

Livelihoods for Dignity

Learning from Bihar





Project Supported by Karuna Trust UK & Karuna Trust Deutschland
Dignified livelihoods for the most marginalized communities in the
West Champaran district of Bihar through Vegetable Cultivation &
Bamboo based craft

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Introduction

Livelihoods for Dignity explores a transformative intervention aimed at empowering the *Musahar* and *Dom* communities—among the most disadvantaged Scheduled Castes—by promoting sustainable and dignified livelihoods.

This document details the efforts of PHIA Foundation, in collaboration with Karuna UK, to develop economic opportunities for these communities through vegetable cultivation and bamboo-based crafts. More than just economic empowerment, the project challenges deep-seated social norms, strengthens agency, and builds community resilience. Through key strategies such as community mobilization, technical training, and linkages, the initiative has demonstrated significant progress in improving livelihoods, social security, and gender equality.

The stories and insights presented here illustrate how dignity and self-reliance can be promoted by addressing structural inequities, equipping communities with the right tools, and enabling them to take ownership of their destiny.



Introduction to PHIA

Partnering Hope Into Action Foundation (PHIA) is a Charitable Trust registered in Delhi in 2005. It works across multiple geographies on addressing issues which act as barriers for communities to thrive. PHIA's focus has been on the disadvantaged and vulnerable communities who are left behind in the development interventions.

PHIA works in partnership with multiple stakeholders including government, private sector, philanthropy institutions, civil society organisations, academic institutions and community-based organisations with this focus. Its interventions and programs are spread in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi NCR, Ladakh and Punjab. PHIA's community centric work is on a range of issues including education, WASH, strengthening local governance, climate change adaptation, sustainable livelihoods through strengthening value chains benefiting communities, and food and nutrition security for communities.

Central to PHIA's vision is the belief that real transformation begins at the community level. By nurturing leadership, building capacities, and advocating for systemic change, PHIA turns hope into actionable solutions. Its evidence-driven programs have touched the lives of countless individuals, inspiring them to overcome challenges and thrive.





Promoting Sustainable Livelihoods

PHIA recognises that economic empowerment rooted in sustainable livelihoods is the key to unlock the door to resilience, dignity and sustainable well-being. PHIA has promoted and nurtured opportunities for some of the most marginalized communities, enabling them to build on their knowledge, skills and resources.



1

The state of Bihar

The state of Bihar has always witnessed backwardness on multiple development indicators and poverty. Despite concerted efforts of the state and a remarkable reduction in those living in multidimensional poverty the state still is home to the highest percentage of multidimensional poor in the country with 33.76% of its population falling into this category, as per the National Multidimensional Poverty Index, 2023 released by the Government of India.

Bihar has also always witnessed rigid social structures deeply rooted in historical and cultural traditions. The caste system in the state, like in much of India, stratifies society into hierarchical groups based on birth, significantly influencing individuals' social, economic, and political opportunities. This system has traditionally favoured higher castes, granting them privileges and access to resources, while marginalised communities, such as Scheduled Castes and OBCs (Other Backward Classes), often face social exclusion, limited economic opportunities, and restricted access to education and healthcare.

This stratification has perpetuated inequality, despite legal measures aimed at promoting social justice and equity. The representation of different social categories in the total population of the state is contrary to the concentration of resources and privileges.

Population Share in Bihar



EBC	36.2%
BC	27.13%
SC	19.65%
General	15.52%
ST	1.68%

Contrary to these statistics the least percentage of poor in comparison to their total population are from the General Castes with 25.09% and it would not be a surprise to find that the SCs have the highest percentage of poor among their population with 42.93%. It is in this context of stark inequity, having a historical backdrop to it that the intervention with the Musahars and Dom communities is placed.



2 Working with the most vulnerable



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3 The idea of dignified livelihoods

Both the Musahar and Dom communities fall in the lowest rung of the caste system and are therefore victims of caste based discrimination quite often leading to practices of untouchability and exclusion against them. In the context of the intervention villages they have largely depended on wage labour as their source of income. The tenacity of such source of livelihoods is always weak exposing these communities to both social and economic vulnerabilities more. Moreover the generational oppression witnessed by these communities had also resulted in normalisation of the present way of life and a sense of despondence among these communities.

The idea of a **'dignified livelihoods'** its therefore placed in the dual realm of an economically viable livelihood option and breaking the cycle of dejection and hopelessness to find dignity and pride in what they are doing. There had to

be a departure from the usual options augmenting the present sources to something that goes against the social imagery of caste based limitations and barriers that these communities face. The idea of working on vegetable value chain with Musahars and augmenting the innate skills around bamboo based crafts for the Dom community to cater to larger markets is placed in this thought process. In both cases while the tangible economic returns were to be visible clearly, the breaking of established social norms also is the lasting change.

In 2017, the PHIA Foundation, with support from Karuna UK, conducted a feasibility study to understand the needs of Dalit communities and identify potential livelihood opportunities to increase their income. The report revealed that vegetable cultivation was the most preferred option among the community. Based on these findings, in 2018, PHIA and its network



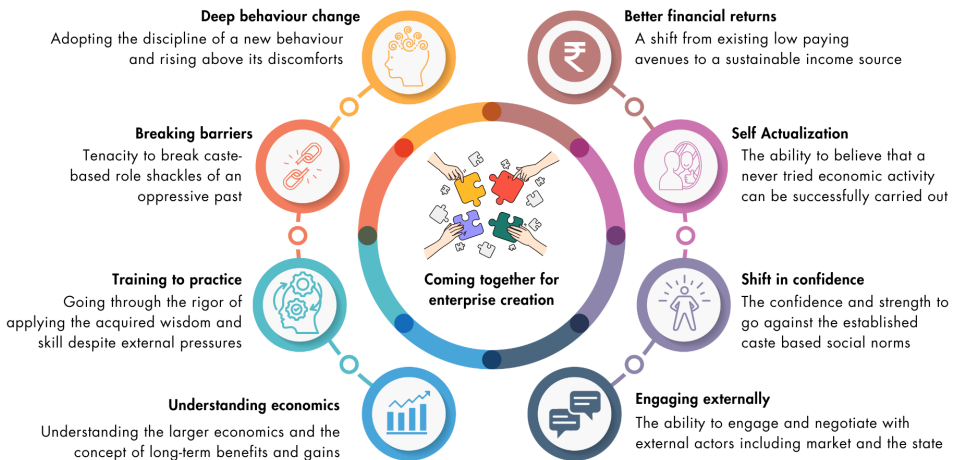


partner SSEVS launched a pilot project to improve the vegetable value chain, involving 200 Dalit families in West Champaran, Bihar, with support from Karuna UK

In 2020, a team from the Karuna Trust UK visited the project area and conducted a review to assess income enhancement, knowledge improvement, and women's participation in the project activities. During the review, it was noted that while 200 Dalit families were included in the project, the Charmkars and Pasi sub-communities predominantly benefited, whereas the Musahars and Dom communities, which are among the

most marginalised within the Scheduled Caste community, were not adequately represented.

Consequently, a decision was made to specifically target these most marginalised groups to enhance their socio-economic status. A project design was developed to benefit these communities, and a preliminary survey was conducted to understand their needs, with findings shared with Karuna Trust and Karuna Germany. PHIA is currently working with 120 Musahar and Dom families on farm-based livelihoods in the West Champaran district of Bihar.





4 What it takes - the intervention experiences

An intervention which seemingly is focused on economic empowerment of communities but has deep moorings in transforming a social norm goes beyond the simple equation of putting resources to bring about a change. In this case it required bringing a lot of ingredients and a patient approach of self transformation to economic and social transformation. We can draw the following key elements necessary to make such an intervention successful and for the communities to take the leap of faith to first believe that it is possible for them to bring about a change.



a. Selecting those who have been at the end of line: Choosing individuals and groups who have consistently faced adversity and marginalisation and are vulnerable can bring forth their untapped potential and a willingness to change things. By focusing on those who have been at the end of the line, the project created opportunities for inclusion and growth.

b. Locally rooted and sensitive team: A team with a deep understanding of the communities, their history of oppression and their starting point becomes the first step in changing things. The empathy they carry towards the cause and for the

communities is one of the critical change factor. The project focused on having a such a team as an integral part of the design.

c. Building on previous work: Building on previous work in this case involved leveraging the gains of the land rights struggle that the communities had undergone previously to obtain land entitlements. Their close association with the land and the struggle created pathways for innovation and progress, ensuring that each step forward is rooted in past experiences.

d. Changing social perceptions: Perception



of possibilities are shaped by social beliefs and historical constructs. Musahars involved in successful vegetable value chain was not among a possibility perceived both by the larger society and themselves.

e. Building trust - from 'can't do' to 'can do': The journey from 'can't' to 'can' becomes the first barrier to overcome. The fear of losing the land obtained through years of struggle was also a push forward factor. But most important is building trust in themselves, their agency and the external facilitator like PHIA. This took time but once established was critical in driving things.

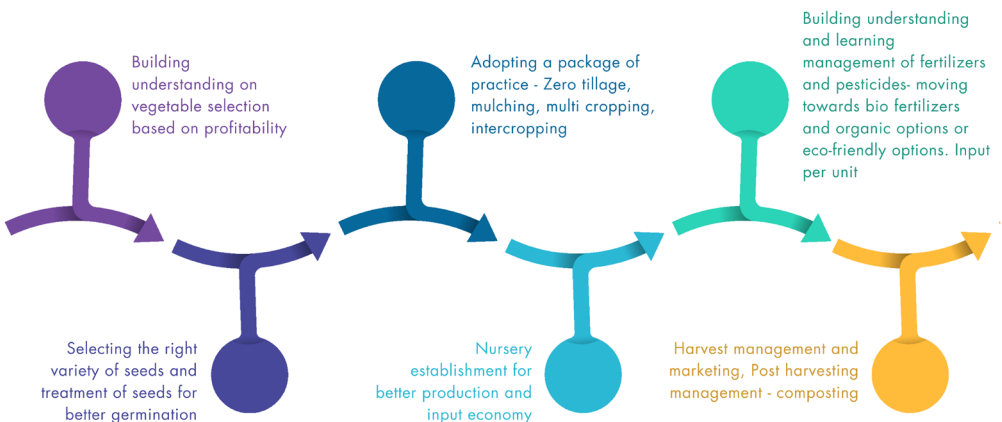
f. Strong community mobilisation: Strong community mobilisation involved a deep involvement to break years of inertia and acceptance of the present realities, rallying collective efforts and energies toward a common goal and facilitating active participation. This empowered the Musahar communities to drive meaningful change, amplify their voices, and address challenges through coordinated action and shared responsibility.

g. Working on making community understand the economics of the trade: Every trade has its economics and for the Musahar community to understand it was critical in enabling them to make appropriate choices in the long run. It was also critical in making the communities understand that what kind of returns can be expected from the venture.

h. Marketing support: Marketing support included building negotiation skills to ensure that the community members as sellers can confidently negotiate for a fair and right price for their product. By empowering individuals with the tools to negotiate effectively, they were able to better navigate market dynamics, safeguard their value, and achieve profitability.

i. Contextual technical knowledge: What package of practice works in a specific context of landholding size, agro-climatic conditions, land type and many other factors has to be understood in granular details before the technical advisory be shaped as failure would have meant a high

AN EXAMPLE OF THE JOURNEY OF ACQUIRING NUANCED AND GRANULAR CONTEXTUAL KNOWLEDGE





level of disposition and withdrawal of the communities. The project was sensitive and cautious on this count and many locally appropriate tools to reduce drudgery and enhance productivity, seed selection, harvesting time etc. were decided accordingly.

j. Gender transformative approach: Utilising the opportunity of enhancing livelihoods to transform gender power relations and move towards equality also enhanced the project outcomes. Women farmers from Musahar community breaking the barriers of intersectional

marginalisation of gender and caste identities instilled a different confidence in them.

k. Connecting with the state: The aspirations of the state policies and agencies meant towards welfare of the marginalised and vulnerable communities quite often do not reach them. Through the project these provisions were optimally utilised. It involved training on agriculture techniques, provision of equipments, handholding support etc. This went on to enhance know how as well as an enhanced confidence to engage with the state machinery.

Overall what looks like a simple intervention of growing vegetables becomes a complex and nuanced exercise involving deep empathy and understanding of the struggles of the communities, immense patience, right mix of social and technical skills and the ability to connect several dots. Missing any aspect would mean that the opportunity to foster a sustainable change is lost or is half served.





5 What has it resulted in?

The mapping of the project results against the initial conception presents an encouraging picture to establish that the project is on the right path of achieving what it aspired to do. While the numbers validate that the project activities have been impactful and are promoting positive change, it is the testimonies from the communities which narrates the journey that they have covered and how their confidence and perseverance has resulted in more than just the income from the vegetable production. Following are the key results achieved which come together to paint a picture of enhanced agency and journey towards sustainability.

Result 1:

Creation of strong agency of farmers in form of Farmers Interest Groups [FIGs]:

Six Farmers Interest Groups or FIGs have been promoted and strengthened through the project. These FIGs are functional and vibrant and are leading the process of training, seed and tool support and marketing for the members. They have developed a keen interest in the farming business. The member farmers from the Musahar community have reaped multiple benefits as a result of this association. Some of them are as follows:

- Exposure training from Krishi Vigyan Kendra of the government
- Provision of Nursery kits as support
- Receipt of millets seeds, training and on-field support to develop demo plots from 'Harvets Plus', a private agro enterprise, promoting millet production
- Farmer entrepreneurship development training by Krishi Vigyan Kendra different livelihood models and drip irrigation technology
- Training on estimating the irrigation requirements of the fields in collaboration with other NGO

All these efforts have resulted in strengthening of the farm management practices and the members are continuously being exposed to new tools and technologies through training opportunities by key government institutions and other stakeholders.



Result 2:

Enhancing the social security net by linking of the families with at least one significant government scheme:

Enhancing the social security net enables the families to be more resilient towards different shocks and stresses. This in turn keeps the primary objective of strengthening the vegetable farming in sharp focus. Approximately 60 % of the families were linked with one or more significant social protection schemes including the following schemes:

- Old age pension scheme – Rs 500 monthly cash support to eligible individuals
- Widow pension schemes- Rs 400 per month cash support for a widow
- E Shram Cards - Pension of Rs 3,000 per month after 60 Years based on contribution as savings by the beneficiary and death insurance of Rs. 2 Lakhs
- Jobs under MGNREGS (rural employment scheme) - 100 days of work in their habitation/Panchyat
- Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojna- Annual cash support of Rs 6,000 to every registered farmer.

Result 3:

Improvement in socio-economic conditions of the targeted families through farm and non-farm-based livelihoods:

120 families are now trained and actively engaged in vegetable cultivation, with 165 families boosting their income across all major seasons. Nursery establishment by farmers has emerged as a profitable business model, with four farmers already earning from it. Support from KVK Madhopur, including a greenhouse net kit worth INR 40,000, has been pivotal in this success. Musahar farmers have transitioned from daily wage labourers to recognized producers, gaining better market prices through improved linkages. Additionally, 35 Musahar women received training in goat rearing. The socio-economic conditions are improving, with 60% of farmers seeing a 20% income increase.

Over three seasons, 165 farmers reported a total income of Rs. 36,35,000, reflecting significant progress in their agricultural ventures. The average annual income of farmers reached Rs. 22,030, with many farmers now profiting from vegetable and crop cultivation, including millets, paddy, and wheat, supported by free government-provided seeds. Some have transitioned to full-time farming, while others continue it as an alternative livelihood, benefiting from improved farm management skills.



6 On the path to deep change and sustainability

Positive change is often a factor of aspiration and in turn also raises the aspirations of individuals. While the project interventions have resulted in achievement of the committed results, it has also led to wider and deeper dimensions of positive change that paved the path to sustainability. We have witnessed the following dimensions which contribute as key determinants for a sustainable journey ahead in which the community leadership and changed practices play the key role.

a. Social inclusion and cohesion: The farming initiatives fostered a sense of social inclusion within the Musahar community, breaking the traditional social barriers. By taking lands on lease from the land owners mostly from the so-called higher castes, Musahars are able to engage with other castes and communities on an equal footing. The community has been able to establish its new identity as farmers and has gained recognition for its entrepreneurial skills and farm management practices. The program helped build pathways for the marginalised community to gain dignity and build an inclusive environment. Communal bonds, cooperation and mutual respect have increased which was previously lacking due to their perceived marginalised status.

b. Transformation in gender power equations: Agricultural training and capacity-building efforts specifically targeted women from the Musahar community, empowering them with the skills and knowledge to contribute equally to farming activities. This has not only improved their household roles but has also changed traditional gender dynamics. Women, who were once confined to domestic spaces, now actively participate in decision-making processes related to

farming, contributing to household income and are gaining greater autonomy.

c. Improved decision making and agency: Through exposure to modern farming techniques and training, members of the Musahar community have developed a stronger sense of agency and improved decision-making abilities. They have become more confident in managing their agricultural resources, choosing crop patterns, and making informed choices regarding savings and investments. This newfound confidence has also extended to personal and family decisions, enhancing their overall quality of life and an enhanced sense of agency.

d. Improved access to education and health: With increased household income from farming, Musahar families have been able to afford better education and healthcare for their children. The stability provided by agricultural earnings has allowed families to prioritise sending children to school rather than engaging them in labour. Additionally, improved nutrition from homegrown produce had a direct positive impact on family's health, reducing illness and improving overall well-being.



e. Changes in intra-household food consumption patterns: Agriculture based interventions with the Musahar community significantly impacted their food consumption patterns, shifting from food that depended on erratic daily wages to a more stable, diversified diet. With increased access to homegrown vegetables and nutritious produce, households have begun to consume more balanced meals, improving nutrition levels. This shift also reduced food insecurity, as they are no longer reliant solely on market purchases for sustenance, cutting down on expenses on vegetables. Each family is able to save at least Rs. 1,500 per month

as expenses on vegetable by producing it in their Nutri-Garden and agricultural farm.

f. Enhanced entrepreneurial and agricultural skills: The farming intervention introduced modern agricultural practices to the community, enhancing their entrepreneurial and agricultural skills. By learning techniques such as crop rotation, organic farming, and market linkage strategies, many families have been able to generate surplus produce, which they have been able to sell in the local markets. This newfound entrepreneurship has not only improved their financial standing but also instilled a sense of pride and self-reliance.

The path to sustainability is an ongoing endeavour with every positive development contributing in moving towards it with greater confidence and enhanced resilience. The changes that the intervention has brought about go beyond the mere enhancement of skills and capacities and have resulted in widening the aspirational horizon for the communities with the newfound confidence and pride.





7 Community speak

“

Kaa Kayil jao. Kaam milte nahikhe ta Kayil kaa jao. Hamni ke jaat ke majdooori karke khaye ke Bhagya me likhal baa.”

- Balister Manjhi

“What to do? What can we do when there is no work available? Our caste is destined to fill our stomach through wage labour only.”

These are Balister Manjhi’s initial thoughts expressed in the local dialect of Bhojpuri. He belongs to the Musahar community with limited job prospects and dependent on government handouts. He is among the others from his community who saw their life changing when they partnered with PHIA Foundation’s initiative aimed at promoting sustainable livelihoods.





PHIA facilitated the leasing of 500 square meter of land on sharecropping for Balister as he did not have any land along with essential resources, including seeds and tools. He was also enrolled in a comprehensive training program that taught him the intricacies of vegetable cultivation. Under the guidance of experienced farmers and government experts, Balister learned about soil preparation, planting techniques, pest control, and harvesting.

In his first season, Balister successfully cultivated peas and ridge gourd, crops that thrived in his local climate. He invested a small amount of money in fencing to protect his crops from wild animals, demonstrating his commitment to his farming venture. When his harvest was ready, Balister took his produce to the district market, approximately 25 Kms from his village, where he sold it at a profitable price.

Inspired by his success, Balister is now determined to expand his farming operations and become a self-sufficient farmer. His story is a testament to the power of community-driven initiatives and the potential for individuals to overcome adversity.



"Pahile koi kaam naa karat rahni, kabho kabho majdoori ke kaam mil jaat rahal jese 150 rupya din ke mil jaat rahal. Jab kheti shuru karnih tose kam samay kharcha kar ke ghar ke kharcha chala le tani. Dekhi na, apne log ke kahlaa par 1 acre khet leni aa aapan log ke taraf se milal genhu ke beej aur zero tillage se karva ke genhu bhi khoob achchha bhayil na. Apne log ke dhanyawaad ba, aa Sabji par bhid jay eke baa"

- Balister Manjhi

"I did not use to work regularly as the wage labour opportunities were sparse providing a maximum of Rs.150 in a day. Since I have started farming I am able to provide for the household spending less time and energy. Your support has encouraged me lease one acre of land for farming and seeds and zero tillage technique which I learnt from you has resulted in a bountiful crop of wheat. Thanks to you and now I am prepared take a plunge into vegetable cultivation."



Transforming Life Inspiring Other

Lalsa Devi, a resident of Dabaria Panchayat, lived a life of poverty, struggling to provide for her family through daily wages. Her family, like many others in her village, relied heavily on landlords for work, as they did not own any cultivable land.

Lalsa Devi saw an opportunity for change when the initiative for vegetable cultivation was initiated in her village. She joined a farmers' interest group, where she learned about improved farming practices, particularly in vegetable cultivation and goat rearing. Despite initial skepticism, Lalsa Devi was convinced of the benefits of collective action by Jeevika Mitra, a community organizer.

With the encouragement of Jeevika Mitra, Lalsa Devi approached nearby landlords and successfully negotiated a piece of land for sharecropping. During the Zaid season, she planted bitter gourd, bottle gourd, and ridge gourd, using the improved techniques she had learned. The Jeevika Mitra provided regular support and guidance, helping Lalsa Devi overcome any challenges she faced.

Lalsa Devi's hard work and dedication paid off. She harvested a bountiful crop, which she used to diversify the food plate for her family and sold the surplus in the local market. In that one season alone, she earned approximately Rs. 13,000 from her vegetable cultivation.

Inspired by Lalsa Devi's success, other farmers and villagers in Dabaria Panchayat began to seek out cultivable land for their own vegetable farming ventures. Her story became a beacon of hope, demonstrating that even in the face of adversity, individuals can improve their lives through education, perseverance, and community support.





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