

Report for AID Austin by Chandrika Ramanujam, April 2006

These are some of my experiences when I worked with Community Awareness Center in the Himalayan hills of the Uttaranchal State between February and March of 2006.

On traditional knowledge:

One of the major outcomes of the Intellectual property rights has been the appropriation of not only who owns the knowledge but what knowledge is and how its represented. While the international agencies which promote IPR and the Indian government maintain that the IPR will help the common people and the knowledge of the community will be preserved, the fight over haldi(turmeric), a basic spice which is used very commonly in Indian cuisine, where no Indian household leaves with and which the Indian women believe has medicinal properties exemplifies this issue. When two NRIs moved to patent the haldi in the US court, the Indian government moved to oppose this. In spite of such common usage of haldi and its properties known to practically every Indian household, the Indian government was hard pressed to prove the prior existence of knowledge, until an obscure reference could be found in Ayurvedic tests.(For more info, refer to <http://www.nilacharal.com/news/rajan/rajan171.html>). This is a tip of the struggles that will shape up as far as community knowledge is concerned in the multinational trade arena. Community knowledge in the Kumaon hills of Uttaranchal state is rooted in the environment of this region. This ranges from the cultivation of indigenous crops to the uncultivable varieties that are available in the forests that communities have managed for centuries. For example, in winter, the community prefers to eat Madua, a staple food grain which heats the body and thus can help sustain the cold winters of Himalayas and this food is not eaten in the summer. Madua is also preferred for the calcium content. Juice from a local flower called Buransh helps the heart ailments. These are just small examples of the knowledge that has existed in the community over decades and may be centuries. This kind of knowledge is not scientific but is rooted in experience through time. Community knowledge has been preserved orally and no written documents exist. These are some problems that communities face in a mainstream development paradigm that does not recognize the validity of such knowledge and the methods of scientific validation of this knowledge are expensive for these communities. In the global struggle against IPR which have tended to be in the health domain especially the affordability of drugs for the poor and the loss of biodiversity, the impact of IPR on community knowledge is a slow started.

The work done by CAC and other organizations include documentation of the community knowledge. A national organization called NIF (National Innovation Foundation) which has created a public domain for registration of community's knowledge. CAC has been working with a Delhi based school 'Lady Erwin College' to institutionalize the concept of community knowledge or people's knowledge and has initiated discussions with a local state university JP Pant University based in Uttaranchal. At the same, it plans to take up policy advocacy to pressurize the government at local and national level for proper documentation and acknowledgement of community knowledge.

Locally women are being made aware of the threats to community knowledge. When visiting a local village, the woman from the village asked me and an American girl visiting the region not to patent any of the information we learn in the hills and to join their fights against the theft of their knowledge. Struggles emerging from these women

and the local communities are the next steps towards promoting and preserving the community knowledge.

On women's issues:

The women of Kujeti in the hills of Nainital district were visibly upset when they attended the monthly savings group meeting. Earlier, one of the women was abused by a man whose family has been lopping trees in the forest which was forbidden by the women's group. The forests of Kujeti has been mismanaged through years and were being destroyed. With the lack of intervention by van panchayat, the women's group took this issue up and issued directives to the community not to cut trees in the region. One family in the village has proceeded to cut the trees and also abused the women on their intervention.

In the meetings, the women discussed how to handle the situation and decided to invite the panchayat for a hearing. In the hearing, the panchayat accepted the issues raised by the women. This was the first time, women have initiated a meeting with the panchayat. Women of this region organized by CAC increasingly realize that their participation in the institutional framework is a key to their empowerment. Recently the four women of Chakdalar contested and got elected as panch(members) of the van panchayat and one of the women has been made as sarpanch(head).

In Almora's Quiti village, the member of the women's group and a dalit(considered as the lowest even with in dalit hierarchy) has been elected as the sarpanch(head) of the panchayat. Munni is the only literate woman in the village. When the seat was reserved for women under the reservation quota, the women's group decided to field Munni as their representative. This victory belongs to both Munni and the women's group which campaigned on her behalf and is very proud that one of her member is a sarpanch. When Munni started as the sarpanch, for the initial meetings her husband(who is also a staff of CAC) used to accompany her to the meetings. After couple of meetings, Munni overcame her shyness and now goes to the meetings by herself. This is in contrast to the custom in the region where men still act as the de-facto sarpanch where women sarpanchs are elected. Also, Munni found that women would not come to the gram sabha meetings and is persuading the women to attend the meetings and bring issues that are related to women. Since her election, the village now has a middle school and water harvesting systems to solve the water crisis and has helped widowed women get widow pension for their survival. No wonder that the local block development office has mentioned the Quiti panchayat as the ideal panchayat.

Yet there are several issues in the region that affect women and disempower women. Women face the burden of labor both at home and in agricultural fields. With men migrating for outside work either for services or as day laborers, women's work in the agriculture has increased in the past 20 years. Yet this increased in work has not translated to economic power for women. It is men who sell the produce(in case of cash crops such as potatoes, cauliflower and peas) and buy the inputs(seeds, pesticides). Women do not own land and in our study, several women were not aware how much land they had.

Increased alcoholism in the region also means that women and girls face domestic violence. In a study that was conducted, both girls and boys in the region mentioned alcoholism as one of the important issues in the region.

Institutional discrimination also exists against young girls. In high school, math is optional for girls and a new subject called home science is introduced. Invariably all the girls in the schools opt for home science.

The caste issue must also be seen with in gender. In Nainital and Almora district, most of the villages are segregated along caste. Either the village population is dalit or non dalit. There are very few villages where the population is mixed. The dalit villages we visited were economically backward with less land holdings and less quality land and more people dependent on less land. The men work more as day laborers and in private jobs compared to the non-dalit villages where more service jobs are performed. The gender change here is also tied to the economic progress of the community here.

The women of these regions are now coming together to form a women's federation to fight for common issues that are important for women. In a meeting that was organized by CAC and the annual women's day celebration, women discussed the issues that could become the focus of the women's federation. These included strengthening the women's group (as women perceive that a strong women's group is important for a strong women's federation), looking at women's position with in the family etc. Several women in the region are emerging as leaders such as Kalavathidi from Thola, Hemanthidi from Sunderkhali, Parvathi from Chakdalar and Deepa from Kujeti.

Women's day celebration:

It was decided that women's day celebration will be conducted on March 26th, a Sunday. We woke up to the day with thunderstorms and it was not clear if the weather would clear for the women's day celebration. By 12 o'clock the skies cleared and the program started. Parvathi, the president of women's group and the sarpanch of van panchayat in Chakdalar welcomed the group and several women representatives from different communities spoke on different issues including forest management, traditional agriculture, modern agriculture, and women's issues. The highlight of the event according to me was by Kalavathidi from Thola who said that women should organize themselves with the help of CAC and even when CAC will not be there in future. The day ended with games for women which women enjoyed very much.

Food security:

The study I conducted for CAC involved food security. Food security is defined by World Food Summit as access to adequate and nutritious food available at all times. The Supreme Court has also ruled the right to food in several rulings using article 21 which guarantees right to life.

20 years ago, the communities here were largely self sufficient in food as they grew food for subsistence. Now in Beerapani region, they are tied into market economy and have switched to cashcrops (mostly cashcrops). This has increased their dependence on food from outside. According to the women, this has resulted in health impacts as they see that their food (both the cultivated food as well as uncultivable food from forest) earlier was more nutritiously balanced(which is also part of food security) and had more medicinal value. The study did not deal with the historical aspects of this switching (like what conditions impacted this switch to cashcrops).

In the Almora region, the food being grown is still for subsistence and has been so until last 2-5 years. The land fragmentation (due to inheritance) and lack of rains has led to

sharp decrease in the food being grown and the region is slowly getting dependent on the food from outside. This has also increased migration among men in this region.

The cashcrops and migration also enforce the gender discrimination with women facing increasing burden in work and men wanting to do less manual labor. This is also reflected in the attitude towards the next generation where girl children are more burdened at home. Its increasingly seen that women are the ones who will maintain traditional way of living and girls are less encouraged to pursue higher studies and more burdened at home.

In the PRA exercises that we conducted in 5 villages, the women identified several issues with respect to food security.

1. Loss of traditional food due to lack of forest maintenance, cashcrops, use of pesticides and climatic conditions has had health impact
2. The PDS in the region fails on several issues towards food security: Lack of quality food in PDS, Lack of adequate food in PDS, Not available in time and lack of nutritious food.
3. Food is the major expense in a family. Food expenses contribute to 25% of the expenses in the family followed by either health or education.
4. Women and girls face the increased burden of work allocation related to food (production and preparation)

The women's group came up with several action plans related to these issues

1. In Thola, some women pledged to increase the food production by 10 more kilos by cultivating some of the uncultivable land.
2. In Thola, women also decided to take up the issue of PDS in the next gram sabha meeting.
3. In Thola, women said that they would allocate equal responsibilities to both girls and boys. Its also interesting that in another study conducted at the same time with the boys and girls, boys recognized that their sisters face increasing workload and have decided to help them.
4. In Sunderkhali, the women decided to convene a meeting on April 15th with the rest of the village and the sarpanch to take up the PDS issue as well as lack of nutritious food in primary school.

In Chama and Chakdalar and Quiti, due to lack of time, the exercise for action plan did not complete in time. CAC will work with the women to create actions plans specific for the villages.

On the staff:

There are 6 people who are working in CAC including Reetu:Vimala, Kiran, Mohan, Munna and Diwan. Munna and Diwan are from the villages where CAC is working. Everyone except Munna used to work with Sahayog when Sahayog was working in the region. They were supported by Sahayog until about a year ago. Since then they have been working with out funds and are very dedicated. They have a good understanding of issues and open to new ideas.

Recommendations:

1. Capacity building for women's group – Even where the women's group has been

proactive in electing Munni, they do not see this as an effective tool towards solving their issues. Some training on different strategies that can be used by women's group to solve their issues and where it can be used effectively will help them realize their goals better especially with women's federation.

2. Economic opportunities for dalit villages – Create economic opportunities for the women in dalit villages.
3. Capacity building for the team to deal with the dalit/non dalit issues especially with in the context of women's federation.