

THE NEED FOR INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY IN THE SUNDERBANS



A Sunderbans Perspective: Views From the Grassroots

A Report by:



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Chapter I

Action Aid And Its Role In Sunderbans

ActionAid International is an international development organization with its headquarters in Johannesburg, South Africa. It aims to fight poverty worldwide. Formed in 1972, ActionAid has expanded its activities over the last 30 years and today works with around 13 million of the world's poorest and most deprived people in 42 countries. ActionAid mainly works in partnership with non-government organizations, people's organization and other agencies, making use of their knowledge and experience, to fight poverty and injustice at the local, regional, national and global levels.

Since 1972, ActionAid International-India¹, supported by its partner organizations, has been making efforts to reach out to the poor and excluded² sections of Indian society. Its mission is to help create an India, and indeed a world, free from poverty, injustice and discrimination where every person irrespective of gender, caste, age and ethnicity fully enjoys all human rights with dignity. AAI-India's country office is in New Delhi with 14 Regional Offices across the country.

The Kolkata Regional Office³ of AAI-India places special emphasis on gender equality viewing it as an issue that needs to be addressed in every sphere of interventions. The KRO works in partnership with NGOs, community-based organizations and directly with poor people, as well as, with alliances and networks. It works on promoting accountability of the government especially at the grass root level. It promotes policy advocacy to ensure the entitlements of the poor and excluded.

The Kolkata Regional Office has been working in the Sunderbans since 2002. Its various initiatives/ activities in Sunderbans were:

- It has facilitated a platform of local NGOs and CBOs called the *Sunderban Chetana-O-Adhikar Mancha* to address the key issues affecting the lives of the marginalized people, namely, livelihood, food security and governance in Sunderbans in 2002. This is a network of NGOs and CBOs and committed social activists. This network is collaborating with the national campaign on Right to Food and Right to Work.
- A bilateral initiative has been launched by organizations working in the Sunderbans in India and Bangladesh to address issues related to livelihood and biodiversity since 2003.
- An alliance building initiative has been taken up to work on the rights of fisher folk and families living below poverty line (BPL)⁴ as well as to address corporate abuse issues. This work is being carried out in partnership with the West Bengal United Fishermen Association (WBUFA) since 2004.

¹ AAI-India

² The marginalised people who have been deliberately neglected and excluded from the mainstream of the society.

³ KRO

⁴ BPL (Below Poverty Line) families are those living below the poverty line i.e., having expenditure less than Rs.274.35 per capita per month

In the course of its work in Sunderbans, ActionAid has felt that information has an important role to play in dealing with issues of the poor and excluded, as it will make them aware, informed and sensitized about various rights like rights over basic sources, Right to Food, Women's rights and right to participate in local governance.

In a first step towards understanding the need for information of poor and excluded people and in finding possible solutions to ensure that they have access and control over the information, ActionAid with the support of Mr. Dipak Basu, Fellow, Reuters Digital Vision Program, Stanford University, USA, conducted an Information Needs Assessment study in the Sunderbans from 15 January to 15 July 2005.

Bangladesh and India: A Joint Initiative

Sharing a common international boundary, India and Bangladesh share similar problems related to the Sunderbans.

These are:

- Φ Livelihood issues, especially those affecting the fisher folk community
- Φ Biodiversity Conservation
- Φ Corporate abuse

ActionAid International-India has since 2003 launched an initiative to work with ActionAid International-Bangladesh on common issues. An Action Research Study on Biodiversity and Livelihood Security was conducted in India and Bangladesh. The study in India was carried out by the Kolkata Regional Office in partnership with *Sundarban Chetana – O- Adhikar Mancha*.

The findings of the Action Research Studies of both countries were shared at a meeting in Bangladesh in 2004. A decision was taken to work jointly on the common issues. The sharing of this report on Information Needs Assessment in the Indian Sunderbans is a step further in understanding these issues.

Chapter II

Sunderbans : a Brief Description

The Sunderbans is a delta formed at the confluence of the rivers Ganges and Brahmaputra with the Bay of Bengal in India and Bangladesh. It is the world's largest mangrove forest area.

The Indian part of the Sunderbans covers an area of 9630 sq. kms and is designated as a Biosphere Reserve. The area comprises about 106 islands of which 54 islands are inhabited. It consists of 6 blocks of North 24 Parganas district and 13 blocks of South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. Of the total area, the Sunderban Tiger Project⁵ covers an area of 2585 sq. kms of which the core area⁶ is 1330 sq. kms. This core area is a National Park. The Indian Sunderbans has been recognized to be a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO⁷. It is also on the list of IUCN⁸ as a World Heritage Site (**Pl. see the map of Indian Sunderbans in Annexure-I**)

Two-third of the Sunderbans is in Bangladesh. It accounts for 4.2% of the total land area of Bangladesh and about 40% of the country's forests. It is situated in the districts of Khulna, Satkhira, Bagerhat, Pirojpur and Borguna. The Sunderbans have a very important contribution to the ecology and resources of the South-West Coastal Region of Bangladesh (**Pl. see the map of Bangladesh Sunderbans in Annexure-II**)

The Sunderbans is popularly believed to mean "beautiful forests", deriving its name from the "sundari" tree (*Heritiera fomes*). Here the tide comes twice daily, over a large area deepening old channels and cutting new ones. The soils are forever shifting and the maps of Sunderbans never accurately depict its constant transformation.

The Sunderbans exhibit a ferocity that is rarely seen in other places. Cyclones are common in coastal areas of the Sunderbans and have been responsible for widespread death and destruction. This is also the land of the Royal Bengal tiger, with a propensity for man-eating.

The history of human settlement in the Sunderbans dates from the treaty of 1757 signed by Mir Jafar, through which the lands of 24 Parganas were ceded to the East India Company, and subsequently became the *jagir* of Lord Clive. This was the beginning of a continuous reclamation of forest for agriculture.

The population of the Sunderbans is heterogeneous, with a rich history of immigration especially in the post-Independence era. The process of uncontrolled population growth has reduced the per capita cultivable land. It has also created overcrowding and high rates of disguised unemployment in agriculture as well as over-expansion of aquaculture and brackish water shrimp

⁵Launched in 1973-74, the project aims at tiger conservation in specially constituted 'tiger reserves', which are representative of various bio-geographical regions falling within our country.

⁶ In core area, forestry operations, collection of minor forest produce, grazing, human settlement and other biotic disturbances are not allowed and is singularly oriented towards conservation.

⁷ UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

⁸ International Union for Conservation and Natural Resources

farming. This has created a range of ecological and socio-economic problems in the region, leading to crisis in the livelihoods of the poor and marginalized people.

The Sunderbans has a high representation of minorities and other disadvantaged social groups. Scheduled castes comprise nearly 40% of the population. Scheduled tribes constitute 7% of the population.

The communities in the Sunderbans are extremely poor with low literacy levels (female literacy- 21.28%⁹). Majority of the population live below the poverty line- They are engaged in traditional livelihoods, working as fisher folk, wage labourers, agriculture labourers, honey collectors, or carrying deep sea fishing, collecting firewood and catching fingerlings of prawn.

About 85% of the population, of which 44% are scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, is dependent on rain-fed mono-cropped agriculture. Many of them are engaged in catching fish from the streams and estuaries. The traditional honey collectors go into the deep forests from February to April every year to collect honey. People in the Sunderbans face the risk of losing their life to attack from tigers and crocodiles and bites by poisonous snakes like the cobra, krait and Russell's viper. The villagers, especially the women, who are engaged in collection of prawn seed in the river and streams/estuaries are vulnerable to crocodile attacks and health hazards arising from wading for long hours in waist-deep saline water.

Infrastructure is poorly developed in the Sunderbans. There are only 42 km of railway line and about 300 km of metal roads, almost half of which are inaccessible in the monsoons. However a large section of the population are cut off from the main land as they live on the islands. In order to access the roads and railway lines, people have to depend on country boats and limited number of launches for moving from one island to the other or to the mainland. The human settlements rely crucially upon the system of protective embankments that are about 3500 in number. However, the system is frequently known to fail, as tidal action undercuts the earthen banks and causes them to collapse. There is an acute shortage of permanent jetties. Due to inaccessibility, most of the inhabited areas still do not have conventional electric supply. Access to safe drinking water is a major problem for the inhabitants.

The Panchayati Raj system, characterized by people's participation and decentralized planning, is the mode of governance in West Bengal and hence in Sunderbans. **For details, see Annexure III.**

In order to address the specific problems of Sunderbans, the government has constituted a special board called the Sunderban Development Board to identify and alleviate the problems of the Sunderbans. The focus areas of its work are to promote improved agriculture, social forestry, aquaculture and engineering construction.

⁹ The figure has been obtained by taking the percentage of the total number of female literates by the total population of the 19 blocks of Sunderbans. *Source: Census 2001.*

Chapter III

Key Issues Affecting the Poor and Excluded People of the Sunderbans

The Information Needs Assessment Study conducted in the Sunderbans helped to increase understanding of the key issues that affect the people of Indian Sunderbans.

Since the time of the early settlers, living within the Sunderbans has required a great deal of adaptability on the part of its human inhabitants. *".... As a settler it is very difficult to live and plan your future in a mangrove forest influenced by very high tides (av. 3 m), where there is virtually no fresh water-not even rainwater-for months at a time, where the whole area is regularly worked over by intense cyclonic storms, and where man-eating tigers are numerous and very real just outside your door"* (Seidensticker 1983¹⁰). The harsh realities of this region have been accepted and incorporated into the cultures of the local human inhabitants.

Today, the challenges posed by political, economic and social factors greatly affect the quality of life of the people, especially the poor, living in this area. These are issues that need to be addressed along with the ecological factors that affect this region.

One of the key issues affecting the lives of the people in the Sunderbans is the issue of governance. There is extremely poor participation of the majority of the people in decisions that affect their lives. There is a serious lack of transparency and accountability in the functioning of the Panchayats¹¹. The Panchayats do not make the required efforts to involve people in decisions that affect their lives. People's right to Information is violated. The poor and the marginalized have very little idea about the benefits that they are entitled to receive from the Government. The Government has failed to deliver the basic services to the people.

Another area of grave concern is the issue of livelihood and employment. The people of Sunderbans are mainly engaged in fishing and agriculture. Both are occupations from which the average earnings are meager. The rights and entitlements of the fisher folk who are poor are often not considered. Conversion of agricultural land of the marginal farmers for shrimp farming by the private sector destabilizes the agricultural economy. There are very few alternative avenues for income generation. Continuous shrinkage of employment opportunities compels the poor villagers to migrate to nearby cities and towns and to other parts of India to eke out a living. In order to improve rural employment scenario, the Government of India has recently passed a bill namely National Rural Employment Guarantee Act to ensure 100 days of work a year¹². However, its implementation has not yet been initiated. The working population of the

¹⁰ Seidensticker, John

1983 The Sunderbans Wildlife Management Plan: Conservation in the Bangladesh Coastal Zone, Gland: IUCN.

¹¹ Institution of Local Self Governance

¹² Every household in the rural areas of India shall have a right to at least 100 days of guaranteed employment every year for at least one adult member, for doing casual manual labour at the statutory minimum wage, and to receive the wages thereof within 7 days of the week during which work has been done. If there is a failure to provide this, within 15 days of the job application of the person, the state authority has to pay an unemployment allowance amounting to one third of the minimum wage per day until the person is provided employment for 100 days.

Sunderbans suffers from unemployment and under-employment. This leads to a lack of nourishment for their families, distress migration, exploitative employment practices and trafficking.

Women and children are becoming increasingly vulnerable in the Sunderbans. Women are underpaid for jobs that they are employed for. They wish to work to supplement their family income but are unable to find employment outside the traditional work. Children are engaged in *meen dhora*¹³, fish drying and domestic work from a young age. Child labor is common in the administrative towns and fish landing centers¹⁴ in the Sunderbans. Women and children migrate to other parts of the country to work as domestic help. Trafficking of women and children is also prevalent. Women face domestic violence.

Another vital issue is the threat to safety and security. Fisher folk, in the Sunderbans, do not receive the benefit of an early warning system like weather patterns from All India Radio or any other source in the country. Unavailability of timely information on weather forecasting endangers fisher folk while they are in the sea for fishing. Robberies are common in the areas and fisher folk often face pirate attacks on the high seas.

The provision of basic services and infrastructure to the people of the Sunderbans is far from satisfactory. Health services are an area of grave concern. Government health facilities in the villages are poor. Private practitioners are few and people have no option but to depend on quack¹⁵ doctors. People have no information on how to access health care though there is desperate need of it. The quality of education is poor. There are primary schools and alternative education centers in almost all the villages but due to insufficient infrastructure and human resources the quality of education delivered is poor. Village Education Committees¹⁶, entrusted to enhance participation of the community in the functioning of the education system, are mostly dysfunctional.

Communication facilities are poor. There is very limited metalled road surface, mostly mud paths. Most of the villages do not have conventional electric supply. Telephone communication is limited. Few people have access to newspapers on a daily basis. Inter-village communication is poor. Day-to-day living is a challenge for the people of the Sunderbans.

¹³ In local parlance meaning collection of prawn fry

¹⁴ Centers that provide landing arrangement for the catches of fish from the fishing boats and trawlers. At these centers multi-activity arrangements are provided for the sea or river going fisher folk.

¹⁵ People who have not undergone any medical course and hence do not possess government registration for practicing medicine. They have learnt to do medical treatment through experience.

¹⁶ VEC

Chapter IV

Information Communication Technology (ICT) and the Poor and Excluded People of Sunderbans

Context

The poor and excluded people of Sunderbans are in urgent need for information that will lead to betterment of their lives and eradication of poverty.

The region consists of islands and wilderness, inhabited by people living in isolation from one another, yet threatened by many of the same disasters. There is a desperate need for communications from the mainland to the islands and between islands.

With the present trends in development of information technology all over the world, Sunderbans needs to experience its fruits. India has made major strides in information technology yet there is a lacuna in reaching information to the poor and marginalized for their economic and social development.

The paucity of infrastructure facilities and the geographical features of Sunderbans make it difficult to reach information technology to the people. However the people of the area, who are among the poorest of the poor have a right to information about issues that affect them. Thus, the information on local issues and opportunities become crucial factors as they regulate the availability, access, utilization and control of the basic amenities and resources needed for their survival. Information enhances their knowledge and enables them to make informed choices. It also allows them to demand their rights from the State and participate in the decision-making process regarding issues that directly affect their lives.

ICT coupled with community participation and social mobilization has the potential for holistic development of the Sunderbans in context to the socio-economic and political environment. However, the content and language of the information needs to be appropriate to the local needs as it will facilitate and ease the process of information sharing and its understanding. It is in this context that the Information Need Assessment Study was conducted from 15 January 2005 to 15 July 2005.

Objectives of the Study

- To understand and document the critical information needs of the poor and vulnerable communities, especially women and children
- To find out if and how the people receive this critical information
- To examine whether the people are in a position to utilize the information received for their livelihood support
- If the people do use the information, to assess how far it helps them to change their socio-economic condition and to make the local government more transparent and accountable to the poor people.

- To find out if and how the people use the information for safeguarding their fundamental rights, safety and security, health care and education
- To examine the methods of communication and information distribution that are already in place.

Methodology of the study

Sunderbans comprise of 19 blocks spread over two districts of North and South 24 Parganas. For the Study, these blocks were clustered into 4 geographical zones that constitute the four entry points to the Sunderbans. The four geographical zones and the blocks selected were:

- Kakdwip zone covering 4 blocks namely Sagar, Namkhana, Kakdwip and Pathar Pratima
- Raidighi zone covering 3 blocks namely Mathurapur II, Kultali and Jaynagar II.
- Canning zone covering 3 blocks namely Canning I, Basanti and Gosaba.
- Hingalganj zone covering 3 blocks namely in Hingalganj, Hasnabad, and Sandeshkhali II.

13 blocks were selected from these four zones using stratified random sampling. The 28 Gram Sansads selected for the study were selected using purposive random sampling. The criteria for selection of the Gram Sansads were:

- areas where there is a large fisher folk community
- areas populated mostly by the deprived, ignored and vulnerable people
- remote and coastal areas

The whole process of selection was done in consultation with two local resource persons of Sunderbans who have been working for the development of the poor and the deprived sections of the Sunderbans including the fisher folk.

The Gram Sansads¹⁷ that were covered and their respective Gram Panchayats¹⁸ in the 13 blocks (Study areas are highlighted in a map shown in Annexure-IV) are given in the table below:

Zone	Block	Gram Panchayat	Gram Sansad
Kakdwip	Sagar	Ghoramara	Entire Gram Panchayat covering 5 Gram Sansads
		Ganga Sagar	Beguakhali-Dakshin Para
	Namkhana	Frazerganj	Paschim Amrabati
	Kakdwip	Swami Vivekananda	Haripur
			Akshay Nagar
	Pathar Pratima	Herembogopalpur	Banigheripara

¹⁷ A Gram Sansad is a body constituted with all the voters in a constituency of the Gram Panchayat. These are the lowest level units where the participatory planning exercise for Gram Panchayat is envisaged. Consultation with Gram Sansad for selection of schemes and beneficiaries is mandatory.

¹⁸ A Gram Panchayat is the elected body at the *anchal* (group of villages) level. It consists of elected members from the Gram Sansad.

Raidighi	Mathurapur II	G-Plot	Dakshin Sitarampur
		Sridharnagar	Kayal Para
		Ramganga	Raj Rajeswarpur
		Damkal	Haldar Para
		Nagendrapur	Baradanagar
			Uttarpara
		Raidighi	Srifaltala
	Kultali	Gopalgunj	Kaikhali
	Jaynagar II	Chubrijhara	Banirdhal
Hingalganj	Hingalganj	Kalitala	Dakshin Samshernagar
			Samshernagar I
	Hasnabad	Rameshwarpur	Dakshin Barunhat
	Sandeshkhali II	Manipur	Purba Atapur
Canning	Canning I	Itkhola	Golabari
	Basanti	Jharkhali	Tridibnagar (Kantajungle)
	Gosaba	Satjelia	Emilybari
		Gosaba	Arapur
Total:	13	20	28

A combination of methods and tools was used to collect information at the field level. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) were held with the village people, including the poorest and marginalized communities. The views of the fisher-folk community and women were taken through focus group discussions and case studies. Adolescents and children were interviewed in some villages. PRA was conducted in five Gram Sansads.

Secondary data was also collected. The local stakeholders viz. Panchayat representatives, Panchayat Secretary at the Gram Panchayat Level, Block Level Government officials and local political leaders were interviewed.

Study Team

The study was coordinated by Chittaranjan Mondal, Programme Manager, AAI-India Kolkata Regional Office. He was supported by Anchita Ghatak, Regional Manager, KRO and Alakananda Rao, the then Asia Regional IT Coordinator. A team comprising five members namely Soumen Ray, Diti Mukherjee, Sumit Roy, Nilratan Halder and Anjana Mondal carried out the field level work. Finally, one of the team members helped in compilation and editing the report.

Chapter V

Findings of the Study

1. Livelihood and Employment

The issue of livelihood was the foremost concern of the people of the Sunderbans. The Government of West Bengal has established a criterion whereby families can be listed as BPL. According to this criterion, there are various welfare schemes of the central as well as state government that people who are BPL can avail of. However it was found in the Sunderbans, that majority of the people have no idea about the criteria for selection of BPL or APL. Discrepancies exist in the BPL list with the poorest of the poor being excluded. Fisher folk are unaware of the rights and benefits they are entitled to. It was found that many Panchayat members, political party members and poor people, do not have detailed information about the Government schemes for BPL families. The list of BPL schemes and list of beneficiaries was not found on public display at any of the Gram Panchayat offices visited¹⁹.

In this context it may be mentioned that identification of specific households living *Below Poverty Line* is crucial as they are the targeted beneficiaries for the various poverty alleviation programmes of the Government. Despite the Supreme Court's verdict on 28th November 2001 on releasing the BPL list after necessary correction of anomalies, the state government is unable to publish the final BPL list. At present, the state government is using the BPL list prepared in 1996 to select beneficiaries for implementation of various government schemes as well as for development planning.

"Without any socio-economic survey, how can the government specify that only 30% of the population are eligible for selection as beneficiaries of BPL. I feel that around 80% of the population are eligible to be enlisted as BPL".

*Iyahi Akanda, member of Village Development Committee, Amtala
Gram Sansad, Itkhola Gram Panchayat, Canning I*

In the 28 Gram Sansads where the study was conducted, employment opportunities were found to be poor. The people in these Gram Sansads are engaged in traditional fishing and agriculture based activities. The poor and excluded not only do not receive the minimum wages but also do not know the amount of the minimum wage that is determined by the State Government²⁰. Usually women get lower wages than men.

People have the information that *meen dhora* is banned but the majority of the women and a large number of children are engaged in this work even though their average monthly earnings from it is meager.

¹⁹ Accordingly to the 73rd Amendment of the Panchayati Raj Act 1993 it is mandatory for the Gram Panchayats to publish half-yearly reports showing amounts received by them from different sources and amounts actually spent on different items, along with a list of beneficiaries for information of the general public. Accordingly to Supreme Court Interim verdict 28 October 2001, the list of BPL schemes and their beneficiaries has to be kept on public display at the Gram Panchayat.

²⁰ The State Government has fixed Rs 62.50 as the minimum wage per day for eight hours of unskilled worked and Rs. 41.20, as the minimum wage for preparing 1000 *beedis*.

People of the Sunderbans migrate to cities and towns to find employment. Men usually migrate seasonally to find work in cold storages in Burdwan and Midnapur districts in West Bengal. For women, there are very few alternative employment opportunities that they can avail of. As a result, women migrate to Kolkata and other cities to work as domestic help.

Swapna Mondal, an adolescent girl, hails from Emily Bari in Satjelia village. She works as a domestic help in Noida in Uttar Pradesh, bordering Delhi. She has come for a vacation to Emily Bari after working for a year in Noida. She was given the job by an agency in Chakrakhali. She likes her work in Noida as it gives her the opportunity to live in a new place and to meet new people.

Collapse of river and sea embankments due to tidal waves and soil erosion poses a major threat to the livelihood of the people of Sunderbans, as the poor lose their agricultural land and houses. They do not have the information on how to make the authority more accountable so that timely construction and repair of river embankments is done. In Sitarampur, the southern part of the island is getting lost to the sea, 40% of the land in Dakshin Sitarampur Mouza having already been lost. The villagers feel the planning of embankments is unscientific and the measures taken are not enough to halt the erosion. The problem of soil erosion is aggravated by the fact that repair work on the river embankment is not done timely.

“Development work like repairing of river embankment etc. has become an annual festival for a section of people as well as wastage of money and energy. No one wants the work to be done in a proper manner”.

Mr. Bomkesh Maity, Member of Sagar Panchayat Samity and former Pradhan of Chemaguri Gram Panchayat.

The farming and fisher folk communities have very limited information about day-to-day market prices of various products. They know that middlemen and local traders control the prices, they have no option but to surrender. Trapped in the vicious cycle of loans, they are forced to sell whatever they produce (mostly vegetables) or catch (fishes, shrimps and molluscs), at a very nominal price to local traders, middlemen or moneylenders. They are unable to afford to carry their produce or catch to distant markets where they can fetch a better price. This is another reason why they are forced to sell their produce and catch to the middlemen at low prices.

1. Government schemes for the BPL Families

- ❖ **Annapurna Yojana (APS):** All destitute persons (60 years and above), eligible for central Old Age Pension Scheme (NOAPS) but not receiving it, will be issued special ration cards, on the basis of which they must be given 10kgs of free food grain per month. These are given through ration shops that need to be open five and a half days a week.
- ❖ **Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY):** The poorest of the poor among the BPL families in urban and rural areas will be issued Antyodaya cards against which they are entitled to 3.5 kg of rice and 3.5 kg of wheat per adult per month with a maximum of 35 kg per family of 5 members per month. These are given through ration shops that need to be open five and a half days a week.

- ❖ **Target Public Distribution System (TPDS):** All BPL families must get 35 kgs of food grain per family per month at Rs. 4.65/- per kg of wheat and Rs.6.15/- per kg of rice.
- ❖ **Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY):** The main objective is to bring the assisted BPL families above the poverty line in three years by providing them income generating assets through a mix of Bank Credit and Government subsidy. In some cases 20% and in exceptional cases 30% of the group members may belong to APL families, but these APL members of the groups are far from being office bearers and are not entitled to get subsidy. 50% of the group formed in each block should be exclusively for women.
- ❖ **Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY):** Wage employment may be provided, whether skilled or unskilled, to any person belonging to BPL family seeking employment in and around the village for creation of durable community, social and economic assets and infrastructural development in rural areas. As part of wages, food grains should be given to the rural poor at the rate of 5 kg per person day. However more than 5 kg of food grains per person day can be given with condition that minimum 25% of the wages is to be paid in cash. The wages should be as per the minimum wages specified by the State government.
- ❖ **National Social Assistance Schemes for BPL individuals and families**
 - **National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS):** Every BPL family must get Rs.10, 000/- within 4 weeks of the death of the primary bread earner, if the age of the deceased person is between 18-65 years at the time of death.
 - **National Old Age Pension Scheme (NOAPS):** All destitute persons, 65 years and above must receive Rs.100/- per month.
 - **National Maternity Benefit Scheme:** Every pregnant BPL woman of 19 years and above must be given Rs.500/- each for the first two births during pregnancy, 8-12 weeks prior to the delivery. (Note: Since April 2005, this scheme has been replaced with Janani Suraksha Yojana, according to which, a mother will be entitled to receive Rs.500 if she gives birth to a male child and Rs.1000 if she gives birth to a female child).

2. Government Schemes for Fisher folk

- ❖ **National Saving-cum-Relief Scheme:** Under this scheme, a sum of Rs.75/- shall be collected from eligible marine fishermen (possessing Fisherman Identity Card²¹) for a period of 8 months in a year, during the fishing season. A total of Rs. 600/- thus collected for 8 months will be matched with 50% contribution i.e. Rs.300/- each, by the State and Central Governments. The total sum of Rs.1200/- thus collected will be distributed to the fishermen during the non- fishing season, in four equal monthly installments of Rs.300/- from March to June.
- ❖ **Group Insurance Scheme:** Provision for getting insurance claim of Rs. 50,000/- by a legal heir of a missing / accidentally deceased fisherman, if the mishap occurs while fishing.

²¹ The Fisherman Identity card establishes the identity of fisher folk, which is issued by the Department of Fisheries

3. Food and Child Development Schemes

Mid Day Meal Scheme

Under this scheme all children regularly attending government and government-assisted primary schools must be provided hot, cooked mid-day meals for at least 200 days in a year. This scheme is implemented by the State Governments.

Integrated Child Development Services Scheme (ICDS)

Under this scheme, it is the right of every:

- Child up to 6 years to get 300 calories and 8-10 grams of protein per day.
- Adolescent girl to get 500 calories and 20-25 grams of protein per day.
- Pregnant woman and each nursing mother to get 500 calories and 20-25 grams of protein per day.
- Malnourished child to get 600 calories and 16-20 grams of protein per day.
- Supplementary nutrition, immunization, health check ups, referral services, nutrient and health education must be given to all children up to 6 years of age, pregnant woman and nursing mothers, adolescent girls and malnourished children.

4. Schemes for Elementary Education

• Sarva Siksha Abhiyan

This programme aims at achieving the long-cherished goal of universalization of Elementary Education (UEE) through a time-bound integrated approach, in partnership with the states. It aims to change the face of elementary education in the country by providing useful and quality elementary education to all children in the age group of 6-14 years by 2010.

• Shishu Shiksha Karmasuchi

An education centre with the name Shishu Shiksha Kendra (SSK) may be opened in a village where there are 20 or more children in the age group of 5 to 9 years who cannot access the facilities of the mainstream primary school either due to distance or due to inadequacy of their infrastructure. Shisu Shiksha Kendras are opened at the initiative of the community and are owned and managed by them. The funds are to be provided by the State Government and Panchayats will act as facilitators only.

5. Scheme for Shelter for Homeless BPL families

- ❖ **Indira Awas Yojana:** In the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, the Government of India launched a programme to construct houses with low cost sanitary toilet for poor people. BPL families of SCs/ STs²² or non SCs/ STs will be provided with grant-in-aid, the permissible construction per house being Rs. 20,000 in plain areas and Rs. 22,000 in hilly or difficult areas.

²² Scheduled Castes/ Scheduled Tribes

a) Findings specific to Government Schemes

Food Related Schemes

Annapurna Yojana (APS)	Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY)	Target Public Distribution System (TPDS)	Swarnajayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojana (SGSY)	Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 3 Gram Sansads, people know about the scheme • People enlisted under the scheme were found in 9 Gram Sansads • In one Gram Sansad namely Raj Rajeshwarpur, those enlisted in the scheme receive 10 kgs of rice once in every 3 months, though they are entitled to receive 10kgs of rice every month. This is a violation of the Supreme Court order. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People of 5 Gram Sansads know about the scheme • In 15 Gram Sansads, it was found that people are enlisted under the scheme. • Some of under the scheme are not aware that they are enlisted. • People are unaware of the amount of food grains and the price at which they are entitled to receive the food grains. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 15 Gram Sansads, people are unaware of the scheme. • In 17 Gram Sansads, people are enlisted in the scheme. Those enlisted are not aware of the scheme. • People do not know the number of days the ration shop should be kept open. • In all the Gram Sansads, the ration shops are not open for more than 3 days a week. • The amount and price of food grains vary from one Gram Sansad to other. • People are unaware of the amount of food grains and the price at which they are entitled to receive. • The ration shop does not issue a receipt against purchase of grains. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People of 4 Gram Sansads are aware of the scheme. • SGSY groups exist in 4 Gram Sansads. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Out of 28 Gram sansads, people in one Gram Sansad are aware of the scheme. • People enlisted under the scheme were found in 3 Gram Sansads.

National Social Assistance Schemes:

National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS)	National Old Age Pension Scheme (NOAPS)	National Maternity Benefit Scheme (NMBS)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 15 Gram Sansads, people are unaware of the scheme. • In 2 Gram Sansads, families have received benefits under the scheme. • There are instances where those eligible have applied for the scheme but the procedure for application and follow up is so complex that they have lost interest in pursuing their applications. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 12 Gram Sansads, people are aware of the scheme. • In 7 Gram Sansads, people are receiving the benefits of the scheme. Out of these in 3 Gram Sansads, there is irregular distribution of pension funds as a result of which those enlisted are not receiving benefits on time. • In one Gram Sansad, it was found that those enlisted are not aware why they are entitled to receive this benefit. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 5 Gram Sansads, people are aware of this scheme. Out of these in 3 Gram Sansads, mothers have received the benefits of this scheme. • In Raj Rajeshwarpur and Dakshin Shamshernagar, mothers are unaware of the scheme but have received benefits.

“Under NOAPS each Gram Panchayat has a quota of beneficiaries. After death of beneficiaries, I wanted to include an equal number of new beneficiaries while maintaining the quota but the SDO does not allow me to do so. I no longer send any list of newly eligible persons to the SDO.”

Ajay Patra, Gram Panchayat Pradhan, Ghoramara

Scheme for Shelter for Homeless

Indira Awas Yojana (IAY)

People in the Sunderbans face the twin problems of poverty and natural calamities with regard to shelter. The poor are unable to repair or reconstruct their dilapidated mud huts. Those who have lost their homes due to soil erosion and collapse of river and sea embankments have been forced to build temporary shelters on the land between the two protective embankments along the river or sea or on the land between the river and the embankment. This makes them highly vulnerable to the vagaries of nature.

PRA (Matrix 1)

Issues of the Fisher folk Community

Men of the fisher folk community in the Sunderbans work as wage labor on deep-sea trawlers, and engage in river fishing in mechanized and non mechanized boats. A small section is engaged in drying fish. Fisher folk face exploitation from trawler owners and middlemen. They risk their lives fishing in the deep seas and in the crocodile infested rivers. Forest Department personnel

seize their nets and boats whenever the fishermen go for fishing in river adjoining the islands under Project Tiger.

Madhav Mondal is a poor fisher folk living in Kaikhali. He has the Fisherman Identity card issued by the Department of Fisheries, Government of West Bengal. One day, he was in the river to catch fishes. Suddenly, he found that the personnel from the Forest Department came to him and started interrogating him. Unable to corner him as he had both identity card and license to catch fishes, the personnel started abusing him for entering the Tiger Project Area. However, the area where Madhav was fishing was not under the Tiger Project area. Madhav was surprised, when they seized his fishing net and asked him to come to the Forest Department office to collect the fishing net by paying fine which is usually fixed by the Forest Department.

Women of the fisher folk community engage in *meen dhora* and in collecting crabs. They make and repair fishing nets. They assist the men in river fishing, sorting fish according to species, in drying fish and in boat repairing. Women possess Fisherman Identity Cards. However, women are not allowed to go on trawlers for deep-sea fishing.

The fisher folk are victims of pirate attacks in the high seas. Fisher folks in the deep seas face health hazards and hazards arising from mechanical failure of boats. Those who engage in river fishing do not have information regarding the market price of fish. In addition, being trapped in the vicious cycle of loans, they are forced to sell their catch at the prices dictated by the middlemen in order to repay their loans.

Children assist their mothers in *meen dhora*, in collecting crabs, in sorting fish according to species and in drying fish.

Profit Sharing of fish catch in deep sea and river fishing

The profit or loss is shared by four stakeholders namely the fisher folk, *majhis* who drive the trawler, the *malik* or the owner of the trawler who provides the material requirements of the trawler (diesel, ice blocks and foodstuff) and the *aratdar*, the auction owner from whom the *malik* takes loans for buying the materials.

At the outset, 7% of the profit is taken by the *aratdar*. The *malik* then deducts the material cost. From the remaining profit, the *majhis* gets 5%. Then the remaining profit is shared in the ratio 60:40 between the *malik* and the fisher folk, if the fisher folk have taken a loan from the *malik* before going on the trawler and 55:45 in case the fisher folk have not taken any loan.

Fisher folk families are aware that the dried fish market is lucrative. Dried fish is sent to national markets in Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Kerala and international markets in Myanmar and Bangladesh. The fish scraps are used to make poultry feed. Even though there is market, traditional methods of drying do not fetch a good price. The fisher folk require concrete platforms for drying the fish but these are not available at present.

A large section of people are dependent on the ancillary requirements of the fishing industry like fish net repairing and trawler maintenance. There are two Government schemes for the benefit of

fisher folk. These schemes require the fisher folk to possess Fisherman Identity Cards. The findings regarding these schemes are given below:

Government Schemes for the fisher folk

Group Insurance Scheme	Savings cum Relief Scheme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 3 Gram Sansads, fisher folks are aware of this scheme. • The fisher folk enlisted under the scheme were found in 3 Gram Sansads. • The Forest Department issues a Boat License Certificate²³ to only those fisher folk who are enlisted in this Group Insurance Scheme. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 3 Gram Sansads, fisher folks are aware of this scheme. • Fishermen enlisted under the scheme were found in 3 Gram Sansads.

Responses of the community on different government schemes have been tabulated in the **Annexure 5**. Findings have been gathered through FGD and PRA. The table indicates the number of Gram Sansads in which people are aware of the schemes. This also indicates number of gram sansads where people are enlisted in the schemes.

Employment For Women

Women are mostly engaged in household work. There is a sizeable section of women who are engaged in different types of income generating activities like *Beedi*²⁴ making, working as household help in their villages, daily agricultural labour, crab collection, collecting wood from forest and selling in local market and drying fish. Women who have formed Self Help Groups under the SGSY²⁵ are eligible to get the cooking contracts for the Mid Day Meals in primary schools. However they lack the required information on how to obtain such a contract. Some women leave their homes to work as domestic help in Kolkata and in other towns and cities of India.

Women get lower wages than men for working as daily labour, in agriculture and allied activities. They usually receive daily wages in the range of Rs. 40 to Rs.50.

A limited number of enterprising women are engaged in embroidery work on saris including *zari*²⁶ work. The middlemen get the contract orders and engage the women, fixing up a daily or piece wage. This trade is being hindered by the dominance of middlemen and lack of access to the market.

²³ BLC. This is a certificate of registration and measurement of boats issued by the Forest Department. This BLC allows them to obtain a permit to fish in the buffer zone (The buffer zone is managed as a 'multiple use area' with conservation oriented land use, having the twin objectives of providing habitat supplement to the spillover population of wild animals from the core, apart from facilitating site specific eco developmental inputs to stake holder communities) of the Sunderban Tiger Reserve.

²⁴ A local cigarette made from tobacco and leaves of the *Tendu* tree

²⁵ Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana

²⁶ Gold embroidery

Kalyani Mondal of Satjelia village, Gosaba Block does embroidery work on saris. She gets the work through a middleman. The rate for one sari is Rs. 170 but she gets only Rs. 100. She does not wish to continue with this work. She wants to start a poultry business for which she has received formal training. However she is not on the BPL list so she is not eligible for a loan without collateral. She does not have the collateral money.

2. Increasing Vulnerability of Women

Viewed from the perspective of human rights, women are becoming increasingly vulnerable in the Sunderbans. Women spend their days engaged in household work and in earning a living. Women's economic contribution is welcome by their husbands but their voices are not heard in times of decision-making. Their personal freedom is generally not encouraged. They do not seem to have any organized recreational activities. In some areas like Paschim Amrabati, they are also not encouraged to go to the market or participate in collective activities.

Kirtoni Das, daughter of Brojen Das of Paschim Amrabati village was married to an old man who came to her village from Shahjahanpur, Uttar Pradesh. After marriage she went to stay in Shahjahanpur. She did not return home for almost two years and her anxious family enquired about her from her in-laws. They were informed that as per the custom, Kirtoni could not leave her in-laws house until she gave birth to a child. After waiting another year, Brojen Das went to Shahjahanpur. He found that Kirtoni was working as a housemaid. Her husband's brothers were sexually abusing her. Brojen forcefully brought Kirtoni back to her village where she now lives with her parents.

A positive aspect in an otherwise gloomy scenario is that women are able to exert their reproductive rights. Women adopt contraceptives, as they usually do not want more than one or two children. The decision of the woman to adopt contraceptives is to an extent dictated by the man, as they do not want to adopt permanent contraceptive measures.

"Women undertake permanent contraception through a surgical operation. Men do not adopt permanent contraceptive measures as they feel that surgery may endanger their lives. Men's lives are precious. Women are dispensable. If a woman dies the man can get another wife easily".

Namita Gayen, Satjelia village, Gosaba Block.

Women's role in governance is not visible. Very few women are aware that there is 33% reservation for women in the Panchayat. In the 28 Gram Sansads studied, only the women in Uttar Shamshernagar and Haripur are aware about the 33% reservation. Very few women participate in Gram Sansad meetings. The reasons cited by them for this are:

- They are not informed about the dates of the meetings,
- They are too busy with household work and earning a livelihood,
- There are many men who do not allow their wives to attend public meetings and rallies.

Several instances were found where the elected woman representatives to the Panchayat do not attend the Gram Sansad meetings. It is unfortunate that in majority of the cases, their husbands represent them.

Sadat Sekh, husband of Mazida Sekh, Karmadhyaksha, Agriculture, Co-operation and Irrigation at Jaynagar II Panchayat Samity represents Mazida at most of the meetings of the Panchayat Samity.

Domestic violence is a common feature. Women are aware of the laws protecting them against domestic violence but are not willing to take steps to address this as they feel that they have to continue living in their husband's house. In Sridharnagar Gram Panchayat and Raj Rajeshwarpur Gram Sansad where women's groups are active, the issue of domestic violence has been addressed with some degree of success. Akshaynagar was an exception where the women said that there are no cases of atrocities against them. They claimed that there was equality of sexes and recognition of each other's contribution to running the family. The men work on trawlers and are away from home for long stretches of time so, they depend on their spouses to take care of the home.

Information on the age of marriage is well circulated through radio and wall writings by the Health and Family Welfare Department. However, early marriage is prevalent in most of the areas. Women are aware that girls cannot be married before 18 years but poverty compels them to marry them off at an early age. The dowry system in cash and/or in kind is present almost everywhere. Marriage without dowry is an exception.

3. Children and Youth Being Denied Their Rights

The children and youth in the Sunderbans do not enjoy the basic facilities required for a healthy physical and mental development. Children suffer from malnourishment and poor health, the most apparent being skin infections. They are poorly clothed.

Quality education is denied to them with lack of teachers and poor infrastructure in the schools. Children's education, in most of the areas visited, does not seem to be a priority with their families. More stress is given to enable them to earn a living. Boys are being educated till Class 4 on an average. The pressure to earn a living usually compels them to leave their education after this level. They accompany their fathers on fishing boats or in agriculture and also go to other districts and towns to work. Girls usually stay on in the village and continue their education till a higher level. They assist their families in river-based activities and sometimes work as daily labour to supplement their family's income while continuing their studies. Early marriage and the burden of household work leads to their education being prematurely stopped.

Child labour is prevalent. Children are engaged in traditional work from a young age. Children help their families in *meen dhora*. They sometimes work as daily labour in kitchen gardens. Children of the fisher folk community in addition to *meen dhora*, assist their family in sorting and drying fish. Child labour is common in the administrative towns and fish landing centers of the Sunderbans.

Banamali Bar lives in Purba Banidhal village in Joynagar II. She studies in Class 6 in Ghutiarini High School. She wants to continue her study. She works as a daily labour in people's kitchen gardens, when required and earns Rs. 40/- a day. She also attends tuition classes three

times a week for English and Mathematics where she has to pay Rs. 60/- per month as tuition fees. Her father no longer works and her mother is a housewife. Banamali is insistent that she wants to study further."

Child trafficking was found to be a problem in 5 Gram Sansads namely Nagendrapur, Banigheripara, Paschim Amrabati, Namkhana, Shamsernagar and Emilybari. Girls are sold in the name of marriage or work.

4. Safety and Security

The factors affecting safety and security indicate how well the people of the Sunderbans are protected from the dangers presented by their immediate environments.

There is a lack of information, among the poor and excluded, about how to avail of police protection. Police Stations are generally located in the Block Head quarters, which are far from the villages. Most of the people do not know how to lodge an FIR. Islands that have been visited during the study had no police station or outpost.

There is lack of knowledge regarding the procedure for obtaining compensation in case of attack by wild animals. Villagers receive compensation via Panchayat. However, villagers do not know the procedures for claiming this compensation.

Information about the weather is of vital importance to the people of the Sunderbans, especially for the fisher folk. However the system of weather alerts at present is not geared to assist the people of the Sunderbans in particular. For weather reports, the fisher folk depend on Bangladesh Radio that broadcasts weather reports every hour. The added advantage of listening to Bangladesh Radio is that the reports are in Bengali. It was learnt that on many occasions the information from AIR²⁷ reached the fisher folk and common people after the natural disaster had occurred. There are very few televisions due to non-availability of electricity in most areas. The wireless system maintained by the Forest Department, Police Department or District Administration does not cover fishing trawlers or local villages.

5. Lack of Transparency and Accountability in Local Governance

Villagers know that there are various government schemes for poor people but they do not know the details of the schemes. They usually do not receive information about these schemes in time. Details of the allocation of funds under various government schemes are not displayed in the Gram Panchayat Office.

The Department of Fisheries issues identity cards to fisher folk. The Block Development Officer (BDO) and the Fisheries Extension Officer (BDO) are the authorized signatories for issuing the cards. The Panchayat is responsible for identifying the fisher folk who are to be issued the cards. The process is complex as there is very little coordination between the various concerned departments. Often those who are not involved in river and sea fishing get Fisherman Identity Cards.

²⁷ All India Radio

Panchayat does not have sufficient information on the different schemes that have been allotted to it for implementation”.

*Madan Mohan Hati, Executive Officer; Minoti Ray, Pradhan and
Rupchand Ray, Panchayat Assistant of Itkhola Gram Panchayat, Canning I*

During the course of the study it was found that ration cards have not been distributed in the last 20 years at Kaikhali Gram Sansad of Gopalganj Gram Panchayat of Joynagar II Block.

When I asked the Panchayat members about the number of days the ration shop should be kept open every week, they replied that most probably it is three days a week”.
Ajay Haldar, Banirdhal, Chuprihara, Joynagar II Block.

Discussions at Gram Sansad meetings are mainly confined to matters related to the annual budget. People felt that discussions regarding welfare schemes and the eligibility for selection of beneficiaries should be given priority in these meetings.

A large section of women do not know that the right to vote is a fundamental right. When asked why they vote, the general views were that they cast their votes because the political leader that they vote for has promised them to provide proper roads, more drinking water facilities and other infrastructure that will make their day-to-day life easier. A very small percentage of women said that they vote to exercise their right as a citizen of the country.

The provisions of the Identity Card for disabled persons²⁸ are not clear to the people. People have doubts about the process of selection of beneficiaries for BPL and provisions of BPL cards. They do not trust the persons in Panchayat as they feel that information is being suppressed and government allocated money is not being put to proper use.

Births and deaths are being registered through the Health Assistants of the Sub-Health Centers²⁹. However people are not clear as to why this registration is being done.

6. Lack of Provision of Basic Services

a. Health

Government health facilities are poor in villages and people have to depend upon quack doctors for common ailments.

People do not know why there is no doctor or inadequate supply of medicines in almost all the health centres. They are unaware of the facilities that they are supposed to receive from the sub-health centers. Few Health Centres like the one in Sitarampur have good infrastructure but there is no doctor. NGOs provide minimum health support in some villages. Quack doctors are the

²⁸ An Identity card that entitles persons with disabilities to a large number of concessions and facilities from State and Central Governments.

²⁹ A Sub-Health Centre caters to a population of 3,000.

only doctors available at the time of medical emergencies in most of the villages. There is a group of quack doctors in Sridharnagar who have formed an association called the Sridharnagar Doctors' Association. They provide primary treatment to patients and arrange for referrals for patients to block level hospitals.

"Every villager in the nearby villages depends on the Raidighi hospital, where there is no blood, no oxygen, no medicine, no free bed or operation theatre. Conditions are similar in Diamond Harbour Hospital. Actually, the survival of the patients depends upon the person's luck".

Krishna Das Gorai, Banigheripara, Dakshin Kashinagar, Pathar Pratima Block

Knowledge about basic health care and hygiene is poor. Women, however, are aware of the use of ORS³⁰ as first level of control in case of diarrhea. They have learnt this mostly from the quack doctors. Information regarding DOTS³¹ for tuberculosis is not adequate nor is the knowledge on HIV/ AIDS. Most people have heard about HIV/AIDS from the radio or television, though this information is not adequate to address the issue.

The practice of taking contraceptives is widespread. Women take the contraceptives, usually in the form of pills. They collect the supplies from the sub-health center. Women in some areas know about the advantages and disadvantages of the various contraceptives.

Snakebite is a common problem in the Sunderbans and it results in death in many cases. Even bites from non-poisonous snakes cause trauma, as people do not have information about the features that distinguish poisonous snakes from non-poisonous ones. Treatment is usually done by *ojhas*³². In most cases of snakebite, the affected persons do not receive the correct treatment as anti-venom is not available in the islands. In the study, Khulna Primary Health Center in Sandeshkhali was found to be the only Health Center that had a stock of anti-venom.

b. Education

People have heard the name of Sarva Siksha Abhiyan but they are unaware about the details of it. The poor people in general have a low literacy level as mentioned before. Demanding quality education from the school system is not a priority for them because their abject poverty compels them to remain busy in earning a living. They do not have an understanding about how the education system functions.

Most of the Gram Sansads have one primary school and/or one SSK. However most of the primary schools have only one teacher for 150 to 450 students. The SSKs are not effective in giving quality education due to lack of infrastructure, lack of trained teachers and teaching aids. People in all the 28 Gram Sansads are not even aware of the functioning of SSKs.

There seems to be no apparent gender discrimination in children's education. In Sridharnagar High School, the male to female student ratio is almost 50:50. Boys usually study up to Class

³⁰ Oral Rehydration Solution

³¹ Direct Observatory Treatment through Short-course chemotherapy

³² Faith healers

IV. The students that move onto high school are, more often than not, unable to complete higher secondary education. The reasons behind these are: firstly, there is no Higher Secondary School or College in most of the islands and secondly, the Higher Secondary Schools and colleges are far away from their villages and as a result, families are unable to afford keeping them in hostel to pursue their studies.

People know that cooked food is served as Mid Day Meal in the village primary schools. However, they do not have detailed information on the details like quantity of the food to be served to each child, the number of days it is supposed to be served and to whom complaints are to be lodged if the quality of food is below standard.

People have heard about ICDS scheme but they have no idea about provision that are available under the scheme nor do they know about the duties of the ICDS workers.

c. Communication

The communication and transportation facilities in the Sunderbans are appallingly poor. There is very limited metalled road surface. There is no electricity in most of the villages.. Water transport facilities are in the form of country boats, mechanized boats and few surface transport vessels. Road communication is in the form of auto-rickshaws, mechanized three-wheeler trolleys and a few trekker and bus services.

95% of the villagers have transistor radios with FM & AM channels. In a few villages, families have their own solar operated televisions where only Doordarshan Channel I is available. People receive Information about various issues from the radio and television but people often find it difficult to comprehend the message, as words used are unfamiliar to them. For example, while broadcasting use of pesticides or fertilizers, the generic name is used and neither the community nor shopkeepers are familiar with such generic names.

Women, whose husbands go for deep-sea fishing in trawlers, can send information to them through the wireless system, which is set up at the trawler owner's house. This becomes embarrassing for these women, as they are uncomfortable to talk to their husbands in the presence of the trawler owners. They would prefer to use the public wireless system similar to STD booth instead but unfortunately, such provision is not available at present.

Women use radios at home and they mainly listen to news, songs (mainly on FM radio) and sometimes listen to programs on the panchayat and health, which they receive through *Vividh Bharati* and AIR Kolkata.

People get news of cyclones and storms from All India Radio as well as Bangladesh Radio.

People believe that newspaper is a great source of information. Very few of the villages have regular access to newspapers. As a result, literate people read newspapers whenever they have an opportunity to do so. Newspapers are bought from the local market.

The Police Department, Forest Department and Block Administration have their own wireless system. Telephone communication is present in the form of a few telephone booths that are usually located at the market place. These booths have WLL BSNL³³ telephones. There are few private WLL BSNL telephone connections. Inter-island communication is very poor. In almost all the islands there is WLL telephone. These telephones are connected to the BSNL tower at Habra or Haroah. The distance of the telephone is very far from the tower and this makes it difficult to connect to other islands in the Sunderbans. It is rather easier to connect to places outside the Sunderbans, using these telephones. The use of telephones is rapidly becoming popular in the islands of the Sunderbans. At Sagar and Ghoramara Island, people use cellular phones. BSNL has started installing two new WLL towers at Raidighi and Ukiler Haat.

At Kalitala market, there is a cordless landline telephone system used by “Sarala Tailors”. It is a BSNL connection and the landline telephone is at Sandeshkhali. Sarala Tailors have taken special permission from the Sub-Divisional Officer of Telephones, Basirhat, to use a cordless phone at Kalitala, that is 12 kms away from Sandeshkhali. They operate a public call system with this connection. However the call charges are exorbitant.

PEOPLE’S VIEWS ON ACCESS TO INFORMATION

People want the government to provide them detailed information about the various welfare schemes in a language that they can understand and also through a system, which they can use to clarify their doubts. PRA was used to assess the value and time sensitivity of information on various issues **(Please see Matrix-II)**.

If you can provide such a system for accessing information and dissemination it will change our lives. We will provide all possible support required for running such a system”.
Nimai Sardar, Gram Sansad Member, Haldarpara, Damkal Mouza, Mathurapur-II Block.

“If the information regarding various schemes is made aware to us in a way, we can understand the details and formalities of the scheme including the approach or guidelines to access and acquire them, we can fight to access the benefits of the schemes”.
Bablu Chandra Haldar, Dakshin Chupriyahara, Joynagar II Block

Women also expressed their desire to receive information on government schemes, schemes for income generating activities, preventive health and information on how to improve education of their children. They would like to receive the information from the resource persons having expertise in the respective fields and through radio programs preferably between 7 to 8 pm from Mondays to Saturdays and 1:30 to 3:30 pm on Sundays.

Women are eager to form self-help groups. Women in Barodanagar, Haripur and Akshaynagar wanted to know which authorities they need to contact to start these groups. Some of the women

³³ WLL: Wireless in Local Loop; BSNL: Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited

have heard about the SGSY scheme but are keen to know its details. Women wish to know about alternative income generating methods. They are keen to learn new trades as well as manufacturing processes.

- Women in Purba Banirdhal village want a machine to make jute thread. They are willing to form a self-help group and gradually take a loan and purchase the machine.
- The women in Uttar Shamshernagar have stopped *meen dhara* as it was banned. However, they said that their main source of income has been badly affected and they are now looking for alternative livelihoods.
- The women who are engaged in household activities wish to get involved in some income generating activities like Sewing, embroidery, *zari* work, *papad* making, *bori*³⁴ making, incense stick making, *shola*³⁵ work and wedding decorations.

Adolescents would like to receive information through letter and radio programme on the following aspects:

- Distance learning education programs (especially girls who have very little opportunity for higher studies in their areas)
- Job opportunities
- Vocational training
- Health (specially for girls).

Indira Biswas studies in Class IX in Shamshernagar High School. She reads the newspaper in school. Her father helps her with her studies, as she cannot afford tuitions. Indra would like to receive information on general knowledge from the radio between 1:30 to 3 pm on Sundays.

³⁴ Lentil balls that are fried or used in curries

³⁵ Material used for decorations, made out of the pith of the shola plant

Chapter VI

Challenges to be addressed in future

The issues affecting the lives of the people of the Sunderbans are many and complex, that have been illustrated in this report. Availability of information to the poor and excluded in the Sunderbans is negligible. Moreover, they do not have control over the little information that they receive.

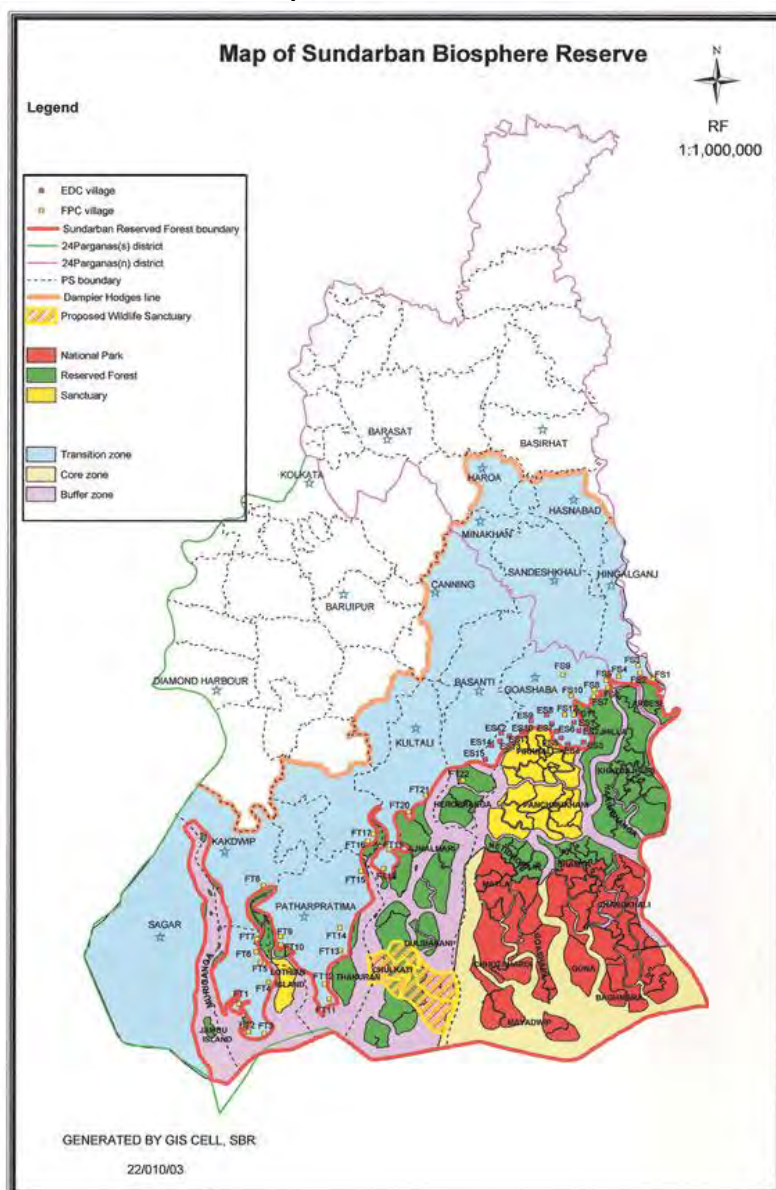
A large number of poor and marginalized people in Sunderbans are presently left out of the purview of the Government schemes related to food and work. Despite the Government's policies and promises, the benefits of these schemes have not reached the poor people. Over time, thousands of people have lost their land to the sea for which negligence on the part of government is mainly responsible. To a large extent, the poor are not aware of their rights and entitlements. The prevailing corruption, misinformation and deliberate suppression of information is alienating the poor and marginalized people and taking them away from accessing government benefits that they are entitled to receive. These are the issues that need to be addressed.

Other issues that are of immediate concern are corporate abuse and trade agreements that are increasing vulnerability of the poor and excluded people. People face the threat of losing their livelihoods due to tourism and forceful conversion of agricultural land for shrimp cultivation. The process of being uprooted is visible from the migration of large number of poor people from the Sunderbans to Kolkata and towns and cities outside West Bengal. In this process women are becoming increasingly vulnerable due to human rights violations that they face at the workplace and at home.

A system of dissemination and utilization of information through information communication technology can only be successful if it is effective in reaching the information to the alienated people in a manner that they are able to participate in the process of social and economic development. Action Aid's perspective is to have a long-term association with the people of the Sunderbans. It wishes to empower the poor people so that they can challenge the threats they face due to denial and violation of human rights. Thus, the biggest challenge for us is to improve governance by strengthening existing alliances of civil society organizations as well as alliances of the poor and excluded people. For strengthening these alliances, information will play a key role.

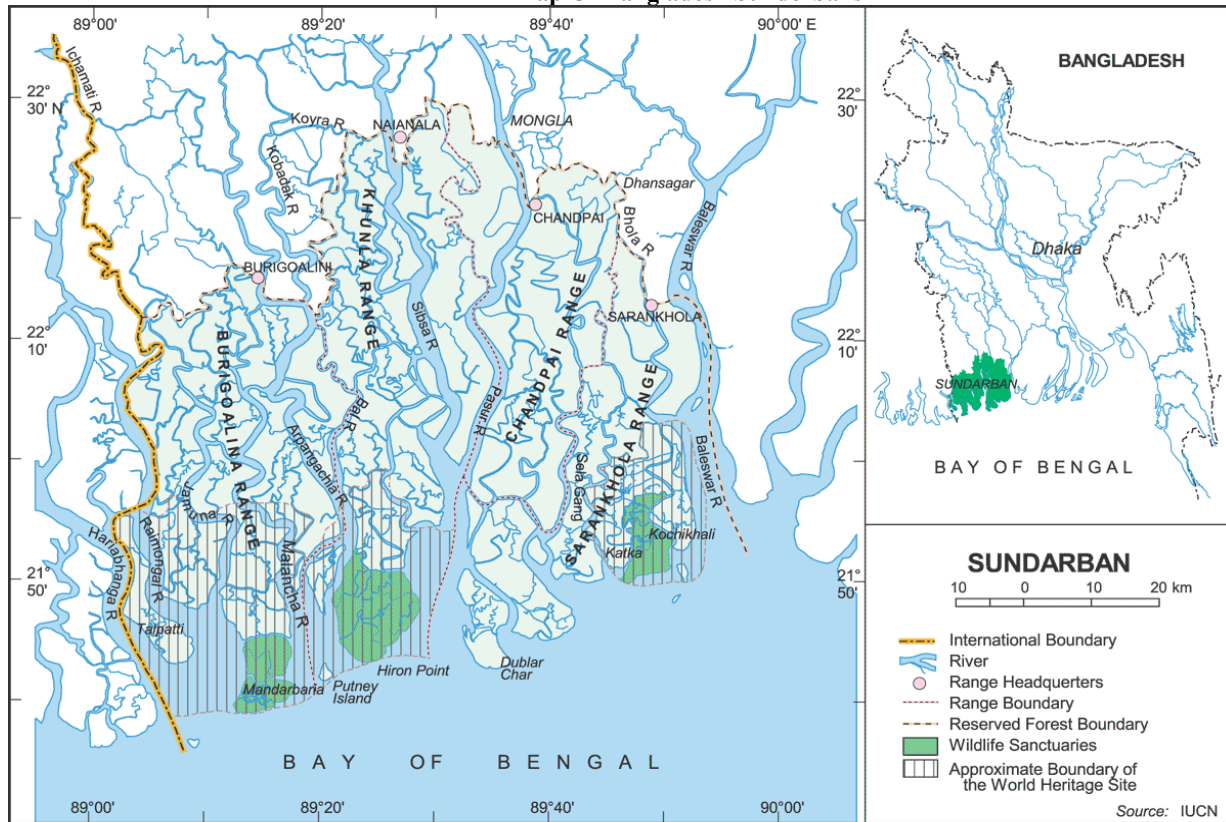
ANNEXURE-I

Map Of Indian Sunderban



ANNEXURE-II

Map Of Bangladesh Sunderbans



ANNEXURE-III

Administrative Setup

Development Administration and Panchayati Institutions (PRIs)	People's Representatives	Government Officials
At District Level- Zilla Parishad	Sabhadhipati ³⁶ Sahakari ³⁷ Sabhadhipati	District Magistrate (DM) Additional District Magistrate (ADM)
At Block Level- Panchayat Samity	Sabhapati ³⁸ Sahakari Sabhapati	Block Development Officer (BDO) Jt. BDO (Joint Block Development Officer)
At Village Level- Gram Panchayat	Pradhan ³⁹ Upa ⁴⁰ - Pradhan	Secretary Village Level Workers

Sabhadhipati heads the *Zilla Parishad* and is assisted by *Sahakari Sabhadhipati*. At the district level, the DM is the Executive Officer (EO) of the *Zilla Parishad*. There are Coordination Committees (*Samannay Samities*) to look after 10 different sectors namely Finance, Planning and Establishment, Forest, Environment and Land Reforms, Agriculture, Irrigation & Co-operation, Fishery and Animal Resources, Public Works, Public Health, Small Scale Industries, Relief and Social Welfare, Education, Information & Culture and Sports, Electricity and Non-conventional Energy Sources, Food and Supplies. A *Karmadhakshya* heads each committee.

Sabhapati heads the *Panchayat Samity* and is assisted by the *Sahakari Sabhapati*. At the Block level, the BDO is the Executive Officer (EO) of the *Panchayat Samity*. There are Standing Committees called *Sthayee Samity* to look after the ten different sectors as described above. These are headed by *Karmadhakshyas* who are elected members of the Panchayat Samity.

The Gram Panchayat is divided into Gram Sabhas that are further divided into Gram Sansads. The people of a Gram Panchayat elect one member from each Gram Sansad. All Gram Sansad members constitute the Gram Panchayat that is headed by Gram Panchayat *Pradhan*.

³⁶ Chairperson of Zilla Parishad

³⁷ Assistant

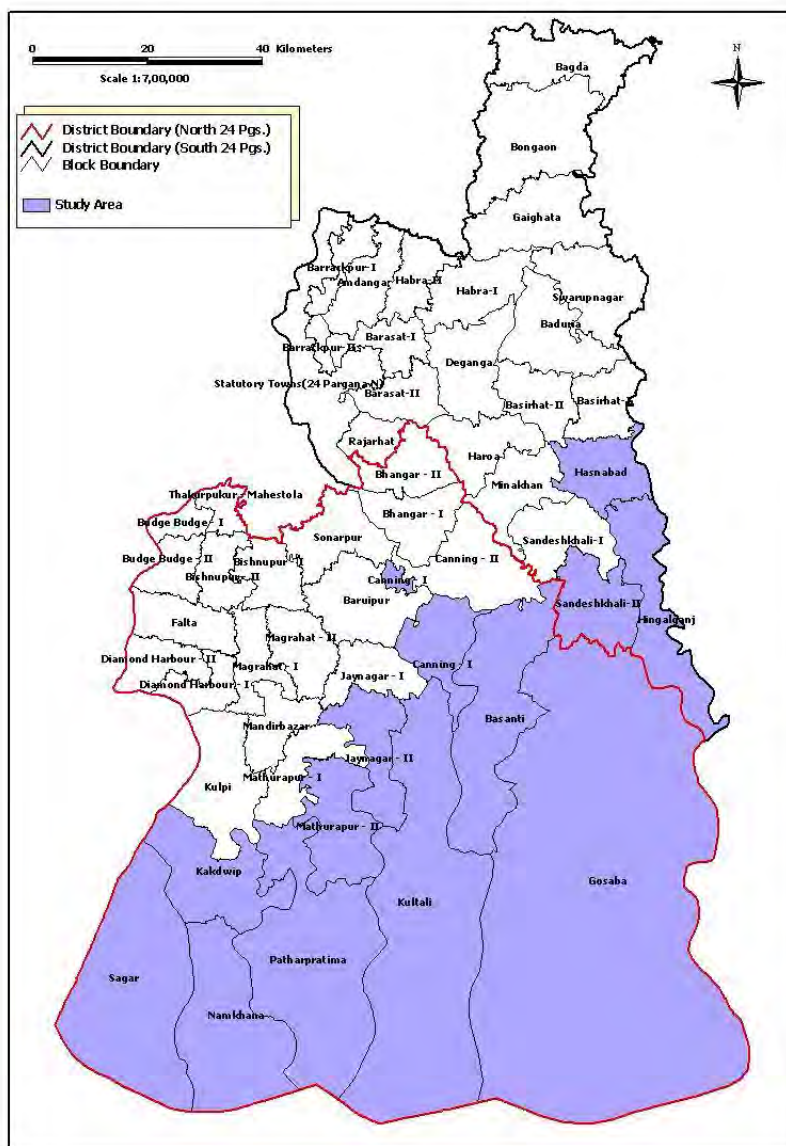
³⁸ Chairperson of Panchayat Samity

³⁹ Elected Chief of Gram Panchayat

⁴⁰ Assistant

ANNEXURE-IV

Map Showing Developmental Blocks Where The Study Was Conducted



ANNEXURE-V**Responses of Community on Government Schemes**

Fields	APS		AAY		TPDS		IAY		SGSY		SGRY		NFBS		NOAPS	
	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
Haldarpara	y	nc	y	y	n	y	y	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc
Barodanagar	n	nc	n	y	n	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc
Uttarpara	n	nc	n	y	n	nc	n	y	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	y
Banigheripara	n	nc	n	y	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	y	n	nc
Shrifaltala	y	y	y	y	y	y	nc	nc	y	y	y	y	y	n	y	y
Dakshin Sitarampur	n	nc	n	y	n	y	y	y	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
Koyalpara	n	y	n	y	n	y	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc
Rajrajeshwarpur	n	y	n	y	n	y	n	nc	n	nc	n	y	n	nc	n	nc
Banirdhal	n	y	n	y	n	y	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc
Dakshin Chuprijhara	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc
Kaikhali	n	nc	n	nc	n	y	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc
Haripur	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	y	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc
Paschim Amravati	nc	y	nc	y	nc	y	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc
Ghoramara	y	y	y	y	y	y	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	y	nc	nc	y	y
Beguakhali Dakhinpara	n	n	y	y	y	y	nc	nc	nc	nc	n	n	n	n	y	y
Dakhin Samshernagar	n	y	n	y	n	y	nc	nc	y	y	nc	nc	n	y	nc	nc
Samshernagar No.1	n	y	n	y	n	y	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	n	y
Dakhin Barunhat	nc	y	nc	y	nc	y	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	n	nc	nc	nc
Golabari	n	nc	n	nc	n	y	y	y	nc	nc	nc	nc	n	nc	n	y
Tridibnagar (Katajungle)	n	nc	n	nc	n	y	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	n	nc	n	nc
Emilybari	n	nc	y	nc	nc	y	nc	nc	y	y	nc	nc	n	nc	y	nc
Purba Atapur	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	Y	y	y	y	n	nc	y	n	nc	y
Total n	16	1	14	0	15	0	7	0	9	1	11	2	15	4	12	1
Total y	3	9	5	15	3	17	4	4	4	4	1	3	2	2	4	7
Total “No Comments” / “Can Not Say”	3	12	3	7	4	5	11	18	9	17	10	17	5	16	6	14

Abbreviations: NOAPS-National Old Age Pension Scheme, APS-Annapurna Yojana (Scheme), AAY-Antyodaya Anna Yojana, TPDS-Target Public Distribution System, IAY-Indira Awas Yojana, SGSY-Swarnajayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojana, SGRY-Sampoorna Grameen Rojgar Yojana, NFBS-National Family Benefit Scheme, NOAPS: National Old Age Pension Scheme

Fields	NMBS		NSCRS		GIS		MDMS		ICDS		SSA		SSK	
	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
Haldarpara	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	y	nc	y	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc
Barodanagar	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	y	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc
Uttarpara	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc
Banigheripara	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc
Shrifaltala	y	n	y	y	y	n	y	y	y	y	nc	nc	nc	nc
Dakshin Sitarampur	n	n	nc	nc	nc	nc	y	y	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc
Koyalpara	n	nc	nc	nc	n	nc	nc	y	nc	nc	nc	nc	y	y
Rajrajeshwarpur	n	y	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	n	n	nc	nc	nc	y
Banirdhal	n	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	n	nc	nc	nc	y
Dakshin Chuprijhara	n	nc	n	nc	n	nc	nc	nc	nc	y	nc	nc	nc	y
Kaikhali	n	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	y	nc	nc	nc	n
Haripur	nc	nc	nc	nc	y	y	nc	y	nc	y	nc	nc	nc	y
Paschim Amravati	nc	nc	nc	nc	y	y	nc	nc	nc	y	nc	nc	nc	y
Ghoramara	y	y	y	y	nc	nc	y	y	nc	y	nc	nc	nc	y
Beguakhali Dakhinpara	y	y	y	y	n	n	y	y	y	y	nc	nc	nc	n
Dakhin Samshernagar	n	y	n	nc	n	nc	nc	nc	nc	y	nc	nc	nc	y
Samshernagar No.1	y	y	n	nc	n	nc	nc	nc	n	n	nc	nc	nc	y
Dakhin Barunhat	n	nc	n	nc	n	y	n	nc	nc	y	nc	nc	nc	n
Golabari	n	n	n	nc	n	nc	n	y	nc	nc	n	nc	n	n
Tridibnagar (Katajungle)	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	n	nc	n	n
Emmilibari	n	nc	n	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	nc	n	nc	n	n
Purba Atapur	y	n	n	nc	n	nc	n	y	nc	y	n	nc	n	n
Total n	13	4	10	0	11	2	5	0	4	3	6	0	6	7
Total y	5	5	3	3	3	3	5	8	4	10	0	0	1	9
Total “No Comments” / Can Not Say	4	13	9	19	8	17	12	14	14	9	16	22	15	6
Abbreviations: A-Awareness, B-Beneficiary, nc-no comments/ cannot say, A/y-Aware, A/n-Unaware, B/y-Beneficiaries are there, B/n- There are no beneficiaries, NMBS-National Maternity Benefit Scheme, NSCRS-National Saving Cum Relief Scheme, GIS- Group Insurance Scheme, SSA-Sarva Siksha Abhiyaan, SSK-Sishu Sikha Karmasuchi														

Matrix-I: Availability of information and its impact on the poor people

Schemes	AAY	APS	TPDS (BPL)	Mid-day Meal	ICDS	NMBS	NFBS	NOAPS	SGRY	GIS	Saving-cum-Relief
How many people know the name of the scheme	○		○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○		○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○			○
How much they know	○ ○ ○ ○		○ ○		○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○						
Number of people accessed government schemes	○		○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	□		○			○
Impact on the poor people	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○			○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
○	10%										

Abbreviations: AAY-Antyodaya Anna Yojana, APS- Annapurna Yojana (Scheme), TPDS-Target Public Distribution System, BPL-Below Poverty Line, ICDS-Integrated Child Development Services Scheme, NMBS-National Maternity Benefit Scheme, NFBS-National Family Benefit Scheme, NOAPS-National Old Age Pension Scheme, SGRY-Sampoorna Grameen Rojgar Yojana, GIS- Group Insurance Scheme

Key findings drawn from the Matrix 1:

- 100% villagers have heard about MDMS, TPDS, ICDS and NOAPS, whereas 10% have heard about AAY, NMBS and Saving cum Relief Scheme and none about APS, NFBS, SGRY and Group Insurance scheme
- Among those villagers who have heard the name of the schemes, 50% have some knowledge on ICDS, 40% on AAY and 20% on TPDS. They do not have any information on the remaining schemes.
- 100% eligible children are beneficiaries of MDMS, 50% eligible children are beneficiaries of ICDS, 20% villagers are beneficiaries of TPDS, 10% villagers are beneficiaries of AAY, NOAPS, Saving-cum-Relief Scheme and 5% eligible women are beneficiaries of NMBS.
- The villagers feel that their lives are highly affected (100%) due to lack of information on APS, NFBS, NOAPS, SGRY, Group Insurance scheme and Saving-cum-Relief scheme. Also, their lives are affected (90%) for not having information on AAY, TPDS and NMBS.

Participants: Prabir, Amalesh, Khokon, Biswaji, Bablu, Jhantu, Bimal, Bappa, Dibakar, Gangasagar Gram Panchayat members.

Matrix II- Value of Information And It's Time Sensitivity

	Schemes for BPL families	Market Price (Fish and Vegetables)	Schemes for Fishermen	Weather Alerts/ Forecast	Minimum Wages	Fund Allocati on against schemes	Traffick ing	Health related information- HIV/AIDS, DOTS etc.
Value of Information								
Time Sensitivity Of the Information								
Why the need for the information	×	= △	= □	=	= △	×	×	≡ =

Particulars	Value of information	Time Sensitivity
Market price (fishes and vegetables)	100	100
Health	100	100
Food related schemes	90	50
Minimum Wages	80	60
Schemes for fishermen	70	60
Weather Forecasting	50	80
Fund Allocation against schemes	30	50
Trafficking	10	10

○	10%
	Right
×	For survival
	Protection against exploitation
=	Prevention of diseases and Protection against them
△	For improving the quality of life

Findings

- The villagers feel they need information on government schemes meant for BPL families.
- They need information on Market Price (Fish and Vegetables) for survival and to protect themselves against exploitation.
- Information on Schemes for Fishermen is needed for survival and for improving the quality of life.
- They need information on Weather Alerts/ Forecast to survive natural calamities.
- Information on Minimum Wages is needed for survival and to get rid of exploitation.
- They need information on Fund Allocation under various schemes as they feel that it is their right.
- They need information on trafficking as they feel that they have a right to live with dignity and to be free from violence.
- Health related information on HIV/AIDS, DOTS etc is needed for survival and for prevention as well as protection from diseases.



Participants: Bikash, Nirottam, Halbar, Swapan, Biswanath, Dipak Sardar, Panchayat member

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Fisher folk with the fishing nets and mechanized boats

ActionAid International-India

Shankar Vihar 3rd Floor, Flat 3A

33, Lake Temple Road

Kolkata 700 029

Tel: 91-33-2465 7017/ 7018/ 7022

E-mail: anchitag@actionaidindia.org, chittam@actionaidindia.org

Address of RDVP

<http://rdvp.org>

