MONITORING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS BY WOMEN’S FEDERATIONS

THE DATA EXHIBITION SOCIAL AUDIT TOOL

Context
In a Data Exhibition, sangha and federation members collect household data on issues that need the urgent attention of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Equipped with this data to back their demands, the women exhibit the data either in community halls or any public place and representatives from various government/non-government organizations are invited to see the exhibition. Community members who were not involved in the process of data collection also came to see the findings and engage in dialogue with government in a formal platform.

Box 1: Data Exhibition
The federations along with Assam Mahila Samata Society in Assam have designed an innovative process of citizen monitoring government programmes at the panchayat level to promote transparency in panchayat administration. The term ‘Data Exhibition’ refers to a display of information collected and exhibited in a public place such as a community hall or a school, for the benefit of the entire community. Data is compiled by federations (through detailed household surveys) which then reveals gaps between the ground reality and information reported by the Gram Panchayat (GP) or line departments. This information is then presented at an exhibition inviting the entire community, panchayats and government department representatives. The Data Exhibition can be instrumental in providing data for the panchayat plans and make it participatory in its spirit. The Data Exhibition can be far more effective if integrated with the recent Planning Commission of India Guidelines on Decentralized District Planning. One guideline requires that the community takes stock of its needs by examining its information base. This data can be easily provided by the Data Exhibition process.

Expected Impact:
- Communities have an information base to assess their needs for the planning process.
- Increased awareness of Gram Sabhas on their entitlements, programmes
- Mobilisation of communities to participate in Gram Sabhas in the planning process
- Poorest of the poor and excluded sections actually accessing their entitlements as a direct outcome of the data exhibition.

Additional Impact:
- Include women and girls into the planning process and improve participation of women in public life.
- Helps government in appropriate beneficiary selection in welfare programme.
- Monitoring of village plan execution by improving transparency

Assam Mahila Samastha Society (AMSS) has designed an innovation together with its women’s collectives called the Data Exhibition. The initial framework for the Data Exhibition was developed in 2007 through consultation between federation women and AMSS, to monitor entitlements. Best Practices Foundation (BPF) identified and documented the Data Exhibition as a best practice in 2009-10.

Objectives
The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), are a universal call to action to end poverty. They tackle the root causes of poverty and unite us together to make a positive change. NITI Aayog is a government think tank, with
the responsibility of monitoring, coordinating and ensuring implementation of the globally accepted Sustainable Development Goals. But there is a lack of good tools for participatory, bottom up monitoring of these goals. The Data Exhibition is one such participatory monitoring tool and social audit mechanism.

With the additional objective of federations monitoring implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all) and 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls), in rural Assam, in September 2017, AMSS and BPF together with federations redesigned the DE tools. Representatives from BPF, AMSS state and district teams together reviewed the original tool and modified them in relation to issues that the federations raised related to SDGs 4 & 5. The tool was then re-worked and translated into the regional language. The new Data Exhibition tool was tested in October end 2017. BPF was present to monitor and provide inputs towards field testing and finalisation of the tool. Simultaneously dialogues across the country were taking place with federations on gender issues. Here the data exhibition process had the additional component of extending the dialogues to government. The issues identified to collect data on, and relevant to SDGs 4 and 5 were discussed.

Methodology

Then the federation women met to discuss what type of data they should collect on SDG 4 and 5. They spoke about issues at the sangha village and at the panchayat levels. Eventually, they chose two backward panchayats to collect data from.

1. Gormari Panchayat – 10 sangha women covered 1849 households
2. Ghagua Panchayats – 12 sangha women covered 3651 households

The methodology used included:

- **Focus group discussions**, with federation women, to discuss issues faced by women.
- **Group interviews**, to establish access to education, health and women’s participation in PRI, based on the village the women live in.
- **Family-wise surveys** to collect information about entitlements the women receive/do not receive from the government.

Annexure 3 provides the instruments for the three methods used. Focus group discussions were added as a means of analyzing SDGs 4 and 5.
Process of Holding the Data Exhibition

1. **Awareness meetings** were held at the Block and the state levels to inform about SDG 4 and 5 and share about the Data Exhibition project.
2. **Review meeting** was held at the district level to discuss issues affecting women and problems around education. The issues covered were child labour, trafficking, dowry, child marriage, domestic violence and school drop outs.
3. Selection of panchayats to collect data from
4. **Identification of twenty-four active sangha women** to collect data.
5. They were briefed about SDG 4 and 5 and **oriented on the questionnaire**
6. **Piloted** the questionnaire and made changes to it and to the methodology used to collect data.
7. **Compilation of data** was done manually.
8. **Decisions** on which government department officials was the most suitable, to invite for the Data Exhibition
9. Then the data was given to a professional to **enter it into the computer**.
10. The federation women sat together and **reproduced the data on charts**.
11. Decision on **the dates** for the Data Exhibition
12. **Booked venue and invited** government officials and the community members

Relevance to SDGs 4 and 5

Through dialogues with the women during the pilot, a few of the issues in the context of SDG 4 and 5 came to light. While quality education is a huge need, especially in rural Assam, gender roles and stereo types that exist in the communities, are one of the main causes of the gender disparity which works against rural women. BPF re-worked the existing Data Exhibition tool in the context of SDGs 4 and 5.

Data Exhibition Event

The Data Exhibition was held on the 4th and 5th of April, 2018 in Ghagua and Gormari Panchayats of Moregaon District, Assam. The Agragami Block Federation played host for the event. In Ghagua Gram Panchayat, nearly 150 people attended and actively participated in the Data Exhibition, which was held in the Gram Panchayat. In Gormari Gram Panchayat, the participants numbered over 250. The programme began with a song. Ms Moushmi Moushmi from the District Implementation Unit, AMSS, introduced all the guests present on the panel. Then Alija Deka the Block President gave opening remarks about the importance of the Data Exhibition and about SDGs 4 and 5. Everyone on the panel made opening remarks. Finally, the people presented were allowed to ask questions to the government officials.
Findings Reported through the Data Exhibition

From the FGDs and qualitative data federation women highlighted issues related to the sustainable development goals.

**SDG 4 – Access to Quality Education**

1. In hilly areas like Karbi Anglong, which is a very backward area, there are no schools. Areas which have schools have very few teachers. Often families send their boys to Gauhati to study because of this.
2. In government schools, quality of teaching is very poor. But all students, regardless of their performance, are promoted to the next class.
3. When students have to appear for board exams, they obviously fail. Girl students feel ashamed when they fail and they drop out.
4. Parents cannot afford to pay tuition fees
5. Child labour prevents children from attending school
6. The federation women said that they had approached the District Education Officer about school drop outs, but the government response was that there is no such incidences in the area. Often the children are sent to work before 18 years by parents who falsify the identity documents on age which also works against the children completing their education.

**SDG 5 - Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls**

1. Unequal wages among women and men
2. Women face corruption and harassment with regards to MNERAGA job cards.
3. Elopement of young girls
4. Child marriage is a major issue and the federation said that anyone supporting the marriage including family and guests can be arrested.
5. Trafficking
6. Women do not have the permission to speak and participate in decision making processes. If she does speak there is conflict between husband and wife.
7. When a woman is positioned in the panchayat, she is a puppet in her husband’s hands, and does as he tells her to do and misuses power and government resources.
8. There are many incidences of women being violated. Some of these include witch hunting, being forced out of home and being separated from her child.
9. Lack of awareness on Domestic Violence Act or free legal services available at the district, when faced with violence.
10. Eligible women beneficiaries are denied government schemes like widow pension.

**Relevance to other entitlements and issues**

1. Many people do not have ID number which is given by the Government of India. Due to this, people are being denied entitlement. Women suffer more because their husbands do not have proper identification and consequently she too does not have proper identification as it is dependent on his identification.
documents. Entitlements are conditional on proper identification and women are more dependent on public services for their basic needs.

2. A lack of toilets.
3. Those who become leaders in the panchayat are corrupt or act as spokes persons for others who have vested interests.
4. Government funds that come to their panchayat are diverted to other panchayats.
5. Government officials open bank accounts for beneficiaries and as soon as the money is credited into their accounts, they withdraw most of it for themselves. Even bank officials syphon off money that is meant for the poor. Corruption and delays add to the denial of public services which result in the deepening of poverty.

Highlights of community and official reactions
The community was surprised to find out about the number of programmes and the lack of access to these programmes. Finally they also understood that there was work to be done to ensure access both on their end as well as that of the government.

“Through the poster I have got to know about some of the government schemes. Now I understand how much more work needs to be done by us to avail their entitlements”.

“I hope that the government officials see this presentation and then ensures that old age pension is disbursed to everyone eligible”.

Community members

“Since 2005, I and my sangha group have held regular meetings to solve problems and regularly save money”.

Sangha women said that they meet regularly and can solve issues. Through the data exhibition findings they had begun to understand the problems faced across the area which now could provide them a focus to act on.

From the focus group discussions, it was decided that the following were important to highlight in the Data Exhibition:

- Unequal wages between men and women
- Having a job card
- Number of days a family has worked under the government MNEREGA programme
- Whether they have been monetarily compensated for days there was no work
- Whether women were members of any village level committees

Another issue that the women felt was important to highlight was whether old age pensions and widow pensions were received as government records had many mistakes on age.
Federation Reactions to the Data Exhibition

The women said that when they witnessed the Data Exhibition, they felt that all the hard work they had put in was worth it. They also said that through the process of collecting data, they understood practically, how each problem faced by the community can be solved. The Data Exhibition was a huge success which makes them proud.

The community members acknowledged the women’s hard work and complimented them on inviting government officials along with Best Practices Foundation from Bangalore and the State Programme Director from AMSS, Guwahati, to attend the programme and listen to their issues.

“All the women must unite and together put an end to all these practices which are against women”.

*Junti Deka from Kalbarigaon, Ghagua panchayat*

“The government has schemes for us. But we need to know about what is available and how to avail of it. People need to be made aware that it is there right. Till we know more about human rights and rights to entitlements, nothing will move forward. People must learn to help themselves instead of depending on others.”

*Pushpanjali Deuri from Bangthaigaon*

The community members acknowledged the women’s hard work and complimented them on inviting government officials along with Best Practices Foundation from Bangalore and the State Programme Director from AMSS, Guwahati, to attend the programme and listen to their issues. The women felt that as a result of the data exhibition the community gains in terms of their entitlements, but expect the federation to repeat this process for the community. Women felt the community should learn from this process and engage in monitoring government and demanding entitlements themselves.

**Official Reactions to the Issues Raised**

Government officials from SSA highlighted the importance of girls’ education in particular and offered his support around access to education.

“If you know of any girls who have dropped out of school, but now wanted to continue their education, you can take them to the KGBVs”.

“If a man is literate, at best, one person in the family will also be literate. But if a woman is literate, the whole family will achieve literacy.”

“If anyone has any issues with regards to education, you must share it with me and I will definitely resolve the problems.”

*Ranjan Goswami*  
District Programme Officer, SSA, Moregaon District
Other officials such as those from the Child Protection agency said they needed the support of federations and organizations like Mahila Samakhya for them to reach their goals. They felt that federations can penetrate the rural communities and have deeper access. She highlighted the importance of awareness on the issues of child marriage and child labour, again an area where the federations can act.

“The most important thing is reporting the needs of the people. We are here only to implement what the grassroots communities need. This presentation (Data Exhibition), is very fruitful to know what the people need. When we get the report from this event, we will plan action.”

“This is a wonderful programme which will definitely benefit everyone”.

If people had more awareness about the negative aspects of these practices (child labour and child marriage), and if you knew that you can take the help of the judiciary, then these practices would lessen”.

“Through this Data Exhibition, my department can get all the necessary information about the region, and then plan on how to take action”.

Officials like the District Magistrate offered to provide access to women for pensions and other social security benefits. He offered to facilitate the process of sanctioning pensions through coordination from his office. In his capacity as District Legal Service Authority Secretary, he said that people should avail of free legal services to get access to justice.

“Women from SC/ST, tribal communities and those disabled persons, can avail of free legal services. Therefore, any woman who suffers from domestic violence, can approach my office for help”.

Everyone, including the poor, whether they are literate or illiterate, can get an advocate for free and can get justice now. In this panchayat, there is a para legal appointed by the Free Legal Service Authority. Her name is Damayanti.

“Anyone who is not getting their entitlements like widow and old age pensions, housing, toilets, etc can write it down and I will look into the problems legally, and forward the complaints to the relevant departments to try and find a resolution”.

“Please give me all the data on widow pension and I will ensure that it is delivered to the District Rural Development Agency and the Zilla Parishad, for prompt action.”
Damayanti Bordoloi from Udaheembori village, who is also a para legal volunteer said that she was acknowledged and introduced to everyone by Anurag Jintu Borah, District Legal Service Authority Secretary and Magistrate, at the Data Exhibition. He said that those who had not received that widow pensions, must give their applications to her, and she would deliver it to his office. As soon as the function ended, around twenty-five community members came to Damayanti to hand over their application forms. Damayanti sat and spoke to everyone after the function and said that she would first present the applications in writing at the Mahasangha and only then hand over the applications to Anurag Jintu Borah’s office at the Block level.

Recommendations
The government has an eligibility test for teachers before they join a school. But due to distances, teachers do not attend class and remain absent. To counter this, the government has introduced an electronic punching machine, which records what time the teacher gets to school and what time she/he leaves. The federation women said that they will fully support this system when it is implemented. They feel that this may solve the problem of absenteeism.

Snapshots of the Data Exhibition – 4th and 5th April, 2018