

Stories and Insights from ASA Landscapes

Regenerative Frontiers

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A note from the Director ●

Thirty years ago, Action for Social Advancement (ASA) began with a simple belief: lasting change happens when communities are at the centre of it.

Over these years, our work has taken us across eight states. The contexts have been different, but the starting point has stayed the same: sit with people, understand what they need, and help build something that lasts. We have worked with farmers, with women's groups, and with families trying to secure water, land, and livelihoods. In every place, the work has been shaped by what people themselves choose to prioritise.

For a long time, these stories stayed where they began, in villages, in field notes, in conversations. **'Regenerative Frontiers'** is our first quarterly external newsletter, and starting it in our 30th year felt right. Not as a celebration, but as a way to share what we have been seeing over time. This space is for our partners, donors, peers, and our own teams. It is simply a way of saying: here is what is happening, who is making it happen, and why it matters.

Before you read further, I want to acknowledge the people behind these stories. Not the ones who wrote them, but the ones who lived them. Our field teams, who travel the last mile, sit through long meetings, and stay with communities through the small and difficult parts of the work, are the real authors of what you will read here. Their names appear with each story, as they should.

For those within ASA, this also offers a way to see what others are doing on the ground and to share yours too. We hope these stories give a clear sense of who we are and what we care about. Do share your thoughts with us. This is the first of many editions to follow, and we want each one to be worth your time.

With warmth and gratitude,

G. Jayanthi



Photo credit: **Deepak Sharma**
Project Executive, GIS


 Photo credit: **FCO RANAPUR**

24 years and counting: A view of the stop dam in Dotad during the summer months.

Built in 2002. Still holding water in the summers of 2026.

In a
Nutshell

In Dotad village in Jhabua district of Madhya Pradesh, a stop dam built in 2002 is still holding water in the summers of 2026, and that alone says a lot. This story traces how something as simple as water staying back changed farming here, from fields lying idle after the rains to full crop cycles across 32 hectares, steadier incomes, and far less migration for work. But more than the dam, it is about the people who have kept it going all these years, and what becomes possible when a community truly owns what is built for them.

In 2002, Action for Social Advancement (ASA) was still a relatively young organisation. Jhabua was among its early working areas, and the communities here were among the first to place their trust in it. That year, with funding of ₹2.2 million from the Sir Ratan Tata Trust, ASA built a stop dam in Dotad village.

Nobody knew then that it would still be standing in 2026.

When the dam was built, the land around Dotad was difficult. Water ran off after the rains and did not stay. The Rabi season was a gamble. Some farmers earned almost nothing from their fields in winter. Many families supplemented their income by migrating for work, something they had done for as long as anyone could remember.

Those who were farming then remember it clearly. The fields were there, the seeds were there, the will was there. What was missing was water at the right time.

Jhabua and why water has always been the hardest thing

Jhabua is one of Madhya Pradesh's predominantly tribal districts, home largely to Bhil, Bhilala and Pateliya communities. For decades, it has carried the weight of being counted among the state's most underdeveloped regions. The land is hilly, the soil often thin, and rainfall, while not always scarce, runs off quickly. Very little of the monsoon water stays.

In 2002, when ASA built the stop dam in Dotad, most small and marginal farmers in the district had little access to irrigation outside the monsoon months. Seasonal migration was deeply entrenched. Farming families would wrap up after the kharif harvest and leave. The land would sit idle through the winter months, not because they did not want to farm it, but because there was no water to farm with.

As of March 2026, the dam is the only water-retaining structure in the area still holding water at this time of year. Other sources nearby have already run dry. Twenty-four years on, it continues to do what it was built to do.

✦ The farmers who kept it alive

A structure only lasts as long as the people who look after it. And the people who have looked after this one, year after year, are the local Water Users' Group (WUG).

The WUG has, year after year, regulated water use among its members, carried out maintenance work, sorted out disagreements, and made sure that no one draws more than their share. Thirty-two hectares of farmland now fall under its management, and full crop cycles are completed on that land every season.

The contrast in incomes tells the story directly. Families who once earned next to nothing from their Rabi crops now bring in between ₹90,000 and ₹1,50,000 in a single season. Together, the households farming this land generate over ₹5 million a year.

Migration, once very common when the land could not support families through the year, has come down considerably. Women, who earlier had little role in farm decisions and even less in managing a second crop, are now growing vegetables, selling at local markets, and managing their own income from what the land gives them.

✦ What keeps this going after 24 years

Most water harvesting structures do not last this long in working condition. Silt accumulates and is never cleared. Cracks appear and are left unrepaired. Disputes over water use go unresolved. Gradually, the structure stops serving the people it was built for, and eventually no one quite remembers whose responsibility it was.

The reason is almost always the same: no one owns it. When a structure is handed over to a community without building the institution to manage it, it is only a matter of time before it deteriorates. Ownership cannot be installed like a gate or a pump. It has to be built, and it takes time.

In Dotad, ASA built the institution alongside the dam. That sequence matters. When communities are given ownership from the start, they tend to sustain it over time. As Mangiya Jhakhla, one of the group's long-standing members, puts it: **"We have repaired it, cleaned it, argued over it. But it has never let us down."**

Development work is often counted in structures built and people reached. Dotad asks a different question: will this still be working in 20 years? Here, the answer is already yes. It shows what happens when work is built to last, not just to deliver.

Pritesh Jain, Field Office Coordinator, Jhabua

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We used to finish the kharif crop and then wait. There was nothing to do on the land in winter. After the dam, we started growing wheat and chickpea. Now the whole family works through the season.

Kehu Nanka, Member, Water Users' Group, Dotad





Small structures, big difference: A Doha in Temla village, Barwani district, Madhya Pradesh. Each structure lasts 5 to 7 years.

How Doha structures brought water security to Barwani

In a Nutshell

In Barwani district of Madhya Pradesh, villages like Temla and Berada are beginning to hold on to the rain they once lost. Simple Doha structures, small trenches built along natural drainage lines, are helping store water, recharge groundwater, and bring hundreds of acres of land under irrigation. With water staying longer, farmers are growing second crops, incomes are more stable, and fewer families are moving out of their villages in search of work. Farming no longer stops with the rains, and that has changed what a year looks like for many families. Sometimes, all it takes is holding on to what was always there.

Barwani is one of Madhya Pradesh's tribal districts. Agriculture here has, for generations, been at the mercy of the monsoon. Good rain meant a decent kharif harvest. Poor rain meant borrowing. And when the harvest was done, many families left, heading to towns and construction sites to earn what the land could not give them.

Temla and Berada, two villages in the district, knew this cycle all too well. Most households could grow just one crop a year. The idea of irrigating a rabi crop in winter was, for many farmers, more aspiration than plan.

With support from Action for Social Advancement (ASA), both villages adopted the Doha water-harvesting model. The results have been significant.

As Mr. Mukesh Chauhan, Sarpanch of Temla Gram Panchayat, puts it, "Today, around 125 to 150 acres of land are irrigated because of the Doha structure here."

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This started as a simple idea around holding on to rainwater, especially the runoff that usually drains away after the monsoon. ASA first saw it working well in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra about 12 to 15 years ago. It made sense to try it in our areas, so we adapted the design to local conditions and used machines to scale it up.

Since then, ASA has taken this model across Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha. So far, we have built close to 19,000 to 20,000 of these structures, helping thousands of farming families access water for irrigation.

Bhagwan Singh Patel,
Programme Director, LWRD & Convergence

What a Doha does

A Doha is a trench dug along natural drainage lines, where rainwater already flows during the monsoon. Each structure is 30 metres long, 6 metres wide, and 1.5 metres deep, holding up to 0.27 million litres of water. Rather than letting the run-off drain away into the nearest river, the Doha catches it and holds it.

Over time, the stored water seeps into the ground and raises the local water table. Wells hold water longer into summer. Hand pumps that once ran dry by March stay functional. And the water sitting inside the Doha itself can be pumped directly to fields using motors installed at the site.

The work in Temla and Berada

In Temla, 50 Doha structures have been built with community participation. Here, 13 pumps of 3 horsepower (HP) capacity have been installed directly at the Doha sites. Each pump pushes 500 litres per minute. Together, all 13 running for 10 hours a day move roughly 3.9 million litres of water, enough to irrigate 16 to 18 acres every day.

Before the Dohas, Temla could access around 0.5 million litres a day for irrigation, covering about 4 acres. This has increased nearly eightfold in water availability, while irrigation coverage has grown to about 4 to 4.5 times the earlier level.

In Berada, 50 Dohas and 15 pumps together now generate about 4.5 million litres daily, irrigating 18 to 20 acres. Together, the two villages have brought over 285 acres of farmland under irrigation in total, benefiting 87 families.

What has changed

In Temla, farmers like Mansharam are now growing wheat and vegetables in the winter season, something that was not possible before. Others have started selling vegetables as a secondary crop. Households that used to have one agricultural income in a year now have two, and for some, a third income from horticulture.

In Berada, the change is just as visible. Crop yields are up, livestock have water through the dry months, and



families that once left after the kharif harvest are now staying back to farm their land.

The groundwater recovery has also had effects beyond individual plots. Wells near farms that previously dried up by March held water into May last year. Soil moisture across the landscape improved, which benefited even rain-fed crops on adjacent land.

A district where water has always been the deciding factor

Barwani has a large tribal population and a long history of drought-prone farming. Infrastructure for irrigation is limited, and communities have historically had very little buffer against a poor monsoon. The Doha model works here partly because it asks for nothing from outside. No canal, no external water source. Just a well-placed trench, community effort to maintain it, and the rain that already falls.

The cost is another reason the model has travelled well. Irrigation through a Doha works out to roughly ₹5,000 per acre, and with minimal maintenance, each structure lasts 5 to 7 years.

ASA has since taken the Doha model well beyond Barwani. It is now active across Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha. To date, ASA estimates that 19,000 to 20,000 such water compartments have been built, supporting thousands of farming families with irrigation.

Vipin Patel, Project Associate, LWRD Team



Scale

100 Doha structures (2 villages)
87 families covered, 285+ acres irrigated



Water impact

Temla: 3.9 million litres/day
Berada: 4.5 million litres/day
8x increase in water availability (Temla)



What changed

20-30% increase in crop yields
Less seasonal migration
Second crops now possible



Nutrition in her hands: A farmer with her sponge gourd harvest.

‘Poshan Vatika’: Nourishing families, nurturing land

In a Nutshell

In many villages of western Madhya Pradesh, the months after harvest usually mean making do with less, fewer vegetables, fewer choices, and more dependence on the weekly haat. Poshan Vatika is quietly changing that. With small kitchen gardens growing right next to their homes, families now have fresh food within reach, even in the lean season. Women are leading this shift, tending these plots and bringing variety back to everyday meals. What may look like a small patch of green is doing much more, feeding families, caring for the soil, and helping people rely a little less on uncertain markets.

“Ab hum apni sabziyaan khud ugaate hain. Bacche ab achcha khaate hain, aur haat pe itna nahin jaana padta. (Now we grow our own vegetables. Our kids eat well, and we do not have to go to the market for everything),” says Thavli Bai from Chikli village in Dhar district, Madhya Pradesh. But this was not always the case. For farming families in western Madhya Pradesh, the months after the kharif harvest have always been the hardest. The cotton is in, the fields lie fallow, and fresh vegetables grow scarce at the weekly haat. When they do appear, prices climb beyond what a post-harvest budget can easily reach. Diets shrink to staples, and the dry season passes with families getting by on very little.

The consequences are not invisible. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21), 54.7% of women and almost 73% of children aged 6 to 59 months in Madhya Pradesh are anaemic. In tribal communities, these figures tend to be even higher.

Vitamin A deficiency among young children is also widespread. Both are preventable, and both are, in large part, a consequence of this seasonal food gap.

What is Poshan Vatika

Poshan Vatika, which means Nutrition Garden, is an initiative of Action for Social Advancement (ASA) to help small and marginal farmers grow fresh vegetables at home. The idea is a small plot, either in the backyard or on the edge of an agricultural field, planted with a variety of vegetables suited to the family's nutritional needs. The aim is that each day of the week, the family has access to something different, something fresh, and something grown by their own hands. A well-managed kitchen garden can also generate an additional income of ₹15,000 to ₹20,000 per family from surplus sales at local markets.

Between December 2025 and January 2026, ASA distributed 4,600 Pusa Beej seed kits from the Indian Council of Agricultural Research across Alirajpur, Barwani, Jhabua, Dhar, and Ratlam districts. Each kit costs ₹200. In total, 4,600 kits reached an estimated 9,200 tribal households across the five districts.

The seed kit and what it carries

A single kit fits in your palm but carries 10 vegetable varieties: tomatoes, spinach, fenugreek, coriander, radish, carrot, brinjal, turnip, onion, and mustard greens. Planted on a patch of 30 to 50 square metres, it can keep a family going for four to six months. The varieties were picked with care. Spinach and fenugreek are high in iron. Carrots, mustard greens, and tomatoes provide Vitamin A, which matters most for children's eyesight and immunity. Fenugreek is particularly good for lactating mothers. Growing these at home is a more direct answer to the nutritional gap than a supplement ever could be.

Alirajpur accounted for the largest share, with 2,100 kits covering 4,200 families. Barwani followed with 1,200 kits (2,400 families), then Jhabua (800 kits, 1,600 families), Dhar (300 kits, 600 families), and Ratlam (200 kits, 400 families). Every distribution was documented through geo-tagged photographs using NoteCam, an app that embeds GPS coordinates, date, and time directly into each photograph, providing field-level accountability from seed distribution all the way through to harvest.

Women at the centre

Women were the first point of contact at every location, through Self-Help Group meetings and village cluster gatherings. They collected the kits, brought them home, and took charge of the garden plots. In many households, it was the first time a woman had a growing space she could call her own. By February and March 2026, women across the programme area were tending brinjal, cowpea, and tomato crops on land that had lain fallow just months before.

The 9,200 households saved an estimated ₹12.4 million in

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Since we started the Poshan Vatika, things at home have become easier for us. Earlier, we did not always have vegetables, but now we grow them right near the house. Every day we just pick what we need for cooking, which feels very convenient.

The children are eating fresher food, and we don't have to depend so much on the market. Sometimes we even have a little extra to sell in the haat. It feels good to manage our food like this on our own.

Jah Bai,
Bamnali Village, Barwani District, MP

vegetable purchases over the season, because they were growing their own. That works out to roughly ₹1,100 to ₹1,500 saved per family, all from a ₹200 kit. Families who grew surplus cowpeas, cucumbers, ridge gourds, and tomatoes also had something to sell at the local haat during what is normally the leanest earning period of the year.

The Pusa Beej varieties are open-pollinated, which means farmers can collect and dry seeds from their own harvest and plant them again the following season. The programme has generated an estimated ₹0.46 million in seed multiplication value. Over time, the aim is a family that grows its own seeds as well as its food, without waiting for the next distribution.

What the 2025-26 season has shown is that food security does not always need a large budget or a complex system. A ₹200 seed kit, placed in the right hands at the right time, can begin to close a nutritional gap that has persisted for decades. Between December 2025 and March 2026, 9,200 families in western Madhya Pradesh had vegetables growing in their own backyard, through the months when good food is hardest to come by. That is what the change looks like.

Anurag Patel, Programme Manager,
Regenerative Production Landscape Collaborative




 Photo credit: **FCO RAJPUR**

Where learning happens: ASA field staff and women farmers during an Organic Producer Group training session.

When crop waste becomes the farmer's best input

In a
Nutshell

The Community Decomposer Programme, launched by ASA, is helping farmers turn crop waste into usable compost in just 30 to 45 days, using simple materials already available on their farms. In regions where soil health has steadily declined and traditional composting takes too long to be practical, this offers a faster, low-cost alternative. In just three months, the programme has reached 60,000 farmers, enabling them to improve soil quality, reduce dependence on chemical inputs, and make better use of what they already have.

Ask any small farmer what keeps them up at night, and soil comes up quickly. Not just whether the rains will come, but whether the land is still capable of growing what it used to. Decades of intensive cultivation, dependence on chemical fertilisers, and the gradual abandonment of traditional organic practices have left soils compacted, depleted, and slower to respond.



A farmer with a bottle of decomposer culture.

The answer most farmers know is compost. The problem is time. Traditional composting takes three to four months. For a small or marginal farmer working with one or two acres and no financial cushion, that wait is not always practical. Crops need nutrition now, not next season.

The Community Decomposer Programme, which Action for Social Advancement (ASA) began in January 2026, has one aim: give farmers a way to make good compost in 30 to 45 days, using what they already have on the farm.

What is a decomposer culture

A decomposer culture is a liquid preparation packed with microorganisms, particularly bacteria and fungi, that break down organic matter rapidly. Think of it as a starter for compost, similar in principle to the culture used to set curd. You add a small quantity to a heap of crop residue or organic waste, keep it moist, and the microbes do the rest. The heap breaks down in a fraction of the usual time.

To make D-Compost, you need a 200 litre drum and a few things most farms already have:

- Water
- 2 kilograms of jaggery
- 10 kilograms of fresh cow dung
- 2 kilograms of virgin soil
- 1 kilogram of gram flour (besan)
- 100 grams of the decomposer culture powder as a starter

Stir once a day for five to seven days, keep the drum in shade with a loose cloth over it, and the culture is ready when it smells slightly sour and turns frothy. It stays good for up to 30 days.

To use it, farmers dilute 10 litres of the culture in 90 litres of water and spray it over one tonne of crop residue or organic waste. Covered with a thin layer of soil, the pile should be turned within 7 to 10 days for aeration and to support proper composting. Keeping the moisture at 50 to 60% helps the microbes do their work. The compost is ready to use in 30 to 45 days.

How the programme rolled out

ASA has organised farmers across its working areas into Organic Producer Groups (OPGs), each typically comprising 20 to 25 members. It was through them that the decomposer programme was delivered. Staff were assigned to each OPG in January, trained the groups through February on D-Compost preparation, application, and culture management, and farmer-level distribution began in March.

The decomposer powder was supplied to 120 Community Decomposer Units and 47 Kheti Badi Kendras (KBKs) across the project area. The KBK initiative of ASA builds a farmer-led extension system where progressive farmers' fields function as local learning centres for their peers. From these points, the culture reached OPG members for local multiplication and use.

The programme was designed specifically to reach economically weaker farming families who cannot afford commercial soil amendments. The materials for making D-Compost cost very little. The knowledge to make it, once transferred, stays with the farmer.

Why it matters beyond speed

Faster composting is only part of the story. Incompletely decomposed organic matter, which is what many farmers end up applying when traditional compost is rushed or left unfinished, brings problems with it. Termites are drawn to it and damage root systems. Weed seeds survive in it and germinate in the field, adding to labour. And because the breakdown is incomplete, nutrients stay locked in the organic matter rather than reaching the crop.

Decomposer-treated compost, because the microbial activity fully breaks down the organic material, delivers nutrients in a form the plant can actually use. Soil texture improves over seasons. The dependence on purchased inputs decreases. For a small farmer, the arithmetic of that is straightforward.

The Community Decomposer Programme sits within ASA's Responsible Crop Initiative, known in Hindi as Jimmedar Kheti. This approach actively discourages the use of chemical fertilisers, pesticides, and plant hormones, and instead promotes locally sourced organic inputs, mechanical cultivation techniques, and crop rotation practices across ASA's working regions.

The decomposer is one part of that larger picture. Sixty thousand farmers, in three months, each now carrying the knowledge and the culture to keep making their own compost. That is what the shift looks like on the ground.

Shahrukh Khan, Assistant Programme Manager,
Sustainable Agriculture

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Earlier, the compost would take three months, and even then half the time it had termites and was useless. I wasted so much. Now it is ready before I expect it, it has a good smell, and I can feel the difference in the soil with my hands.

Dhubdi Bai Solanki, Pati Village, Barwani District, MP





Photo credit:



What change looks like: For Mrs. Usha and Mr. Ramsaran, the upgraded toilet has brought comfort and ease into their daily lives.

When access to a toilet changed everything

In a Nutshell

A family in Bamhani village in Anuppur district of Madhya Pradesh had a toilet but could not really use it because there was no water. That began to change with a household tap connection, and later, a switch to a western-style toilet that made it usable for everyone. With support from ASA's WASH programme and a couple of loans, what was once unused became part of everyday life. The change is simple but deeply felt, bringing ease, dignity, and a sense of independence into the household.

“Ghar mein shauchalaya tha, lekin paani nahin hone ki wajah se hum uska theek se istemaal nahi kar paate the. Isliye humein bahar hi jaana padta tha (We had a toilet at home, but we could not use it properly because there was no water. We had to continue going outside),” says 57-year-old Usha Patel from Anuppur district in Madhya Pradesh.

The Indian-style toilet in the Patel household was rarely used because there was no reliable access to water. Without water, it was difficult to use and maintain, and the family continued to go outside to attend to nature's call.

The Patels are a farming family in Bamhani, a tribal-dominated village. Ramsaran, 62, who is differently abled, looks after the fields, while Usha manages the home. Their two granddaughters are both in college. The family depends on what the land provides, leaving little room for unexpected expenses. Getting a water tap connection was not something they had considered.

How ASA's support reached the family

This is when Action for Social Advancement (ASA) became involved. Its work on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) is part of its Financial Inclusion vertical and is supported by Water.org.

The programme focuses on helping families improve access to safe water and sanitation infrastructure. It supports them in accessing resources, institutions and financing options that enable them to set up piped water connections, construct toilets, and install borewells, handpumps and water filters.

Usha first heard about the WASH programme during a weekly meeting of the Sambhawana Self-Help Group (SHG), of which she is a member. In her interaction with ASA's field team, she understood that without reliable access to water, the toilet at home would remain unused.

Soon after, Usha took a loan of ₹3,000 from her SHG and added some of her own savings to install a household tap connection. This made it possible for the family to start using their existing toilet. The change was immediate. They no longer had to go outside to defecate, improving both safety and hygiene, especially for the women in the household.

When one problem still remained

Even after the toilet became functional, it was still not usable for Ramsaran. Because of his condition and age, sitting and squatting on the Indian-style toilet was difficult. What worked for the rest of the family was still not accessible to him.

When ASA's field team learnt about this, they spoke with Usha and explained what could be done. The team suggested replacing the existing Indian-style toilet with an ambulant toilet, a modified toilet designed for people who cannot squat or have difficulty maintaining balance.

To make this possible, ASA, with support from Water.org, contributed ₹5,000 towards the upgradation. Usha also took another loan of ₹40,000 from a microfinance company. In total, the family invested ₹45,000 to make the toilet fully usable at home.

What changed at home

Today, Ramsaran can use the toilet on his own. "Even after the toilet started working, I could not use it earlier. I had to depend on others. Now I can manage on my own," he says.

For Usha, the change is just as important. The need to step out at night is gone, and she no longer has to assist her husband every time. The physical strain on her has reduced, and her own knee pain has eased.

What it took

This change did not happen all at once. It began with a conversation at a weekly SHG meeting. Then came a small loan to bring water into the home. Finally, an

upgrade made the toilet usable for everyone. Together, these steps solved a problem that had affected the family for years.



Earlier, my husband depended on me every time he had to go for nature's call. I was always alert, expecting that he might need help at any moment. Since the western-style toilet has been installed, he is able to manage on his own. This has given me more time for other work.

Usha Patel,
Bamhani Village, Anuppur District, MP

Pinky Singh Gond, Project Associate, Financial Inclusion



₹3,000

First SHG loan:
Tap connection



₹40,000

Second loan:
Ambulant toilet



₹5,000

Support from **ASA** and
Water.org





At the table, with a voice: Women submit the village development plan at the Gaigaon Panchayat office in Kesinga, Kalahandi, Odisha.

Women at the heart of the village development plan

In a Nutshell

This story looks at what happens when women move from sitting quietly in meetings to speaking about what they actually need. In villages across Odisha, the Village Development Plan process has created that shift. Women are now part of deciding which works are taken up under MGNREGS, and their priorities are clear and rooted in everyday life, water for fields, sheds for livestock, safer roads, better drainage. What follows is not just new assets on the ground, but a change in who gets heard. And once that starts, the plans begin to reflect real lives, not just paperwork.

In the villages of Kalahandi, Rayagada and Balangir districts in Odisha, Gram Sabhas were meeting, Gram Panchayats were preparing Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) work plans, and funds were flowing through the system every year. But for many of the most marginalised families in these villages, women, Scheduled Tribes, landless households, and people with disabilities, that process was happening around them, not with them.

Before the Village Development Plan (VDP) process of Action for Social Advancement (ASA), decisions about which MGNREGS works to propose were made by Gram Panchayat representatives, Sarpanches, and influential community members.

Palli Sabhas, or ward-level village assemblies that form the grassroots unit of governance in Odisha's Panchayati Raj system, were at times conducted in an informal manner. Marginalised groups had little awareness of their MGNREGS entitlements and even less understanding of how to bring their priorities into the works planning

process.

A change in who plans

In 2025-26, ASA worked with communities across 8 blocks (Muniguda, Lanjigarh, Narla, Kesinga, Bhawanipatna, Muribahal, Bangomunda and Turekela) in 3 districts to facilitate VDPs.

The process was straightforward: help communities, especially women and marginalised groups, understand what MGNREGS could offer, identify their actual needs, prepare a plan, and present it formally at the Gram Sabha.

Two Field Coordination Offices (FCOs) led the work. The Bhawanipatna FCO covered Kalahandi and Rayagada, and the Turekela FCO covered Balangir. Together, they supported the submission of 20 VDPs for 462 beneficiaries, representing an estimated investment of ₹37.2 million.

ASA team members mobilised communities, conducted awareness meetings, explained the scheme and its entitlements, helped document priorities, and supported the submission of plans to Gram Sabhas. In villages where people had previously thought of MGNREGS only as wage employment for digging ponds or roads, ASA helped them see it as a planning tool for lasting assets.

Women listed as beneficiaries

Naming women as the primary beneficiaries was not incidental. It is part of ASA's approach in marginalised communities and was reinforced by what women themselves were asking for. Approximately 30 to 40% of Gram Sabha participants were women in villages where the VDP process was implemented, a higher proportion than typical because ASA specifically mobilised women to attend and bring their priorities.

The assets women asked for tell their own story:

- Farm ponds and dug wells for irrigation during the cropping season
- Land levelling to improve yields on marginal holdings
- Cow sheds and goat sheds for household income
- Roads, because women walked long distances to weekly markets and had no transport
- Solar lights, because darkness felt unsafe
- Community tanks, because in summer there was often not enough water for bathing
- Drainage, because poor drainage led to malaria and diarrhoea

The asks were specific, practical, and grounded in what daily life actually required.

The shift was noticed at the panchayat level. "Earlier, the

planning of MGNREGS works was mostly done at the Panchayat level with limited community input," one Gram Panchayat member observed. "After the VDP process, we have started involving villagers more actively through Gram Sabha discussions. This has helped us understand the community's actual needs, especially those of women and marginalised groups. The selection of works is now more transparent, participatory, and focused on long-term benefits."

Works underway

VDPs have been formally adopted by Gram Panchayats across all 8 blocks. Works sanctioned and in progress include dug wells, farm ponds, land levelling, stop dams and field bunding.

In Narla block, 3 poultry units were built in Gigina Gram Panchayat and 3 cow sheds in Muskuti Gram Panchayat. In Lanjigarh, a farm pond was completed in Kadamguda Gram Panchayat and a goat shed in Bhurtigarh Gram Panchayat.

For those whose works have been completed, early changes are already visible. Bichitra Pidikaka of Kurumajodi village in Agulo Gram Panchayat now grows vegetables using water from her completed well. "We do not need to buy vegetables every day," she says. "Our food has improved and we are saving money by not going to the market."

The target for 2026-27 is 72 more VDPs across the same 8 blocks, reaching more villages in Kalahandi, Rayagada and Balangir. The process that began with 20 plans and 462 beneficiaries is now extending to communities that watched their neighbours participate and want to do the same.

Dibya Ranjan Sethi, Field Office Coordinator, Bhawanipatna

“

Before this programme, I kept a few country birds in my backyard, but predators and rain killed half of them every season. Through the VDP process, I got a permanent cement shed for them sanctioned through MGNREGS. Now they are protected.

Brundabati Parua, Gigina Village, Kalahandi District, Odisha





Photo credit: FCO BETUL

Seeing it up close: BoD members and women farmers during an exposure visit to a ginning unit.

10 women, ₹10,000, and what happened next

In a Nutshell

This story looks at how a small group of women in Athner became part of an FPO and gradually grew into running it. What began with little experience and modest means has, over time, turned into a collective where women pool their produce, negotiate prices, and manage day-to-day operations. The visible change is in income, but the more lasting shift is in confidence and control. Women who once stayed on the margins are now making decisions, handling transactions, and representing their work beyond their villages. What has taken shape is not just a functioning enterprise, but a space where women are leading how it grows.

In May 2021, the Athner Women Farmer Producer Company Limited was registered in Betul district of Madhya Pradesh, with support from Action for Social Advancement (ASA) under the Government of India's scheme to promote 10,000 Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs).

At the time, there were 10 women involved. None had run a company before. Most had never sat in a meeting where prices, plans, or decisions were discussed. They started anyway.

The share capital was ₹10,000. In the first year, the turnover was ₹300. By 2025-26, the FPO had nearly 1,000 women members across 25 villages, share capital of ₹2.725 million, and a turnover of ₹26.2 million. Every board seat belongs to a woman.

What started small began to take shape as more women joined in, and step by step, it turned into something that could sustain itself.

How the FPO works

Before the FPO, most women sold produce individually to whoever came to the village. Prices were not negotiated, just accepted. Now, produce is pooled at two aggregation centres managed by local rural youth who act as facilitators, creating work within the same communities. Weighing is fair, transport costs are shared, and members receive between 10 and 15% higher prices than before.

The FPO aggregates wheat, maize, gram, soybean, mustard, and other crops that members already grow, and sells collectively to institutional buyers. Seeds, fertilisers, and other inputs are procured in bulk, reducing costs that were previously absorbed one bag at a time.

Digitisation has been central to how the FPO operates. Every transaction from farm to market is tracked through

KRAI (Kommodity Receipting and Invoicing System), a digital platform for traceability and record-keeping. Digital payments are also made to farmers directly. Together, these systems have helped maintain accurate accounts, manage compliance, and plan ahead, a significant step for a rural, women-led enterprise.

Knowing the land

The FPO has also changed how farming decisions are made. A soil testing machine, received as a grant, helps members understand what their land needs before deciding what to apply, removing much of the guesswork. To learn how to use it, members travelled to the Indian Council of Agricultural Research in New Delhi for a three-day training.

A silage machine, also received as a grant, has helped reduce crop residue burning, turning what was once treated as waste into something useful on the farm. ASA has also trained members in organic cultivation, integrated pest management, and crop diversification.

“

Today, many of the women are comfortably using digital systems to track transactions and manage payments. What might have once felt unfamiliar is now part of their daily work. It has made things simpler, but more importantly, it has given them confidence in how they run the FPO.

Amit Dwivedi,
Assistant Programme Manager, FPO Support

The women behind it

The turnover figures show growth. The more noticeable change is in the women themselves.



Members who had rarely left their villages have travelled to different states to represent the FPO at both local and national forums. They now verify quality at procurement, handle logistics, manage digital transactions, and run meetings where decisions about prices, plans, and the season ahead are made.

Hemlata Davande, a member of the Board of Directors, says, “Before 2021, I did not even know what a producer company meant. Today, I am one of its board members. Being part of this FPO has changed so much for me. I speak with confidence now. I can discuss business, negotiate prices, and help other women do the same.”

“The FPO has grown, but the real change is in the women themselves,” says Samim Molla, Programme Director, FPO Support, ASA. “I have seen them go from quietly listening to confidently leading.”

Five years on, what began with 10 women and ₹10,000 has grown into a company of nearly 1,000 members. But the real change in Athner goes beyond income. Women who once waited for others to decide are now leading, making decisions, and shaping what comes next.

Prashant Saini, CEO,
Athner Women Farmer Producer Company Limited



1,000

Women farmer members
across **25 villages**



₹26.2 million

Turnover in 2025-26,
up from ₹300 in Year 1



10-15%

Higher prices for members
through collective selling





Photo credit: **Deepak Sharma**
Project Executive, GIS

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