



# Transforming Tales

Visual imagery reflecting journalism or  
community engagement

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## About **Sewa International**

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Sewa International is an organisation with a mission to nurture institutions of social impact, and serve humanity. In our two decades of work, we have worked across the length and breadth of the nation to inculcate the spirit of Sewa as a means for societal transformation or Parivartan. Our direct projects span across India, and globally across 25+ countries as the 'Sewa' movement.

## **Vision**

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Sewa International, as a premier non-profit, would live in a world of equality, where everyone is happy, enjoys good health, has equal growth opportunities and lives in balance with nature. In the event of any disaster, Sewa will be called in and be among the first to serve.

## **Mission**

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Sewa International serves humanity in distress, aids local communities, and promotes volunteerism. We engage our beneficiaries to be agents of change in development and strive to make progress broad-based.



# Foreword

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It is with great pride and enthusiasm that we present this compendium of case studies, a culmination of the hard work and dedication of our social journalists. This collection represents the diverse and compelling narratives from grassroots communities, highlighting the unique challenges and triumphs that often go unnoticed. Through these case studies, we aim to shed light on the real-world impact of social journalism and its vital role in society.

In an era where information is abundant yet often superficial, social journalism stands as a beacon of depth and authenticity. It bridges the gap between marginalized communities and the broader public, ensuring that every story, no matter how small, is heard and valued. As a development professional, I have witnessed firsthand the transformative power of storytelling. Social journalism not only informs but also empowers communities, fostering a sense of belonging and driving social change. This compendium is a testament to the significance of this work and the profound impact it can have on society.

I encourage you, dear reader, to delve into these case studies with an open heart and mind. Each story is a window into a world that is both unique and universal, reflecting the resilience and strength of the human spirit. As you explore these narratives, may you be inspired to take action, advocate for change, and contribute to the ongoing dialogue that shapes our society. Together, we can amplify these voices and continue to drive the impact of social journalism.

# Acknowledgements

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This compendium would not have been possible without the unwavering support and contributions of many individuals and organizations. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to our dedicated team of social journalists whose passion and commitment have brought these stories to life: Rajesh, Prajwal, Navneet, Rashi, Chetan, Pratap, Gautam, Nozomi, Vanshika, Disha, Arushi, Rubiya, Akshita, Shaivya, Rahman, Krutika, Samiksha, Phanindra, Adarsh, +Tanu, and Naresh. Special thanks to our workshop speakers and facilitators for sharing their expertise and insights: Ram Kakani Ji, Suparna Diwakar Ji, Sakshi Abrol Ji, Prakash Bhatt Ji, Venketaish Ji, Shatakshi Ji, Milind Thattee Ji, Sewa International Communications Team, Sanjay Ji, Menaki Ji, Sristy Ji, and the Sewa International Programme Team including Anohita Ji, Hemul Ji, Amulya Ji, and Gokul Ji. I also acknowledge our printing support team, led by Prem Kumar Ji, and our project partners: Tarak Ram Ji, Phoolbasan Devi Ji, Venugopal Ji, Narendra Paul Ji, Ashwani Tiwari Ji, Kshama Ji, and Viren Joshi Ji. Without their invaluable support, this initiative would not have been possible.

# Introduction

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The Social Journalism Program, which commenced on May 15, 2024, was created to engage working professionals from the corporate sector in the world of social journalism. Over a span of 2.5 months, nine dedicated teams embarked on this journey, each partnering with various organizations to delve into specific social issues. Their work involved in-depth exploration and documentation of these issues, providing a detailed account of the challenges and successes faced by grassroots communities.

This compendium stands as a testament to the program's objectives. It captures the essence of the stories uncovered by these teams, illustrating the profound impact of social journalism. By presenting these case studies, we aim to highlight the program's purpose and goals: to shed light on critical social issues and advocate for change through the power of storytelling. The importance of these case studies cannot be overstated, as they offer invaluable insights into the real-world effects of social journalism, bridging the gap between marginalized communities and the broader public. Through these narratives, we seek to foster a deeper understanding of complex social realities and inspire action that drives meaningful social change.

# Understanding Social Journalism

Social journalism is a field dedicated to covering and addressing social issues with a focus on depth, context, and community impact. Unlike traditional journalism, which often prioritizes breaking news and headline stories, social journalism seeks to explore the underlying causes and broader implications of social phenomena. Its scope encompasses a wide range of issues, from poverty and inequality to environmental challenges and human rights abuses, providing a comprehensive view of the issues that affect marginalized and underserved communities.

Journalists in the realm of social journalism play a crucial role in shedding light on these issues. They go beyond reporting the facts to engage with communities, understand their experiences, and convey their stories with empathy and accuracy. This approach helps to raise awareness, foster dialogue, and drive action by highlighting the human aspect of social issues. Through thorough research and in-depth reporting, social journalists aim to give a voice to those who might otherwise go unheard, advocating for systemic changes and policy reforms.

The impact of storytelling in community engagement is profound. By presenting stories that resonate on a personal level, social journalism fosters a deeper connection between audiences and the subjects of the stories. This connection not only informs but also inspires readers and viewers to become actively involved in addressing the issues highlighted. Effective storytelling can mobilize communities, influence public opinion, and spur collective action, ultimately contributing to meaningful social change. Through its focus on impactful narratives, social journalism enhances our understanding of social issues and empowers individuals and communities to drive progress.

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## Case Studies



# In Togetherness and Abundance:

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The story of women-led  
community farming in  
the Himalayas

*Authors*

*Krutika Katre & Samiksha Goel*



## Important Definitions & Abbreviations

**Nali** - Nali is a land measurement unit used in Uttarakhand. It is used to assess indicated the quantity of seed required for cultivating the land. 1 Nali is approximately equal to 2160 sq. feet, and 1 acre of land is equivalent to 20 nalis.

**Himsampada** - It is a Farmer Producer Group formed by Sewa International

**SHG** – Self-help groups

**NRLM** - National Rural Livelihoods Mission

**Ha** - Hectare (unit of area in the metric system equal to 100 2.47 acres, or 10,000 square metres)

## Acknowledgement:

We extend our sincere gratitude to all stakeholders at Sewa International for granting us the opportunity to study the “Community Farming Project” and document its inspiring stories. In particular, we would like to thank Jinesh Lal, Dileesha, Kumar Shubham and Anohita from SEWA International Central Team for holding together the Sewa Journalism project. We are also very grateful to Sewa’s Uttarakhand Team, particularly Tarak Ram (State Lead Uttarakhand), Manwar Rawat (District Manager), Sanjay Ji (Block Lead), Santoshi Ji, Hemlata Ji & Kailash Ji (Chandrapuri Team), Lata Barthwal (Pokhri Team) for supporting us on the field and enabling us to travel to remote locations of the community farms. Finally, our deepest thanks go to the women community farmers, whose powerful stories and lived experiences shaped this case study. While their names are not mentioned here to respect their privacy, their voices remain central to this work.

## Executive Summary:

The story of agrarian distress in India is tragic and deep, affecting communities across regions and castes. In a country where agriculture sustains the majority, the rural population was suddenly left without a viable livelihood. While numerous studies trace the roots of this crisis to the commercialization and corporatization of the countryside, the consequences have only deepened and led millions further into poverty.

While it may not be easy to put a stop to large scale commercialization of the agriculture sector to build dignified livelihoods for all, there have been many initiatives and interventions to support the small-scale rural agrarian community in India. Community farming by Sewa International in the hills of Uttarakhand is one such initiative which we will be talking about in this case study.

Community farming is an approach where small and sub-marginal farmers pool resources to reduce costs, improve food security, and benefit from scale. Sewa International practises this approach exclusively with women farmers, and yes, not only has it empowered the women of the community, but it has also led to a kind of abundance in produce that had hitherto seemed unreal.

This is the story, primarily, of togetherness. Sewa International's approach is a testimony to the fact that civil service organizations need only serve as the catalyst; the real solution always lies with the community.

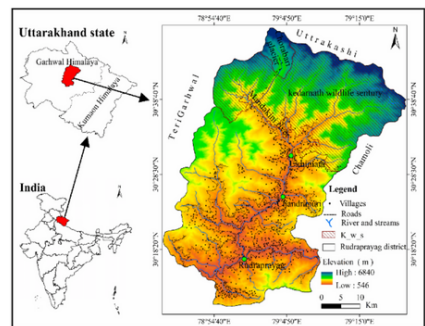
# Livelihoods & Agriculture in Hilly areas - Unpacking the Problem

## Uttarakhand's multi-dimensional livelihood crisis

As the narrative on climate change evolves to warn us of what lies ahead, the mountainous regions are among the first to bear its brunt. Uttarakhand, nestled in the Himalayan ranges of Northern India, exemplifies this increased vulnerability (Raghuvanshi & Ansari, 2020). Popularly called “The land of Gods”, owing to the number of pilgrimage sites in the state, its faith is being challenged by horrifying calamities such as the Kedarnath floods of 2013. Washing away over thousands of people and countless animals, this catastrophe was next only to the Tsunami of 2004 in India.

However, these environmental disasters represent only one dimension of the challenges faced by communities in these regions. Even in the period of relative stability, residents contend with persistent socio-economic vulnerabilities, and the pursuit of a stable livelihood is marked by resilience against deeply entrenched challenges.

Take Pokhri for example, a small Gram Panchayat located in the midst of the Himalayan mountains in Rudraprayag district of Uttarakhand. The villages are agrarian, hilly, secluded, and quiet throughout the year, and see no major tourism despite their picturesque beauty. Thus, the major source of livelihood of the villagers remains their farms, and small shops/businesses some of the families have set up.



A small town a little away from Pokri, named Chandrapuri is similar in terms of the deteriorating livelihoods, except for the annual “yatra” season when the devotees of Kedarnath and Badrinath travel for the pilgrimage. The pilgrim season not only brings with it noise and crowds, but also a majestic opportunity for the local youth and families to earn their livelihoods; for some, the only source of their livelihood. So, the family set-up guest houses are no longer vacant and young

boys and men of the families who have migrated further north return to the villages and get petty jobs in hotels, guest houses, or as guides for the pilgrims. The income, apart from being seasonal, involves great risks, provides no stability, and no job security. During the “off-season period”, people come back to their farms and grow as much as they can.

## Green Revolution, and its forgotten small-scale farmers

Primarily a hilly state, Uttarakhand, of its total area of about 5.35 million ha, 86% is mountainous, and supports about 50% of the state population [Rana, Bisht, 2023]. Fragmented and small land holdings are given in such topographies. Most of the area of the state is under forests and wastelands, thus leaving only a small amount of cultivable land i.e. 0.74 lakh ha (about 1.4%). Out of this, about 89% are under small and sub- marginal which amounts to the average land holding of a farmer to less than 1 ha (Uttarakhand Statistical Diary, 2017). Handling uncertainties in agriculture becomes even more difficult for such small and marginal farmers.

But even the agriculture isn't as it used to be. India's agrarian class collapsed and was pushed to the margins of society, leaving them poor, vulnerable, and open for exploitation.

The crisis started with the on-set of the green revolution, which was envisioned as a boon for India's food security. However, it led to a kind of production that is so fast and so dependent on artificial and chemical methods of fertilization, that it makes it impossible for a small-scale farmer to compete with it. The effects of it deepened further due to policy neglect, ecological fragility, market dependency, and migration pressures (Ahoy, 2016).

Even in Pokhri and nearby areas, distressed or aspirational migration, which is a direct result and a direct cause of the failing agrarian businesses, is a common phenomenon. Men migrate because they know even with three times the effort, the farm won't earn enough. Young men already aware of this truth, and with imaginations fueled by popular media and culture, go to cities with hopes and aspirations. Not only does it cause a major brain drain in the community, but it also puts their traditional livelihoods at a major risk of extinction.

In almost the whole of the area of Rudraprayag district, supply of fruits and vegetables comes from Najibabad, a town almost 150 km south at the border of Uttar Pradesh. The large-scale producers from places such as Najibabad decide the rates of production, which is neither fair nor sustainable for the local farmers in Pokhri.



It is also indefinitely hard for communities such as those in Pokhri in Uttarakhand to keep up with the changing food patterns. The people have traditionally always been farmers, but their indigenous knowledge in farming was never for wheat and rice, but for various millets such as bajra, jawar, etc. Since the eating patterns in the Indian sub-continent changed decades ago, the knowledge that was accumulated with centuries of work is not of much use, and the knowledge for rice and wheat farming is still only developing. A small example could be the use of cow dung as a fertilizer while growing wheat, which while supporting the wheat seeds, also leads to the growth of grass and other weeds thereby undermining crop productivity (Charanjeet Kaur, 2016).

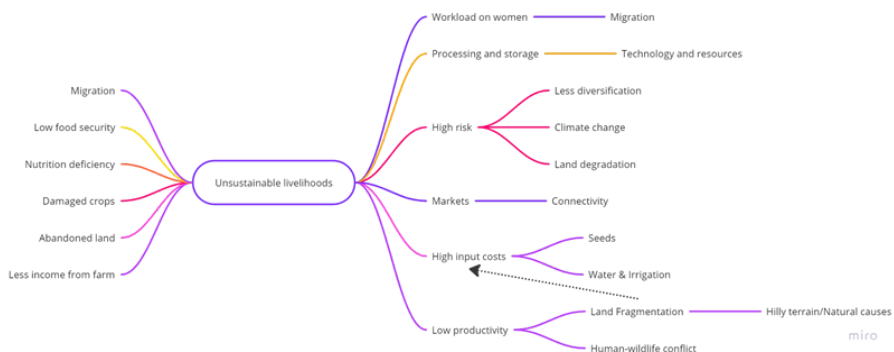
## Local Challenges, Lasting Consequences

Another major distressing factor for the communities, when it comes to their farming, is the wildlife, specifically monkeys and wild pigs, which can destroy any harvest within a span of hours, ruining months' of hard work. Degradation of land and lack of proper irrigation methods are other factors for which a solution can be hard to figure out.

The ever-changing climate and land and water patterns have made farming an unpredictable and risky choice, and thus no family chooses to rely it as their sole livelihood.

And with this, the community members are often left with no choice but to go away, from their tradition and their land, and to migrate to much more crowded places and less dignified jobs. The fruits and vegetables grown overnight in a closed space from Najibabad continue to flourish in the markets of Pokhri and Chandrapuri, the local farmlands go to waste and uncared for, and the women remain as the caregivers of their houses and children with full dependence on their men.

The below figure gives a situational analysis of the problem.



# Sowing the Seeds of Change: Community Farming as a Promising Solution

## Sewa International in Uttarakhand - A calling in distress

As we chase the fruits of economic progress, the roots of resilience in our hills grow weaker. Uttarakhand was at the peak of its vulnerability when the Kedarnath floods swept away its many towns and villages in 2013. It was during this time Sewa International, a non-profit civil service organization registered in 1997 that focuses on providing disaster relief during calamities, entered the region.

Sewa International made a major contribution towards the rehabilitation of these areas after the deadly floods. But the organization didn't just stop with the rehabilitation efforts. True to , their mission to contribute towards holistic development for the community, Sewa International started various initiatives across different thematic areas such as livelihoods, education, gender equity, and healthcare.

Since men would often migrate for work, the focus of Sewa's Their major interventions with women. Sewa International started facilitating the formation of women SHGs in 2016 to focusing their efforts on livelihoods. Women from the communities, striving towards a better life for their families and themselves, came together through Sewa to drive a number of entrepreneurial ideas. A few of these were quoted by the Program Manager of Community Farming at Sewa International:

*"We looked at local opportunities to generate alternative non-farm income. For example, in Tapovan which is very close to Badrinath, women started cultivating and selling marigold flowers and garlands. In Chamoli, we leveraged creative talents of the Bhotiya and Rigaal tribes to make handwoven carpets etc. These small successes motivated not just the women but also our team to bring together the work purposefully."*

As the organization started to focus on livelihoods, farm livelihoods turned out to be the component which they realised shouldn't be ignored. In the process, they were able to figure out the following problems in the region around farming and agriculture:

1. **Degraded or abandoned land**, for which causes can be many: lack of interest, lack of resources, lack of support, or people in the household who could invest enough time on farms.
2. **Human-wildlife conflict**, owing to mostly monkeys and wild pigs who would sometimes damage the entire produce within a span of hours.
3. **Insufficient profit from farming**, due to the monopoly of big producers in the markets growing the produce inorganically, and due to the lack of diversity in production.
4. **Lack of resources** such as people to work on the farm, time, and other farming equipment.

With the above problems in mind, the Community Farming project was formalized in 2019 By Sewa International for launch in Uttarakhand with three major objectives:

- Promote Organic Farming in hilly districts of Uttarakhand
- Increase income generation avenues for women farmers in Uttarakhand via scientific farming practices and focus on vegetables instead of just crops
- Optimal utilization of resources including revival of under- utilized land, water, etc. for making available Organic Fresh Farm Produce in the market

At present, there are 20 community farms operational under the Community Farming project in 10 blocks of Rudraprayag and Chamoli districts, with 150 women across different SHGs formed by Sewa.



Figure 3. A community farm supported by Sewa International in Uttarakhand

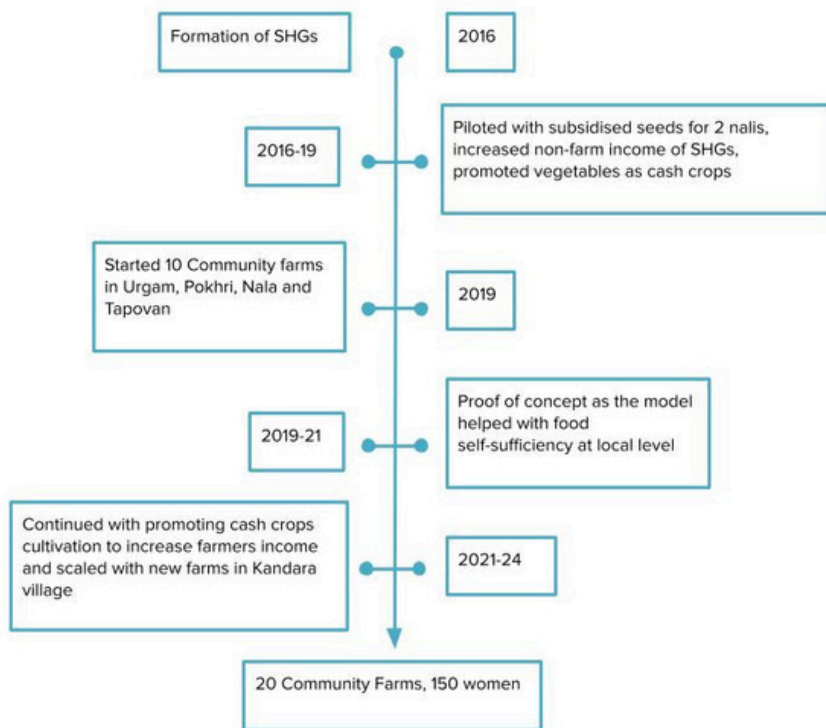


Figure 4. Timeline of Sewa's activities in Uttarakhand

## The Community Farming Model

Working on the lands of different farmers and coming together in times of distress is not new in rural India. Community farming is a way to formally mobilize the small and marginal farmers to come together to pool their fragmented lands and leverage economies of scale (Knapik, W. (2018). It has been experimented across the nations in various forms as per the local context. Be it pooling of resources and collaborating for better market linkage or a way for urban citizens to support farming activities in exchange for organic produce, the range of models that exist is vast.

In India, some successful projects stand out. The Kudumbashree Mission in Kerala which is helping all-women farms by creating and sustaining Joint Liability Groups. This project started in the year 2000 has reached over 68,000 farms today (Kudumbashree. (n.d.)). In Andhra Pradesh, the ZBNF (Zero Budget Natural Farming) model has evolved into what is now known as Andhra Pradesh Community Managed Natural Farming (APCNF) (Mongabay India, 2023). This government-supported approach showcases the successful scaling of agro-ecology. This particular APCNF model came into the limelight when recently it was awarded the Gulbenkian Prize for Humanity for its pioneering work in agriculture.

If implemented well, the APCNF model holds a lot of promise, specifically for farmers with small land holdings. In India, 47.3% of arable land is used by 87.2% of smallholder farmers. India's more than 126 million smallholder farmers, with an average holding of 0.6 ha, collectively possess around 74.4 million ha of land (Bantar, 2017); the magnitude of impact Community Farming can have is immense. In Uttarakhand, it means working with women farmers. As per Census 2011, in Uttarakhand, 64% of the women work as cultivators and 84.4% of the women are agricultural labourers. Women in Uttarakhand are a significant resource in agriculture: beyond being engaged in subsistence production, they have also contributed to protecting the land and natural resources.

The National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM)-induced Self Help Group (SHG model) led to a rural economic revolution in the country. It revealed many things that may have been previously unknown to the people of this country – that it is possible for women to come together and bring change, that women can handle finances, and that true economic growth of a household and a country is only seen when a woman has agency over the money, that small businesses can lead to big change, and that in the country tilting towards globalization, we need to leverage the local markets again.

With the men migrating for work and the land being degraded and left insecure, some may believe that women coming together and leading the farm initiatives became the only real intervention idea for the communities.



## So how do these women come together, and what does this togetherness entail?

The inception of community farming is fully dependent on the land-owners who have land that is joined with each other, coming together, and farming on it as a single unit. Thus, ten farmers with 1 acre of land each then farm on 10 acres of land together. But the land parcels must be joined or be right next to each other, for only this factor allows the farmers to share the work, the benefits, and of course the risks.

There are many reasons why this method has been taken up and proven successful. It is important for farmers to understand that their land and its production are dependent on their neighbors' land as well. If one's farm is being attacked by animals, then the ones next to it are at risk well. The animals neither understand nor care for farm boundaries. When the groundwater decreases, it decreases for the whole patch of land, not just for the land parcel of one specific farmer. When the rain pours for days and weeks, it damages crops on all farms. Often the irrigation process is one for the whole patch of land. All of these problems are common, and thus should only be dealt with in togetherness. With the combining of the land, a sole farmer, that too a woman farmer, gets not only the moral and emotional support it takes to run a farm, but also community labour to work with. The increased land means farming can happen on a larger scale with more use of technology and more innovative methods. Keeping the monoculture aside, different crops can be sown and harvested, with much higher production.



Community farming starts with investment, and ten women can invest more than a single woman. The increase in the farm area allows for more innovative and technical methods, such as setting up of polyhouses etc. There are more hands and more eyes to look after the crops and production, and the work is usually shared and/or divided, with women having specific crops to look at, or one doing the book-keeping, another managing the irrigation, and yet another in charge of marketing and sales etc.

As the Future Food Together by WWF (World Wildlife Fund) has written on community farming, “Consumers while enjoying fresh produce, also share agricultural risks, thereby developing a profound understanding and appreciation of the challenges faced by farmers. We know that this small idea is a big leap for rural India’s dying economy and women’s agency.” (WWF India, n.d.)

## Sewa as catalyst - Strategies and Approaches

The program planning flows into the implementation as anticipated with some surprises. This process is not linear, however. It is always a loop of taking feedback from the ground and correcting the course of the program as and when necessary. As Sewa team incorporated the learnings from the ground in their working, a number of successful strategies have emerged.

- **Building community ownership**

Any intervention on ground can be successful only if the community is made a stakeholder in it and not seen just as a beneficiary. At Sewa, this is ensured by asking the community to partially invest in the resources that will be provided by Sewa. It is not just a way to build ownership in a community but also a mechanism for the community to hold Sewa accountable. The state Head of Sewa, Tarak Ram ji, narrates an anecdote:

*“There are few farms and few farmers who have taught me one lesson, that is to say, the entire cost of setting up this particular project will never be borne by the organization alone. We decided that we will provide the infrastructure, but the labour cost for setting up everything.... will be done by the farmers. This is the agreement.... And I feel by doing that, they are able to ask questions to me..... I remember someone from Urgam which is a very high-altitude valley in Samodhi, near Joshimath, on a night, he is calling me. Called me and said, “You could not complete the work of fencing. When are you going to do it?” He said, “I have paid. I have put my stake there. I am paying my 20% for Sewa.” So, you are bound to do that. That approach is something that I felt is a good part.”*

- **Modeling the change**

The model farms made by Sewa not only serve the purpose of upskilling the farmers but also set a successful example for the farmers to look up to. As the Sewa agriculture expert from Chadrapuri, Kailash ji, puts it in a beautiful metaphor, “We are laying out the gud (jaggery), the bees are gonna get attracted on their own”. Its effect can be seen even beyond the farmers directly associated with the program, as the farmers around the community farm are also emulating their methods to generate more income.

- **Building resilience of farmers**

Another strategy to make the program more sustainable is equipping the farmers with the right tools and knowledge to upscale farming instead of doing things for them. One consistent theme that emerged while speaking to all the farmers associated with this project, was that of acquiring knowledge on what to grow and how to do that. That is not to say that their indigenous knowledge is being ignored. The agriculture experts at Sewa build on their existing knowledge and Sewa helps them connect it to external ecosystems of markets and policies to capitalize on the opportunities.

- **Building trust with the community**

One of the major components and also a major success of the program is Sewa's ability to mobilize the community, something where most implementing organizations in the sector have struggled. There are two key reasons for Sewa's success. Sewa's field staff is from the community itself which helps them mobilize the farmers, and the work done by the Sewa-led SHGs in 2016 has helped the farmers generate additional income which gave them confidence in Sewa's support. When Sewa floated the idea of Community Farming, it was not very difficult to bring farmers on board.

## **Sowing the Seeds of Change: Community Farming as a Promising Solution**

### **The model of program delivery**

The SHGs made by Sewa in 2016 served as a base to kick start the community farming projects in Chamoli and Rudraprayag districts of Uttarakhand. A baseline survey was carried out to capture the socio-economic profile of the women farmers and mobilize volunteers interested in the project. Groups were formed based on the following guidelines:

- Minimum 3-10 numbers of farmers per community farm
- Community farming and land sharing based on mutual consent and mutual trust
- Farms should not be more than 500 meters away from the villages.
- There should be a minimum of 10 drain lands collectively
- The water source from the agricultural land should not be more than 100 meters away - Wetlands are not suitable for community farming

Next, an MoU was signed with each group as per Annexure 2. It is preceded with a need assessment to finalize below inputs from Sewa:



Figure 5. A polyhouse at a community farm in Pokhr

- **Polyhouse:** It draws from the idea of Controlled Environment Agriculture (CEA), whereby controlling the temperature, moisture, and other variables, produce is grown.
- **Solar Fencing:** With the incidents of animal attacks on farms reportedly increasing, and with climate-induced global warming indicating that such a phenomenon is going upwards, it was decided to protect the farm with electric fencing to prevent crop loss.
- **Drip Irrigation:** Drip irrigation involves dripping water onto the soil at very low rates (2-20 liters/hour) from a system of small-diameter plastic pipes fitted with outlets called emitters or drippers. Two sintex water tanks were provided at each farm along with pipes for drip irrigation.
- **Farm Tools:** Basic farm tools such as sickle, plough etc.
- **Organic Seeds:** An initial one-time supply of organic seeds to kick start the project

For each farm set up thus, a crop calendar would be developed in consultation with the farmers based on the soil, the altitude, farm's distance from the road, etc.



**Monitoring Systems:** Farm-level registers are maintained for cropping patterns and marketing data of crops. Sewa's Cluster Coordinators meet in the State Office of Simli every month and report data on indicators such as number of visits done, crop-wise data on seed demand, quantity of seeds sown, and the amount marketed.

**Model Farms:** As the name suggests, these farms, developed by Sewa, represent the kind of farms the community farming is supposed emulate. They are also used for training and capacity building of the farmers. Each model farm is assigned an internal Agri expert from Sewa who trains the farmers.

**Himsampada and the Seed Bank:** Himsampada, a farmer-producer organization (FPO) set up by Sewa with 150 farmers across 550 SHGs, assured supply of organic seeds made available at a subsidized rate. Organic seeds require using fertilizers that are free of harmful chemicals thereby ensuring organically grown produce. This arrangement has played an important role in supplying seeds at affordable prices and consolidating non-fresh farm produce such as millets. The model could be extended to fresh farm produce in the future.



Figure 6. Model farm established by Sewa in Pokhri



Figure 7. Seed bank run by women farmers

Making the implementation model flexible to suit the context is key to the success of the model and which Sewa International seems to have captured. The State Head of Uttarakhand at Sewa International explains this:

“Every community farm is different and based on their local needs, they implement the program, so we have to allow some operational flexibility. For eg. in Urgam, markets are not so easily accessible; the nearest market is Joshimath. They grow the same crop and sell to the one person linked to the market and share the revenues. But in Pokhri, markets are easily accessible. So, we have laid no conditions on whether they grow the same crop together and sell it collectively. In fact, there was a backlash from the local market in Pokhri when our team tried to intervene.

The commonality of our program design is in terms of bringing farmers together, providing a common fencing and protective environment, polyhouse for indoor farming etc. These common things are heavy on investment, so pooling in land is important here both logistically and financially. This way, Sewa can also scale and reach more sub-marginal farmers.....

Differences in farms are because of market conditions, caste angles etc. We do not want to go into having operational conditions for such heterogeneous groups. People come

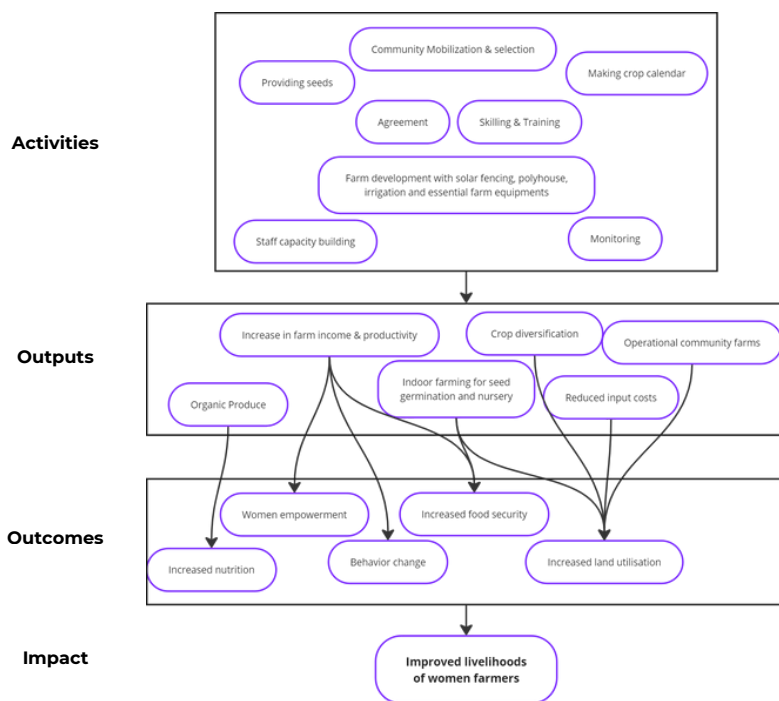


Figure 8. Community farm at Chandrapuri, Chamoli

together as per their context and reality. We cannot regulate group dynamics to its very end sitting here.”

This approach moves away from standardization in farming and captures varied local contexts to make each and every farm unique. The farms attest to this approach by displaying rigor to hold together a model of their own and serving unique purposes to exist.

## Community Farming Theory of Change





# On the Ground: Stories and Perspectives

## The Dubadkhu Community Farm - A Trailblazer

The community farm at Dubadkhu near Chandrapuri village is run by four women in 10 nalis. It has served not only as a means to revive agriculture on the abandoned land of these women farmers but has also inspired farmers of surrounding farms to follow suit. It is a testimony to success of Sewa's model to increase farmer income by cultivating cash crops such as vegetables. Two women who are part of the Dubadkhu community farm shared how increased income from farming has helped them build resilience. Here is what they shared:

*"Even with the monsoons getting delayed this year, we sold 1.5 quintals of peas each. Cultivating vegetables means we have to spend much more time of farms than we used to, but the amount of extra work translates into that much more extra income. We now no longer think twice about buying things we need from local markets."*

## The Community Farms in Kandara - Going Beyond self-sufficiency

The farms in Kandara village are being run by strong and independent women who, along with help from Sewa, are taking the cultivation beyond community farms on their own lands as well. Even though they had been farming vegetables before Sewa intervened, Sewa brought not only more tools, knowledge, and confidence, but a strengthened market linkage. They supply the nearby villages and local institutions directly without any middlemen. They are also able to help local women earn a living by employing them on their farms.

## The community farm in Pokhri - A refuge from hardships

This is one of the oldest farms consolidated by Sewa comprising a number of adjoining land parcels. The fifteen women who run this community farm already supported each other in farming and other things. Sewa helped them do this even better by backing their efforts with the infrastructure and training. The farm not only provided additional income, but also a very reliable support system.



Figure 9. Women leading the community farm initiative in Kandara

## Harvesting of the work: Impact & Outcomes

One of the biggest successes of the program is bringing together the community of women farmers and upskilling them to generate more income from their farms. Sewa has managed to unlock the power of collaboration to bring about what appears to be a long-term change. However, at this early stage of the project, it is important to focus on measurable outcomes to determine if the program is headed in right direction. The testimonies that follow suggest that the community farming projects are bringing about real changes in a number of aspects.

**1. Developing agency and confidence of women** – One of the women working in Kandara community farm reported that her husband's last contribution to running the household was a meagre Rs. 1800/- 6 months ago; there was nothing ever since. Had she not been earning her own money through this farm, she had no idea how they would eat. Such has been the complete dependence on others and vulnerability of women, and such has been the historic apathy of men. The community farm initiative gave agency to these women over their own lives and their dependence on others is no longer. "Now when I go to market, I can just buy what I want, something I could never do before", said another woman from Chandrapuri running one such farm.

## **2. Increased household income and more financial autonomy with the women**

The community farm at Chandrapuri town reported an income of around fifty thousand through just peas alone. Another farm in Pokhri earned up to one lakh rupees during their very first harvest of potatoes. The land which had been rendered a wasteland earlier is now a major source of income for the families.

## **3. Land being used, secured, and prevented from soil/land degradation**

The solar fencing at community farms has made it possible for women to farm safely their crops, without the fear of wild pigs or monkeys destroying them. The land which, due to lack of initiatives and resources, lay waste for half the year was used productively and turned fertile. Now that the women have come together, they're able to use the land and also keep the nutrition intact in the soil.

**4. Boost to the local economy** – The biggest instance of this was seen during the Covid times. "As the supply reduced and the fear of food coming from faraway places increased, the community relied on locally grown production, and that demand was majorly completed by the women of community farms. Covid, however horrifying, got us our very first success stories of community farming", said Mr Manwar, a facilitator on community farming in Rudraprayag. Ms Kusum Rawat, owner of a community farm in Kandara, also runs a roadside shop where she sells the farm's produce. "People collect their supplies en route. I also supply to local inter-colleges and schools."

**5. Access to chemical-free, organically grown food** – Rudraprayag and Chamoli are organic farming districts with a full ban on the use of harmful chemical fertilizers. "But some people still use them illegally," said a community farm member. Further, the main supplies of fresh produce to these areas come from Najibabad, where it is known that they're produced using banned inorganic chemicals. The women growing in community farms refrain from 22 employing any such inorganic methods. "We use cow dung and urine, and a certain neem variety as fertilizers and insecticides.", quoted Ms Anju, a member of the community farm.

**6. Diversification of food and better nutrition consumption** – Now that the community grows more vegetables, they eat more vegetables. Vegetables like capsicum, peas, mushrooms, lemons, and tomatoes are not always available at affordable prices to these communities. In areas such as Uttarakhand where women are the primary food crop producers while men are more involved in animal husbandry or work off the farm a foodbased and gender-inclusive approach to community nutrition and health is proving to work. If food systems

are not gender inclusive, it has a negative impact on food production, food preparation, and nutrition, especially for children (FAO, n.d; Department of Agriculture, Cooperation & Farmers Welfare [DAC&FW], 2018). Diversification of crops produced and consumed, is sure to benefit community health and well-being.

**7. Building resilience** - By training women farmers on growing crops that they not just locally consume but also sell, Sewa has increased the food security of not just these farmers but also of that local area or in some cases the entire village. On being asked about the effect of COVID-19, these women farmers did not, surprisingly, respond with grief. It was because they had found a self-sufficient and selfsustaining way to live; blocking of channels from the outside world did not affect them very adversely. Sewa also started the celebration of a women-led community festival called “Fuli Gauthik” where women would come together and celebrate their newfound ways. The festival gives them visibility in society and the confidence to come to the stage and speak up which they never had before. This event is a great testimony of women's empowerment through the project.



Figure 9. Women leading the community farm initiative in Kandara

# Lessons from the Journey

While some components of the program shine through, any intervention, however powerful, does not come without its fair share of gaps and challenges. Community farming in Uttarakhand with SEWA international is seeing its own share of them.

## Market Linkage

And as we start to talk about it, we go to the very beginning of this document. The government policies and the marketing patterns do not support independent and local farmers. It is incredibly challenging for these women to compete with the prices of bulk exports which are the result of inorganic farming.

Women often have to travel far away in order to search for markets that give them their fair share, but geography presents itself as a challenge. Freight is not only expensive but sometimes becomes downright impossible with such hills and slopes.

The challenge of geography is not just limited to sales, but also to supplies. The supply of tools, tanks, polyhouses, etc. to hills and places with near zero access to roads is a task not easily done but is somehow managed to be done every time.

Sewa has tackled these challenges at local level by co-creating the cropping calendars as per local context and also establishing market linkages wherever possible. Be it the external project facilitators or internal team leaders, the work is not just limited to farms or sales. Maintaining the internal status quo and keeping peace within the group itself can be a challenge that can be hard to mitigate. This requires working tirelessly with the groups, holding meetings and sessions, and keeping the work going despite everything. What needs to happen further is a consolidation of these efforts and a solid strategy for market linkage. This is something Sewa realizes and it is one of the major focus areas for them moving forward. They plan to leverage Himsampada for the same.

## Commitment in Maintenance

Lack of maintenance of community farms is a huge challenge. For example, even though solar fencing has been provided to every community farm, it's rarely be found in functioning condition for various reasons. In farms of Kandara village, for example, there was an issue with the supplier who could not provide maintenance support in the region. Whereas in Pokhri, there were concerns about the fencing not being safe for local animals and the fencing had to be disabled after repeated complaints from people in that area. Resolution of man-animal conflict and sharing the cost of fencing were two of the major objectives of the project which are yet to be achieved. Working on farms is hard work and the disappointment and demotivation on the faces of these women because of crop destruction was so visible as though they were living it all over again.

## Group dynamics and sustenance

It is never easy for a group of people, be it any group, to come together and work. But we know that it is the only way to make things happen. Humans, after all, exist as a whole. Sustaining a group and maintaining the status quo is always an ongoing challenge, the one that the field team champions but is often left unacknowledged.

# Next Steps: Scaling, Strengthening, Sustaining

As Sewa strives further towards its mission to build sustainable livelihoods for these women farmers in Uttarakhand, community farming holds immense potential which can only be unlocked through a systemic approach. An approach that looks at the big problems of land fragmentation and migration from different lenses across the levels of state, market, and society. As the State Head of Sewa puts it:

*“Community Farming alone cannot be a solution to generate alternate livelihoods and increase income of these farmers. It has to be linked with other solutions such as eco-tourism, growing medicinal plants etc.... We even need a holistic approach for farms themselves, for example, introduction of livestock.... We aim to generate enough livelihood opportunities in these areas to promote reverse migration which will involve working on multiple challenges.....”*

Having implemented the current model in various contexts across geographies and learning from it, Sewa's strategy for scaling it further is impressive. They want to leverage economies of scale through a clustered approach, involving most farmers from the same village rather than the farms spread out across multiple villages. Once a community farm is developed at the village level, a value chain will be set up. Each village or community farm will have a crop expertise based on their context. This will help with forward market linkages through Himsampada. This value chain can also have better processing and storage solutions because of the scale and help deal better with the challenges of the market.

Before Sewa even begins to scale up, it needs to gather sufficient and reliable evidence from the ground on the effectiveness of the program design. Yet again, thinking in systems will be a helpful tool at disposal for this. Whether the current program design is well rounded to account for both intended and unintended consequences of the program can't be said with certainty. While increased income is an obvious and direct success metric, looking at it in isolation could be risky and misleading. The sustainability of the processes should not be compromised to maximize financial output from this initiative. Key features of the program such as promoting organic produce, land conservation, diversifying crops, and training the farmers on the same – these are its strength. Sewa must continue to promote these aspects even if it is not easy to do so. Along with income, Sewa should look at capturing some qualitative outcomes of women's empowerment and self-sufficiency from the program which are evident from this case study. It may be difficult to showcase qualitative impact beyond anecdotal evidence but it is this impact that holds out promise of a better future than just income numbers.

Learning is a continuous process and for a program to be successful it has to have ears to the ground, listen to the feedback, and learn from it to strengthen itself. The field representatives of Sewa, who are people from the community itself, are Sewa's eye and ears, and one of its biggest strengths that make a major contributor towards the success of their programs. Relying on these champions from the community for on-ground operations as they scale up will ensure holding on to the essence of the program. Sewa needs to invest in their field representatives to ready them to deal with the real, and sometimes very twisted, challenges as they mobilize the community and systems on the ground. Sewa realizes this and is already taking steps to strengthen its talent management department at its head office in Delhi. A key missing link at present is full-time persons committed to community farming in each of the locations to help cover many nuances of the project.



Given Sewa is able to leverage its strengths, and resolve current challenges, the community farming projects hold immense potential. The opportunities for Sewa can make a difference are enormous: influencing policies in the domain, especially with respect to polyhouses; collaborating with the competing government-owned FPOs; leveraging the local environment to grow offseason crops that are artificially grown in plains; augmenting farms with technology to reduce the increased workload on farmers; increasing non-farm income from livestock, beekeeping, fisheries, etc. Another ambitious objective is to encourage reverse migration and address the livelihoods problem right at its root. Very rarely do you find that migrants leaving these areas find a life of dignity in urban areas. Increasing the productivity of one's own farmlands would be a major incentive against migrating to an undignified urban life. The domino effect of reverse migration can even lead to a reduction in urban poverty.

What we can do on our part is be aware of our consumption patterns and how they lead to a market crisis for such farmers. Interacting with any senior farmer will reveal how our food habits have evolved for the worse. Here is how the Sewa agriculture expert puts it:

*"I remember the size of gourds in older times, one could feed an entire family. Because we wanted more efficient transport and market penetration, we played around with the seeds to reduce the size. Most seeds you get nowadays are hybrids which need chemicals and fertilizers to grow. Have you ever wondered how you get all vegetables year round in urban areas at such high prices? Is there any such thing as seasonal consumption as it is in rural areas? The huge polyhouse and technology are being exploited to create artificial environments to grow these off season items. Government provides subsidies only for the polyhouse, there are regulations on what happens inside. How are we supposed to compete with that?"*

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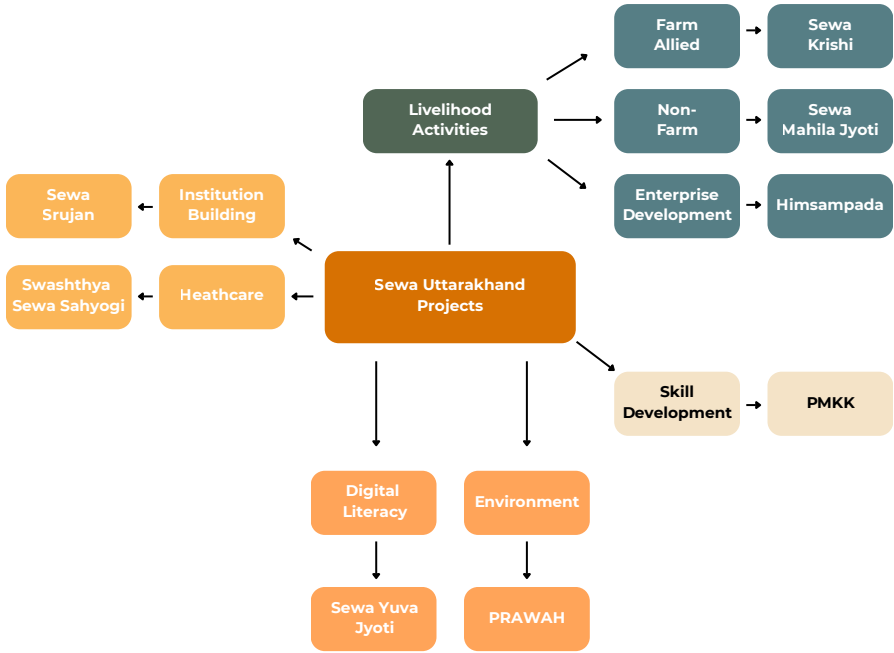
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# Annexures



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**10**

**आज दिनांक 25/11/22 को राजस्व ग्राम पंचायत समूह/समूहों के सदस्यों की बैठक आयोजित की गयी जिसमें सदस्यों एवं संस्था के मध्य यह अनुबन्ध किया गया जिसका उद्देश्य सामूहिक रूप से हेतु जमीन एवं उत्पादकों पर सहमति है। बैठक में सदस्यों ने राजस्व ग्राम के जीरा तोक में 15/15 नाली में सामूहिक खेती हेतु अपनी सहमति जताई।**

**संवीता देवी**  
*(Signature)*

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- के सामूहिक साथ रूप काम करना
- क. 7 उपरोक्त सभी संसाधनों में लगने वाले वित्तीय लागत का 20 प्रतिशत वहन किया जाएगा।
- उत्पादक द्वारा उपरोक्त सभी संसाधनों में लगने वाले पैर तकविकी कार्यों में बंधनान किया जायेगा।
- उत्पादक सेवा कृषि द्वारा ५ दत्त उत्पन्न वक के अनुसार ही कार्य करेंगे।
- उत्पादक हिमतापदा प्रोद्गुसार कम्पनी के सहयोग से उत्पादन का मत प्रतिगत विपणन करेंगे।
- अभिसरण के माध्यम से प्राप्त व्यक्तिगत संसाधनों पर उत्पादकों का सामूहिक रूप से अधिकार रहेगा।
7. उत्पादक उपरोक्त भूमि के सम्बन्धित सभी दस्तावेजों की प्रामाण्यता उपलब्ध करायेगा।

ह अनुबन्ध दिनांक 25/11/22 को 5032 स्थान पर सेवा इन्टरनेशनल एवं उपरोक्त उत्पादकों के बीच किया जाता है एवं इसकी अवधि पांच वर्षों के लिये है।

किसी भी परिस्थिति में यदि उपरोक्त नियमों का पालन सदस्यों द्वारा सही तरीके से नहीं किया जाता तो सेवा इन्टरनेशनल उपरोक्त संसाधनों को वापिस लेने का अधिकारी होगा।


हस्ताक्षर सदस्यगण

हस्ताक्षर प्रतिनिधि सेवा इन्टरनेशनल

संगीता देवी  
मौशी देवी  
शोभा  
डायन

संगीता देवी  
मौशी देवी  
शोभा  
डायन

| पति | छापाएक का नाम | समूह का नाम   | पिता/पति का नाम | सामुहिक स्वीती में प्रयुक्त स्वयं या परिवार की भूमि (वर्ग मी.) | दस्तावेज                              |
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| 01  | Laxmi Devi    | "             | राधा कृष्ण      |                                                                |                                       |
| 02  | Singhi Devi   | "             | विनायक          |                                                                |                                       |
| 03  | Bachchan      | "             | नीलेश           |                                                                | Bachchan                              |

| 10 | पू. स्वाधी का नाम | पिता/पति का नाम | सामूहिक खेलों में प्रयुक्त भूमि का माप (नाती में) | हस्ताक्षर                                                                         |
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1. बेबीसायी फसल उत्पादन, नदीती उत्पादन एवं सरंक्षित कृषि हेतु \_\_\_\_\_ वर्ष गीटर का पीली हाजरा  
2. तपु सिंचाई हेतु \_\_\_\_\_ गीट डिप सिंाई उपकरण  
3. उपरोक्त कृषि हेतु \_\_\_\_\_ गीट की घेरबाद की सुविधा  
4. सिंचाई हेतु आयरनकातानुसार पानी टैंक एवं पाइप (कुल लागत के 80 प्रतिशत की सीमा में रहते हूयें)  
5. उपरोक्त कृषि कार्य हेतु कृषि यंत्र (सूची प्रत्येक रूप से संलग्न)







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## Transforming Tales

*Visual imagery reflecting journalism or community engagement*

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