

DIGITAL FOR RURAL WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

ASSAM MULTI-STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTATION REPORT

Enabling Rural Women from Livelihood to Entrepreneurship: Challenges & Opportunities in Access and Technology



The conference, *Enabling Rural Women from Livelihood to Entrepreneurship: Challenges & Opportunities* focussed on rural women's entrepreneurship Assam was organised by the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) and Council for Social and Digital Development (CSDD), and North East Development Foundation (NEDF), at NEDFi campus on 16th November, 2022, Guwahati, Assam. The goal of the consultation was to map the issues that persist in the area of rural women's entrepreneurship in Assam, and to discuss the scope of meaningful usage of ICTs and digital technology for the purpose business. The consultation was designed as a roundtable with scope for equal participation for inputs in the discussion. The event was attended by stakeholders engaged in funding, capacity building, knowledge production, and interests in the domain of entrepreneurship in general and rural women's entrepreneurship in particular in the state of Assam. As hence, the event was also attended by representatives from rural women's enterprises (RWE); and early-stage RWE groups with affiliations in self help groups (SHGs), which have been a key stepping stone at the grassroots level in equipping rural women with the sense of security and motivation to orient themselves towards entrepreneurship.

CONSULTATION SUMMARY

1. That there has been a sea change in terms of openness to entrepreneurship among rural women in the 20+ years in Assam. However, there are several micro enterprises, but very few have been able to scale up. An aspect to deliberate upon for the forum is on the ways to market and finance, two biggest challenges for entrepreneurs in the state, could be designed better to help entrepreneurs in the state succeed.
2. The importance of supporting rural women is much needed requirement, and that North Eastern Regional Agricultural Marketing Corporation (NERAMAC) Limited has stepped up their initiatives towards the same recently. NERAMAC has been of late engaging with at least 50 women FPOs out of the 200 farmer producer organisations (FPO) it is working with. The mainstay of NERAMAC's engagement with RWEs is through FPCs/FPOs. They have also helped in marketing and selling items that FPOs have handed over in white label stage. They also undertake skill training. Very few FPOs in northeast undertake value addition to the crops and marks it as an area of concern.
3. Financiers are more comfortable with issuing loans to women as loan repayment is more strictly adhered to by women. KVIC finances a sizeable number of SHGs. However, the entirety of funds issued is not used for capital formation for sustainable development and a good amount goes towards consumption purposes. There is a need for professionalism from the side of the RWEs to give more of their time towards production, as also quality control. That crossing over



an FPO to maturity level takes time and requires handholding in the process towards capacity building. For the issue of marketing, the utilisation of GeM portal must be explored, and the small and medium corporates to provide small amounts to work on orders. There is an acute need to build the value chain in the northeast and work on market linkages.

4. NEDFi provides assistance in applying for loans and strategising on setting up an enterprise, as also skill building and marketing products. It is also providing the digital space in innovative ways to reach aspiring entrepreneurs. That a database of entrepreneurs may be of help. In the web portal *Advancing Northeast*, it has compiled extensive resources to help guide an aspiring entrepreneur. NEDFi has recommended the introduction of entrepreneurship in some capacity at school level.
5. RWEs are facing hurdles in rural enterprises from diversifying to digital marketing. GST registration, a must have certification for digital marketing had proven an issue as often it is not feasible for the entrepreneur to employ a CA, and/or due to inadequate monthly savings. The government e-Marketplace (GeM) portal as it exists currently is not welcoming to entrepreneurs. Availability of credit has improved but to cross over from livelihood to entrepreneurship is a challenge due to differences in skill, information, and credit availability as one move away from cities and towns to rural areas.



6. That a partnership with Google, in 2021, a fund with a corpus of around INR 200 crores was made available to be shared among micro and small enterprises for assistance on application basis, but information did not reach entrepreneurs in north east India in time. By the time a few applications rolled in the fund was already exhausted.
7. It may take another 5 years for the entrepreneurship ecosystem in the north east India to be strong enough for rapid dissemination of relevant information. Further, in the context of women entrepreneurs from the urban regions, there is a need to ensure exposure to newer, innovation-based areas of development in entrepreneurship such as e-mobility.
8. Investing in governance and management of cooperatives from the part of organisations working with market linkages for cooperatives like NERAMAC has an important role to play in uplifting the state of rural women's entrepreneurship. Low exposure to markets and low literacy rates in Assam contribute in hindering the entrepreneurs from engaging with the market in an organised manner. In comparison to states like Tamil Nadu, entrepreneurs of Assam have abysmally low participation in cooperatives, and FPOs. FPOs as they exist in Assam have not benefitted from capacity-building in the current scenario.
9. There is a chain involved in engagement with FPOs, and the role played by cluster based business organisations (CBBO) in helping resolve some of the issues in market linkages for the FPOs. NERAMAC, for its part, has appointed dedicated personnel for the task of monitoring of and liaising between CBBOs and FPOs where necessary. The farmers, producers are encouraged to demand accountability of the corporation where required, and to engage with them with a sense of confidence – a change which may take some time in the region.



10. That the evolution process of scaling from and SHG, FPO, FPC takes time. There is a need for training of women beyond the stage of product training and onwards to capacity building in how to manage their enterprise. It often happens that once the development actor exits a site, the built landscape of entrepreneurship is not equipped to sustain its productivity.
11. Assam Start Up, in collaboration with NRLM and SRLM has stated a project with the goal of incubating 100 rural women's enterprises for 1.5 years with mentorship. They received 10,000 applications of which they shortlisted 150 enterprises. Apart from financial challenges, the entrepreneurs are facing issues in branding, packaging, lack of knowledge on technology, lack of knowledge on finance and bookkeeping. That several enterprises are making a good product but are selling their product in bulk to companies in tier-1 cities who then repackage and market the product with greater profits.
12. SeSTA has been working for decades in building social and financial capabilities of communities, among them through FPCs. There is a necessity to skill the rural women entrepreneurs in backward and forward linkages necessary for running a farmer produce company. That too often women have had to take up the mantle of managing the businesses, and that a shift towards allotting greater agency to the RWEs is fundamental to their sustainability beyond the years of the development actor's intervention.
13. Finance and infrastructure and machinery are much less of a problem compared to equipping the entrepreneurs with business planning and management skills. Quality control is another issue. Another important issue is equipping the entrepreneurs to deal with negative economic shocks. Often when they are met with a negative experience their motivation to participate in entrepreneurship again flounders, sometimes due to lack of support from family.
14. According to Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission (ASRLM), the RWEs need help in sourcing the working capital for timely procurement of the raw material at the harvest season when prices are low to be able to make profit. There is also a need for strategising in good branding and packaging.
15. There is little awareness among the small and micro food producers regarding food safety licencing and there must be efforts to encourage the RWEs to visit to the web portal FoSCoS (<https://foscoss.fssai.gov.in/>) and contact the corporation for a primer on the process of registering for licence, a process now digitalised through the portal.
16. Bhogali Jalpan is a company that has built up their market in over a decade in Assam in Assamese traditional food items. That as season brand operating in Assam, Bhogali Jalpan are willing to lend their brand name to products by RWEs.

That there are issues on the supply side with availability of products and produce often being a problem it has faced with products like *joha* rice not being available in steady supply or at the quantities to meet seasonal demands.

17. Standardisation of products is another aspect in which the producers need training. Further, the importance of providing handholding and capacity building of the entrepreneurs to consider the benefits of long-term engagement in production cannot be overestimated.
18. ARIAS Society of Assam government provides financial as well as machinery support to RWEs. It also provides support in setting up stock rooms to aid hoarding of raw materials. There is the need to set up connections between FPCs so that there may be an exchange of goods. Moving towards assigning division of labour to members in cooperatives like CLFs for greater specialisation and moving from livelihood to entrepreneurship is a needy area.
19. There should be more avenues in Assam to tap into the non-handloom uses of silk cocoons in cosmetic and pharmaceutical industries that are underway in several countries without a robust domestic landscape of sericulture. Assam depends on imports from other states for dyes used in the silk industry and steps need to be taken to encourage entrepreneurship in this domain.
20. Lack of awareness on quality control measures, and lack of value addition are areas of attention required for RWEs. APART is working on training and capacity building mentorship to 1500 entrepreneurs to be investment-ready.
21. The micro and small enterprises should focus on formalisation basics like licensing, GST registration, and scaling up their enterprises. That the percolation of information is extremely low at the level of villages. Banking and finance have in fact been unwelcoming towards small and micro entrepreneurship.
22. There are significant gaps in marketing management and branding. That the products are not available round the year, and work needs to be done in distribution. RWEs required to be travelled through the process of successful branding of their products. Institutes like the Assam Institute of Management (AIM) can help RWEs in market linkages, branding, advertisement, etc.
23. NSIC is playing a big role in product training of entrepreneurs. It has facilities to provide training in an extensive list of specialisations including food industry and candle making. It feels that north eastern states have finally captured the attention of the government and MSMEs can only benefit from sustaining their efforts.
24. The rural-urban divide collapses in certain aspects, and Urban Livelihood Mission supports a good number of SHGs in towns and cities of Assam. District headquarters and City Livelihood Centres can extend the use of their networks and

showrooms to showcase the products made by rural entrepreneurs free of cost. NULM is focussing on digital marketing via the large online marketplaces, but standardising products is an issue that needs to be taken care of from the side of the entrepreneurs. There is already a felt need for diversifying in the range of products created for mass consumption.

25. There is simultaneous lack of familiarity with concepts of entrepreneurship, trading, and business at the local level, as also the presence of practical leadership skills prevalent among rural women with a scope of training for bigger projects. Women's leadership need to be honed.
26. There is need to have a more nuanced idea of the woman entrepreneur in terms of their social location instead of looking at them as a homogenous category. There is also a need to learn from the historical mistakes in other domains and of other regions, all the while engaging with the intersectional and diversity issues while planning an intervention.



Some of key speakers during the consultation included - Dr. Sriparna B. Baruah, Advisor, North Eastern Handicrafts and Handloom Development Corporation (NEHHDC); Cmde. Rajiv Ashok (Retd.), Managing Director, North Eastern Regional Agricultural Marketing Corporation (NERAMAC), Govt. of India; Sukumal Deb, Deputy CEO, Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC), NER; Debashish Gangopadhyay, Chairman, Assam Gramin Vikash Bank; Srijib Kumar Baruah, Executive Director, NEDFi; Dr Abhijit Sharma, IIBM.

Key leading institutions included – Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission (ASRLM), SIDBI, NABARD, ARIAS Society, APART, Assam Institute of Management, FSSAI Regional office, CML Tata Trusts, NEDFi, Assam startup, SeSTA, Food Safety, Govt. of Assam; PMFME, AIDC, Industries Dept.; National Small Industries Corporation (NSIC); DAY-NULM; DIYA Foundation; Directorate of Sericulture, Assam; TISS Guwahati offline Campus.


