring business from here. It's also clean and safe for the family to have a pucca house"

Access to entitlements has substantial reach, especially in Madhya Pradesh. In Bihar awareness and access is lower but rising significantly, especially in immersion areas

Avg. Schemes Available (# of schemes) in MP



Avg. Schemes Available (# of schemes) in Bihar



In MP, **Nari Adhikar Kendras (NAKs)** have helped streamline access to entitlements, with high approval rates driven by progress in orders, training, and NAK cadre mobilization. TRIF is playing a key role in strengthening training and community engagement as the model transitions from a prototype to a fully state-led initiative

In Bihar, levels of awareness and schemes available were lower than MP, but saw significant growth

In both MP and Bihar, increase in uptake of schemes in both program and non-program areas suggests broader system-wide effects on entitlement access

Mahila Mates to supervise MGNREGA works in Bihar were mobilized by SHG networks, but payment and deployment challenges affected realization of program goals

- Government orders facilitated the registration of Mahila Mates and the operationalization of Gram Rozgar Diwas. Awareness of Mahila Mates was high in immersion blocks
- Administrative data shows high state-wide employment of Mahila Mates. Project areas worked to tackle challenges such as MGNREGA staff deployment issues and payment delays, while also strengthening support infrastructure
- Mahila Mates valued the Gram Rozgar Diwas for MGNREGA grievance redressal. Interventions continue to focus on increasing PRI and government official participation in these forums

"The PRS (Panchayat Rozgar Sewak) is not giving us any work. When we asked, he gave us one work, where we had to dig a canal on a hill. There were boulders there. How could we do it? Since then, he has not given us any more work"

- Mahila Mate, Dobhi, Gaya

"We must work with the Mukhiya. We cannot work by going against him. In MGNREGA work, Mukhiya's workers also need to be deployed. So, we use 10 of Mahila Mates' workers and 10 of Mukhiya's workers whenever we deploy Mahila Mates"

- PRS (GP MGNREGA Official), Jainagar, Madhubani



Top - Mahila Mates Registration in Jainagar, Madhubani

Right - Gram Rozgar Diwas in progress in Dobhi, Gaya

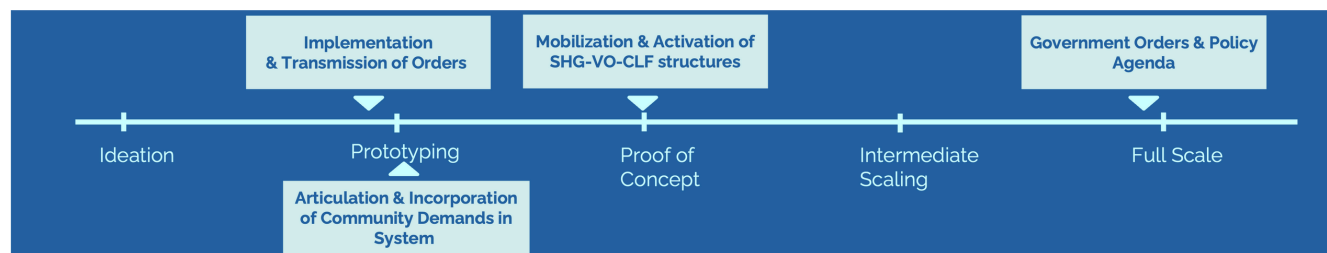


Lessons and Prospects

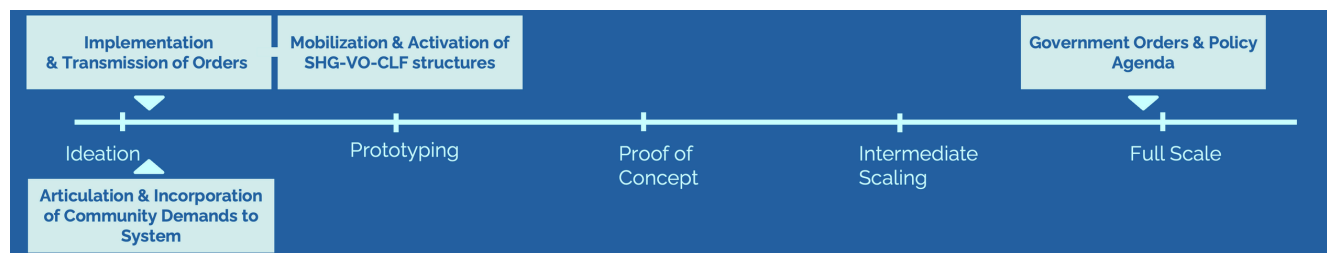
Convergence initiatives have shown **progress in a short span of time**, with some **positive changes offset by systemic resistance and specific design challenges**

In relation to the **scaling pathway for change**, there has been much **more progress on government policy and specific orders**, compared with within the state and the state-society interface

In MP, government orders are now largely at scale; other levers are earlier in the scaling continuum. Prototypes show potential for change



In Bihar, most levers are in initial phases with government orders partially at full scale



*Comparable assessments for NAK and Mahila Mates in the full report

Directions for the next phase of change

Current Progress

Next Frontiers for further development

1 Policy orders & directives

Both MP and Bihar have witnessed **a large number of government orders to promote and support bottom-up demand generation processes**. These are crucial for authorization, legitimacy and momentum in pushing initiatives forward

- Ensuring **effective transmission of these orders** from the district, block, to the gram panchayat **through data driven monitoring**
- More specific guidance on **how to implement the policy orders at the frontline**
- Facilitating **interdepartmental coordination** perhaps via coordination committees that meet regularly on a **focused agenda with full attendance**
- Facilitating **buy-in of orders from PRI**, for whom these orders may pose threats to power
- Declining **budgets for social programs** (e.g., MGNREGA) and payment delays

2 Technical Innovations

The **TRIF Badlav portal and the existing E-gram swaraj portal** for tracking which village demands are incorporated into Gram Panchayat Plans **are foundational platforms for information, transparency, monitoring and accountability**

- Processes to ensure the **app is used correctly and information is filled accurately** in a timely manner and **with fidelity**
- More extensive **training to improve technological proficiency of community resources persons (CRP)** to input data into applications
- **Improvements in user experience**, e.g., reducing app instability and difficulties in updating demand related details
- Addressing challenges around **rural network connectivity**

3 Frontline worker engagement

Community Resource Persons (CRPs), often rooted in SHG mobilizations are vital intermediaries in the state-society interface. **Both MP and Bihar are leveraging CRPs to drive convergence initiatives**

- Providing **continued training to CRPs**
- Providing **support structures to manage CRP workload** and burden, especially in light of a large volume and backlog of unprocessed demands
- **Transitioning** from TRIF/PCI paid CRPs **to government paid CRPs** to replicate their catalytic role across the state
- Reducing CRP dependency by **greater involvement of PRI** (especially in Bihar)
- **Tackling overuse of CRPs in various other development initiatives** in health, education etc.

4 Community engagement

There has been **increase in both awareness and participation in initiatives by SHG women** in both MP and Bihar

- Nurturing & **growing Gram Sabha participation of rural women**
- Facilitating other **grievance redressal forums** (like the Gram Rozgar Diwas in Bihar) but **with active participation of PRI** and other state actors to be able to solve problems
- Managing **disenchantment and disinterest in community due to unfulfilled demands**, in part by focusing on early successes and schemes with high resource envelopes
- **Reducing barriers to Category B asset creation** such as elite capture, lack of information or misinformation, and lack of out-of-pocket funds
- **Tackling overuse of SHGs in various development initiatives** in health, education, etc.