



Research Paper

# Empowering Rural Women for Sustainable Development in North-Eastern India: A Descriptive Study of Rural Livelihood Programme

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## ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the implications of “North-East Rural Livelihood Project” in empowering the poorest rural women for Sustainable Development in Eight Districts of four States of North East India. The Project aims poor rural women in accessing various economic generating opportunities in reducing rural poverty. The project increases the economic and livelihood opportunities by improving agriculture for food security and income enhancement from farming and allied activities. This paper is based on the Projective Development Objective to women’s empowerment set by North East Rural Livelihood Project in the targeted project area. The methodology of this paper is descriptive and required information were collected from different secondary sources like books, research articles, different government documents, thesis etc. Based on the data, the North East Rural Livelihood Project address the target of sustainable development goals. The interventions should be expanded to all North Eastern states so that the more of women would be covered and empowered for achieving Sustainable Development Goals.

**KEYWORDS:** North East, Livelihood, Sustainable, Self Help Group, Women’s Empowerment.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

A livelihood can be defined as the activities, the assets and access that jointly determine the living gained by an individual or household. Livelihood schemes that focus on the formation of Self-Help Groups, the creation of income-generating activities and interventions have become the panacea to empowering women in low-income countries and communities for sustainable development (Akurugu, Jatoo, & Domapielle, 2021; Batliwala, 2007). The rural livelihood project works in achieving the sustainable goals, which seeks to achieve end poverty and sustainable goals of women empowerment and gender equality by 2030. The sustainable development goals or global goals are a collection of seventeen interlinked objectives designed to serve as a “shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future” and part of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, 2023).

This approach to project empowers the women who are weak and vulnerable in findings the livelihood opportunities, in the male dominated patriarchal society. This paper discusses the current issues of practices, policies of women’s empowerment through the implementation of income generating projects in the Eight Districts of Four states of North-East India, where the poverty and marginalisation is high.

North East (NE) region in India are one of the most isolated regions in the country. The North East of India constitutes the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Flanked by hills and with the mighty Brahmaputra river slashing a central path between its north and south, the North East is bounded by the States of Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura with Assam comprising the heart. Arunachal Pradesh lies to its north and Sikkim a little away in the North West bordering China and Bhutan. Bangladesh and Myanmar lie to its southwest and east. The torrential Brahmaputra deposits its rich alluvial silt along the banks of the plains of Assam. Tropical rain forest, rich in flora and fauna, spread their arms across Arunachal Pradesh into Assam. It is a land where tea is an industry, handicrafts a major occupation and martial arts a favoured sport. North East area covers 7.9% of total area of the country (Ministry of Development of North East India, 2023).

The economy of the North East region is still pre-dominantly agrarian with the share of agriculture in total State Domestic Product (SDP) above the national average. India's North Eastern region is a melting pot of various tribes and communities with extraordinarily diverse and colourful customs traditions. The vast majority of the region's population lives in rural areas, accounting for 65.5% of the total population. As such the region is also known for its rich cultural heritage and ethnic diversity by being the home of tribal groups.

Human development indicators of the region's population are relatively favourable. The region has a relatively educated population with state-wise literacy rates and gross enrolment ratios for grades 1 to 8 above the national average in six out of eight North East states. The female literacy rate of the region is significantly above the national average.

The region has better than average Human Development Indices but the Poverty and Unemployment is widespread in rural and urban areas leading to many social issues. The standard of living of people in this region, as measured by per capita Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP), has lagged significantly behind the rest of the country

The most widely recognized obstructions for development and upliftment of North East region include: (1) high degree of isolation from the rest of India and severe limitations on cross-border trade, (2) poor internal infrastructure and services that hamper access to markets and credit, and (3) low level of business confidence and difficult investment climate caused by the impact of armed violence.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

(Akurugu et al., 2021) Water for resilience project was implemented in north -western Ghana to empower women for sustainable development by providing agro-ecological methodologies and environmental sustainable practices. This resilience project was based on the context of Batliwala three-dimensional approach to women's empowerment. The analysis of water for resilience project shows that it met the realization in achieving SDG 1, SDG 2, SDG 5 and SDG 10 very significantly. The primary source of data collection like in-depth interviews, focused group discussions and observations were employed to gather data from selected targeted samples. From the analysis, the water for resilience project fulfilled the two out of three criteria set by Batliwala three dimensional model to women's empowerment – the integrated approach and the economic development. The project improves the healthy lifestyles of women by engaging them in various sustainable income generating activities by providing water resources and improving livelihood.

(Awmpuia, 2021) studies on the administration of livelihood project in north eastern region to mizoram. The study resonate the project development objective of improving the rural livelihoods of most disadvantaged people especially that of women and reveals in improving the socio-economic condition of the society. This study observes most of the beneficiary are engaged in agriculture and allied activities and some of them are in business activities. The study found that the involvement of female beneficiaries is more than the male beneficiaries in the livelihood project of NERLP and met the sustainable development goal- of end poverty, end hunger and women empowerment.

(Tanzile, Domapielle, & Fielmua, 2023) studies the implementation of a semi-mechanized sheabutter processing addressing on women's strategic interests and raise the consciousness of women for achieving their empowerment related goals and target for achieving African Union's (AU) Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals. The intervention has the highest potential in improving unequal gender relations, reducing household poverty, increasing women's self-esteem, improved economic and living conditions of women and their households. This study was set out in the criteria of Batliwala's three dimensional approach to women's empowerment and addressed the two out of three model to women's empowerment- the integrated approach and the economic development dimension. The qualitative approach was used in the data collection and a multistage sampling strategy was used. Under this study, the data were generated through Focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and observation. The intervention has contributed high in improving livelihood.

(Khosla, 2020) The study reveals the status of women in North East India. The broader status of women with respect to dignity, rights, education, opportunities, occupation and violence in North East India are highlighted under this study. The descriptive methodology are employed under the study and the necessary information are gathered from secondary sources. The major implications of the study is to bring the consciousness, conditions and life of women in North East India beholds.

(Kochar, Nagabhushana, Sarkar, Shah, & Singh, 2022) suggested that the micro finance programs have played a significant role in empowering women in various decisions making by creating sustainable community institution. This analysis is based on the National Rural Livelihood Mission, a program that supported small loans and larger loans through community investments fund.

(Miani et al., 2023) studies the sustainable livelihood project has a significant approach in increasing the livelihood and development of rural areas. The study employed the non-random, purposive and snowball sampling to gather data. After the interventions of the livelihood project, the rural people improved the living conditions

after shifting their livelihood activities to non-agriculture activities. The study recommends the involvement of government in reducing livelihood challenges.

(Ghosh, 2020) perceives Self Help Groups plays a tremendous role in North East India towards achieving sustainable development goals. The women become more empower in taking family decision after engaging in the SHGs and changed the lifestyles of the poor women by involving in various economic activities.

(Gonzaga, Alesna, & Cagasan, 2022) studies the role of livelihood project in livelihood rehabilitation after disaster by typhoon Haiyan in women group, known as Abante Kababaaihan Organization. The phenomenological research design was used in data gathering and analysis. The study reveals the persistent effort of women paved the way for the cultivation of women empowerment and acquired the useful skills in financial management.

### **III. ABOUT THE PROJECT**

The Ministry of Development of Northeast Region (DoNER) has now taken up the North-East Rural Livelihood Project with the support of the World Bank in the states of Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura from the year 2012, to assist the rural poor and vulnerable groups including women in improving their livelihood. The Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region is responsible for the matters relating to the planning, execution, and monitoring of development schemes and projects in the North Eastern Region. Its vision is to accelerate the pace of socio-economic development of the region so that it may enjoy growth parity with the rest of the country. It acts as a facilitator between the Central Ministries/Departments and the State Government of North Eastern Region in several ways including rural development, removal of infrastructure bottlenecks, provision of basic minimum services and other economic activities. For the growth and development of North Eastern Region and for the eradication of poverty and to end hunger, the North East Rural Livelihood Project is initiated. The main issue which hampers the development process of the North East region is multidimensional and complex involving the inability to satisfy basic needs, lack of control over resources, lack of education and skills, poor access to water and sanitation etc. based on this, the project is aiming at the livelihood promotion by reducing the rural poverty.

The Project Development Objective would be “To improve rural livelihoods especially that of women, unemployed youth and the most disadvantaged, in four North Eastern States”.

Following from the above, the specific project objectives are to:

- a. Create sustainable community institutions around women Self-Help Groups (SHGs), youth group of men and women (YG) and Community Development Groups (CDG).
- b. Build capacity of community institutions for self-governance, bottom up planning, democratic functioning with transparency and accountability.
- c. Increase economic and livelihood opportunities by
  - Managing natural resources and improving agriculture for food security and income enhancement from farming and allied activities,
  - Skill development of youth for employability and establishment of self and/or group managed enterprises,
  - Establishing backward and forward linkages for economic enterprises
  - Creating access to finance through linkages with banks and other financial institutions,
  - Creating critical infrastructures.
- d. Develop partnership of community institutions for natural resource management, microfinance, market linkages and sectoral economic services.

#### **a. Project Guiding Principles**

The project would adopt the core guiding principles which would be communicated and reinforced across the organization. Project would have monitoring mechanism to see if these are being institutionalized across the project including in the community structures. These guiding principles are discussed below.

- Most disadvantaged people first approach and empathy with community- providing livelihood opportunities for the most disadvantaged is the priority. The most disadvantaged people include women led households, physically handicapped, tribal community, poorest of the poor, etc. The project staff and other stakeholders would be sensitive to community’s needs, wants, customs and traditions.
- Democratic, participatory and bottom-up approach and decision making – At the community level the decision would be taken up by discussing the same in a participatory approach. The people at the grassroots would decide what is best for them. The participatory processes would delay the decision making initially but once the decisions are taken, these would be implemented with a sense of urgency and in a time bound manner.
- Time bound performance with sense of urgency – The decisions once taken by the community would then be implemented forthright.
- Transparency and accountability at all levels –The project would promote transparency by putting maximum information about various projects and investments on the web-site of RPMU and would follow all

disclosure norms as prescribed by Right to Information Act (RTI). At the community level also transparency and accountability will be ensured.

- Recognition for outstanding performance – The project would develop a culture and core value of high performance. The performance parameters would be clearly laid out for people, teams and institutions at different levels.
- Learning orientation –The project would encourage new things and innovation in the process of doing things, in activities and products etc. and create avenues and forums for sharing and learning from each other.
- Holistic Development – The project would aim at holistic development of the community for ensuring attainment of well-being. It would encourage the empowered communities to access other government supports in health, education etc.

#### **b. Project duration and area**

The project is for period of five years. It covers two districts each in Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The districts are:

Mizoram	-	Aizawl and Lunglei
Nagaland	-	Peren and Tuensang
Sikkim	-	South, West and 15 Panchayat wards of East District
Tripura	-	West and North Districts.

The project will cover nearly 300000 households in 1624 villages of 58 blocks across eight districts in four North Eastern States.

#### **c. Project Approach**

Though there are several rural development programs underway in the region, still there are major challenges and gaps in the poverty and livelihood sector. The project would have three pronged approach to livelihood strengthening in view of the above guiding principles and experiences of achieving sustainable development. These are:

- Social empowerment
- Economic empowerment
- Partnerships and Linkages.

As stated in the Project Development Objective, the primary beneficiaries of the project would be women, unemployed youth and the most advantaged. The project would prioritize more vulnerable groups, such as female-headed households, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, physically challenged and the poorest of the poor.

The key Project Development Objective level outcome indicators are as follows:

- At least 60 percent of women SHG members achieve a minimum of 30 percent increased income in real terms by end of project.
- At least 30 percent of project-benefitted unemployed youths are employed.
- At least 50 percent of the most disadvantaged households achieve a minimum of 30 percent improvement in livelihood indices.
- At least 70 percent of the SHGs formed/supported by the project are institutionally sustainable.

### **IV. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

- To determine the impact of Livelihood project on achieving the sustainable development goals.
- To examine the project in empowering women by creating sustainable community institutions around Self-Help Groups.
- To examine the overall impact of Livelihood project on women empowerment in the projected North Eastern States.
- To establish the effects of a Livelihood project on improving the livelihood.

### **V. WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

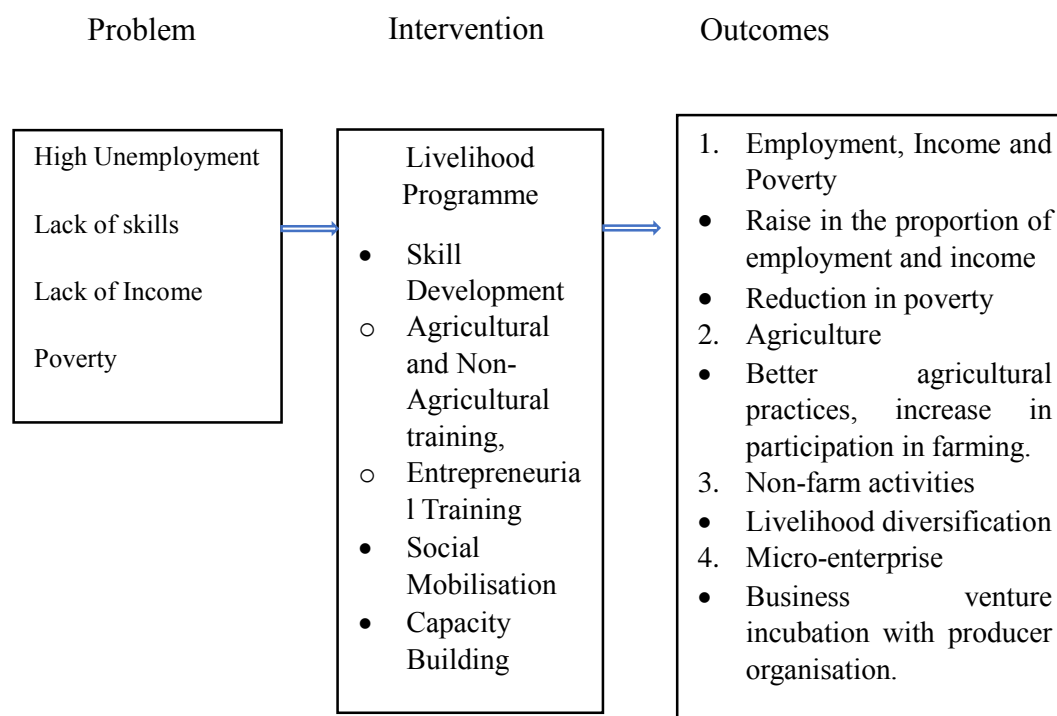
Since the 1980s, women's empowerment practice and discourse have gained reputation as an important conduit for ensuring equity in the distribution of the benefits of development in low-income settings (Batliwala, 2007; Tanzile et al., 2023). The term, empowerment is viewed as the remedy to the diverse socioeconomic problems; including poverty and vulnerability, widespread unemployment, gendered inequalities and gender-based violence (Batliwala, 2007; Tanzile et al., 2023). Empowerment is the degree of autonomy and self-determination in people and in communities. It enables them to present their interest in a responsible way and acting on their own authority. The term Women empowerment is the ability of women to enjoy their rights to control and benefit from resources, assets, income and improve their economic condition and wellbeing as given by (Ghosh, 2020). Empowerment is seen as a powerful tool used to solve the various problems such as limited

livelihood options, inequalities of gender and violence against women. The various project was implemented by engaging in income-generating activities to reduce and alleviate poverty in poor rural communities seen as a process towards women empowerment.

Women Empowerment is interpreted in development agenda, as participation in decision-making, increased access to productive resources, expanded choices, rights and control over her body and life (Kumar & Varghese, 2005a). Through this intervention many women are aware of and gain self-confidence and strength to overcome and dealt with the inequalities faced at the different levels in society. The four dimensions of empowerment are distinguishable: power within- individual changes in confidence and consciousness; power to-increase in skills, abilities including earning in income, access to markets and networks; power over-changes in power relations within households, communities and at the macro-level; and power with- organisation of the powerless to enhance individual abilities and/or ability to challenge power relations (Kumar & Varghese, 2005b). The interventions are synergise with the dimensions of empowerment and it resonance towards the achievement of sustainable development goals.

## VI. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE LIVELIHOOD PROGRAMME

Based on the literature and experiences from previous livelihoods Programme, the NERLP programme had identified problems faced by women in North East region, including unemployment, lack of skills and income and high poverty. An intervention is designed to address these issues and challenges.



**Figure 1: Theory of change**

## VII. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is conducted to empower women for sustainable development through the Livelihood Project in the Eight Districts of four North Eastern States. Research is a careful investigation and research is carried out with the assistance of proper and well-defined methodology. The data for this study have been collected from books, journals, periodicals, government data base, thesis papers, web links etc.

## VIII. FINDINGS

a. Contribution of the Project to sustainable development goal.

Based on the analysis of impact evaluation report (Agriculture and Food Global Practice, Sustainable Development, South Asian Region, 2020) the project successfully contributed towards sustainable access to income-generating activities by the creation of sustainable community institution as shown in Table 1. The project effectively empowered the women for sustainable development as given below in Table 2 where maximum beneficiary of intervention are women. The project enhanced the livelihood options of women by engaging in various economic activities as given in Table 3 and the interventions increased the incomes of poor women in reducing poverty. This project contributes immensely towards the achievement of SDG 1, SDG 2 and SDG 5.

b. Contribution of the project in the creation of sustainable community institutions.

The report issued by World Bank on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020, (Agriculture and Food Global Practice, Sustainable Development, South Asian Region, 2020) shows that the women in project area who were not formerly in Self Help Groups have become members of project supported Self Help Groups. The project was successful in achieving the inclusion of women as a member in sustainable institutions. The impact evaluation of the project is given below.

**Table 1: Community Institutions**

Indicator name	Unit of measure	Baseline	Original target	Formally revised target	Actual achieved at completion
At least 50% of women in project area who were not formerly in SHGs become members of project supported SHGs	Percentage	0.00	50.00		80.00
		12-Mar-2012			31-Dec-2019

Source:<http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/332381586198778661/pdf/India-North-East-Rural-Livelihoods-Project.pdf>

The project was successful in its inclusion of women in the sustainable institutions as a member of projected supported SHGs. The analysis from the Table 1 shows that the 80% of households' respondents women had joined Self Help Groups against the original target of 50%. The evaluation reveals that the project is successful to a very great extent in the achievement of exceeding 50% target of inclusion of women in the project.

c. Contribution of the project to women's empowerment.

The contribution of project in empowerment of women are shown below in the impact evaluation report drafted by (Agriculture and Food Global Practice, Sustainable Development, South Asian Region, 2020).

**Table 2: Project Beneficiaries**

Indicator name	Unit of measure	Baseline	Original target	Formally revised target	Actual achieved at completion
Direct project beneficiaries	Number	0.00	300000.00	300000.00	344549.00
		12-Mar-2012			31-Dec-2019
Female beneficiaries	Percentage	0.00	260000.00 30-June-2018	86.70	102.40

Source:<http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/332381586198778661/pdf/India-North-East-Rural-Livelihoods-Project.pdf>

The above Table 2 shows a total of 344549 households were benefited which was 15% greater than the project development objective target of 300000. A vast majority of direct project beneficiaries were 292881 women SHG members reaching 113 percent of core indicator target of 260000 women. This would increase the income of women by engaging in various economic generating activities and empowered women for sustainable development in North East India.

d. Contribution of the project on improving livelihood.

As per the impact evaluation report of (Agriculture and Food Global Practice, Sustainable Development, South Asian Region, 2020) the following result reveals.

**Table 3: Livelihood**

Indicator name	Unit of measure	Baseline	Original target	Formally revised target	Actual achieved at completion
At least 70% of the project supported Households diversified or up-scaled their income-generating activities	Percentage	0.00	70.00		61.00
		12-Mar-2012	12-Mar-2012		31-Dec-2019

Source:<http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/332381586198778661/pdf/India-North-East-Rural-Livelihoods-Project.pdf>

The above given Table 3 analyzed the contribution of interventions in increasing the annual households income of the respondents based on the key factors including lending from SHGs, adoption of improved farm and non-farm practices and diversification or upscaling of livelihood activities. The interventions did not achieve the original target of 70% set by the project. However, the project significantly improves the livelihood by upscaling or diversifying the livelihood activities by 53 % and access to new input and output markets also contributed towards an increase in the household income.

## IX. CONCLUSIONS

This paper is based on the implications of North East Rural Livelihood Project as a significant intervention in achieving the sustainable development goals in a great potential. India is rising slowly in the path of development where woman is still facing a problem in heteropatriarchal society. Through this intervention, the women are empowered by inclusion in various sustainable institutions. The interventions empowered women in taking households decision. As a result of project, the women of projected area reported increase in household incomes and enhanced the living conditions much better than before. The project was successful in its outreach and inclusion in terms of reaching out to women, poor, low caste and tribal households in all project areas and targeted villages, which led to transformation and strengthening of livelihoods among the rural poor in the four states. The project fulfilled the objectives of interventions on improving livelihood by diversifying the livelihood activities. Based on the findings, the North East Rural Livelihood Project addresses the target of sustainable development goals. The interventions should be expanded to all North Eastern states so that the more of women would be covered and empowered for achieving SDGs.

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