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DEVELOPMENT ALTERNATIVES



Nav Chetna Urja Mandala Mahila Samiti members at Mirzapur solar mini-grid site

Harnessing the Power of Innovation and Solidarity for Entrepreneurship

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Empowering Change: The Journey of Sunita Sahu

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Shifting Systems, Collectively

Collective action has been an integral part of Development Alternatives' approach to creating impact at scale. Unique to most civil society organisations in India, we have, since the late 1980s, built programmes around three types of collaborative structures: community partnerships, business networks and policy alliances.

In the last decade, the organisation has adopted a more systemic view of how cross-sectoral collective action can bring about accelerated, deep and widespread change. This involves work that ranges from grassroots action at the micro-level to policy influence at the macro-level, with a considerable amount of emphasis on bridges being built across scales and among diverse actors by Development Alternatives and its partners at the meso-level.

This issue of the Development Alternatives newsletter highlights the application of this approach and the use of social innovation methods and tools in inclusive entrepreneurship. Our achievements and ambition of creating 'One Million Jobs in One Thousand Days' through grassroots enterprises are predicated upon the following:

- The use of deep listening and co-creation tools among rural communities to develop 'systemic prototypes' (process innovations to create shifts in community-level social and economic norms).
- The creation of meso-level informal institutions such as the 'District Entrepreneurship Coalition', with participation from government agencies, banks, training institutes, non-governmental organisations, leading entrepreneurs and others, to support collective thinking, problem-solving and action on issues that affect marginalised people's ability to set up enterprises.
- The coming together of national-level civil society organisations, who bring expertise, execution capability and influence in three key areas: governance and policy, access to credit and digital technology.
- The launching of a knowledge-building and sharing vehicle, the 'Centre for Social Innovation and Inclusive Entrepreneurship' and 'Samudyam' – a platform for greater equity and inclusion in grassroots entrepreneurship.

Deep, transformative, multidimensional, long-lasting impact in rural communities, particularly in the lives of women, cannot be achieved through 'projects' and is unlikely to happen through government enterprise development programmes or private sector expansion



'One million jobs in one thousand days' through grassroots enterprises - MoU signed with UPSRLM to scale this across UP

of supply chains. Social enterprises will have a limited and localised impact. Hence, our obsession with the creation of thousands of block-level micro-movements, in which collective action fuels systemic shifts in the entrepreneurship and livelihoods landscape.

In our view, the tools, skills and knowledge required for collective action among horizontal configurations of like-minded actors, i.e., partnerships, networks, consortia, etc., have evolved rapidly and are fairly well-known and accessible. Less is known, however, about processes that would need to be put into place in situations where collective action is anticipated between actors who have vertical relationships and when one/some of the collaborators are the primary source of funding (a donor) or in a position of power (e.g., a government body). There is an urgent need for initiatives that explore this space and identify the means that will fuel effective collaboration across sectors and scales.

Regarding Development Alternatives' role, we have prioritised 'evidence-based learning' from intensive engagement on the ground, the emergence of meso-level 'collaborative institutional configurations' and broad-based 'knowledge sharing by practitioners, for practitioners'. Looking ahead, our work is poised to alter the way underprivileged communities perceive entrepreneurship and, perhaps more importantly, how other stakeholders perceive women and youth in these communities – from being beneficiaries who need to be supported through government programmes to being potential entrepreneurs and focal points of social and economic transformation. □

Women-led Energy Transition for Rural Empowerment



Members of Urja Mandala Mahila Samiti and energy supply company discussing operation and management of 30 kWp solar-mini grid in Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh

The twenty-first century presents a significant transformation opportunity for India. With the goal of becoming a net-zero carbon economy by 2070 and energy independent by 2047, the hundredth year of Indian independence [1], India has identified energy transition and climate action as key priority areas. A holistic green growth model, powered by innovation and entrepreneurship, will be the pathway for India to truly succeed in this transformation.

With a population of 1.4 billion, the largest in the world, India requires rapid economic growth aided by digital transformation. This growth will be critical to meet the needs and aspirations of people, especially

women, youth and those living below the poverty line. A World Economic Forum report estimates that India's transition to a net-zero economy can unlock more than US\$15 trillion in economic impact and create over 50 million jobs by 2070 [2]. To achieve this transformation, India will need a transformation engine that is social in purpose, systemic in nature and inclusive by design and can deliver the envisioned social, economic and environmental outcomes. However, the success of such transformational initiatives is determined by the magnitude of synergies that can be achieved by the three development actors, viz., the public sector, the private sector

Salient Features of Urja Mandala:

- Combines **community- and business-**based approaches to a rural micro utility.
- Builds on **public-private-community partnership.**
- **Operated and managed by women** collective, thereby increasing the agency of women in local economic growth.
- Integrated **energy and revenue management system** leveraging digital technology solutions.

and the equally important but most critical communities and civil societies.

The Development Alternatives Group has been using a people-centric transformation engine to demonstrate the catalytic role of renewable energy in the sustainable socio-economic growth of local communities through the productive use of reliable power. The pioneering ‘Urja Mandala’ (energy constellation) economic model, powered by decentralised renewable energy systems, provides a holistic approach to the energy transition, combining the strengths of private entities, public agencies and community institutions, with women

collectives leading the charge for an inclusive and equitable transition.

A typical Urja Mandala model (refer to Figure 1) powered by a solar mini-grid has three components: solar power generation, storage and distribution and energy demand. The women’s institution, with support from the relevant public agency (such as state rural livelihood missions, local panchayats, gram sabhas) enters into a long-term power purchase agreement with a privately held renewable energy supply company (RESCO) for the supply of solar electricity. The women collective, after adding their margin, sell this reliable and affordable solar electricity to local micro-entrepreneurs as per their agreement. The power generation system is privately financed and set up by a RESCO, while the storage and distribution are co-funded with contributions from the women’s institution and partial grants. Overall, the women collective lead the mandate for local economic development by promoting entrepreneurship powered by renewable energy, thereby enhancing innovation, productivity and economic growth while also mitigating carbon emissions.

As of May 2024, the Development Alternatives Group, together with partners, has launched two Urja Mandalas, one each

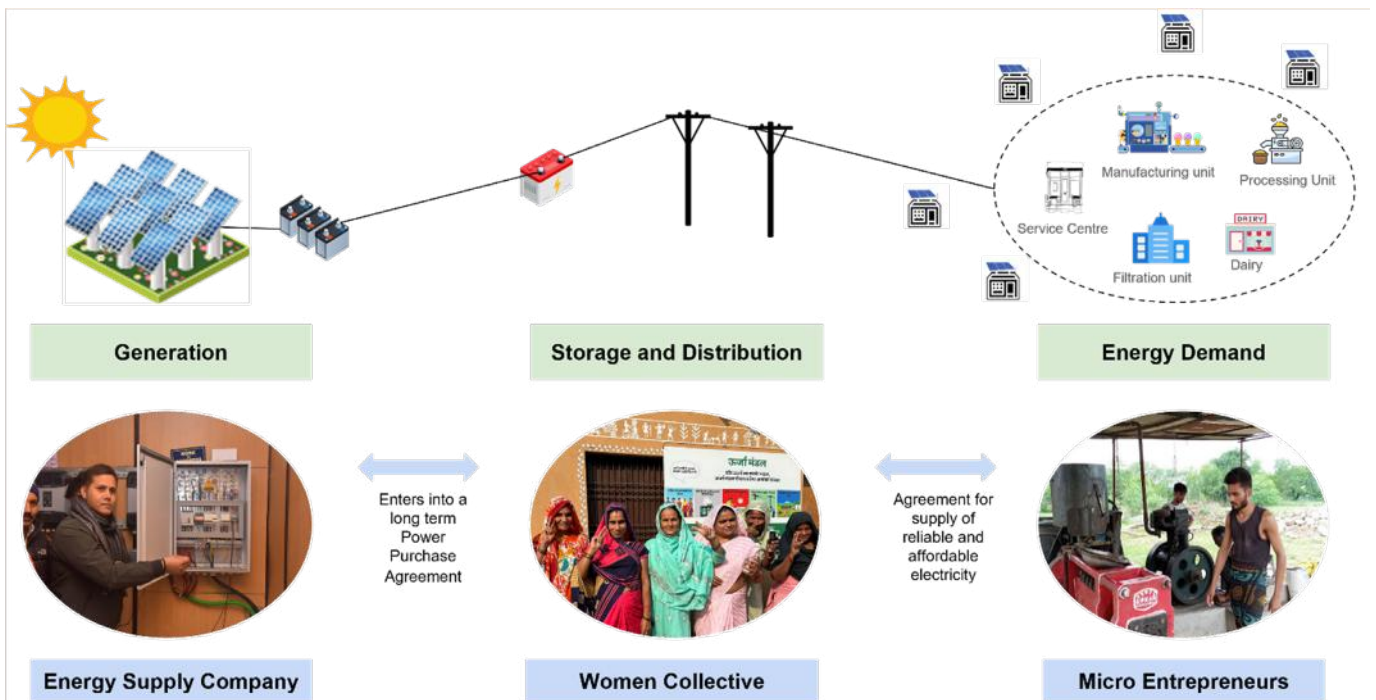


Figure 1: Urja Mandala model depicting the role and relationship of renewable energy supply company, women collective and micro-entrepreneurs

in the Bahraich and Mirzapur districts of Uttar Pradesh, powered by a 60 kWp and a 30 kWp solar mini-grids, respectively. These micro utility businesses are owned, operated and managed by Virangna Urja Mandala Mahila Samiti (Bahraich) and Nav Chetna Urja Mandala Mahila Samiti (Mirzapur), thereby increasing the agency of women in decision-making and local economic growth.

One of the most significant achievements of the Urja Mandala lies in its impact on local businesses. The initiative has enabled over 30 micro-enterprises to transition away from costly and environmentally harmful diesel generators to affordable and dependable solar electricity. This transition has not only enhanced productivity but also cut down energy expenditures by up to 60%, relieving a significant financial burden on these enterprises.

The Urja Mandala helps mitigate approximately 105 tonnes of carbon emissions annually, contributing to addressing the impacts of climate change at the local level. This reduction in carbon footprint emphasises the potential of decentralised renewable energy solutions in addressing national and global environmental challenges.

In addition to its economic and environmental impact, the initiative has profoundly impacted local communities, particularly the members of the Urja Mandala Mahila Samitis, who now proudly identify themselves as the owners and managers of a rural micro-energy utility – a sector that is overwhelmingly male-dominated. The income of the Urja Mandala Mahila Samiti members has surged by an impressive 70%, while over 600 individuals (shareholders) from the women's institutions directly benefit from the energy transition. The initiative showcases the

potential for inclusive economic growth and women empowerment through renewable energy initiatives.

The Development Alternatives Group has demonstrated a women-led Urja Mandala model for a just and inclusive energy transition and showcased the effectiveness of public-private-community partnerships in co-providing social, economic and environmental benefits to the larger community. In India's transformational journey, these women collectives can play a leading role in bringing about an intergenerational change, ensuring livelihood security and significantly contributing to achieving the government's target of 500 GW of non-fossil power capacity by 2030 [3], and becoming a carbon-neutral (net-zero) economy by 2070.



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Empowering CLFs as Local Change Agents for Women-led Entrepreneurship

The evidence from development initiatives in rural India points to the transformative potential of women's solidarity in empowering communities across socio-economic fronts. Their collective strength not only enhances their ability to challenge existing power structures and status quo but also creates a supportive environment where they can share resources, knowledge, and experiences. This environment enables them to navigate challenges and pursue opportunities that might otherwise be inaccessible to them.

A pioneering example of how solidarity has translated into collective action and transformation has been the network of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Cluster Level Federations (CLFs) in India. As many as 89 million Indian women are members in 8.3 million SHGs [1] across 783,389 Indian villages. SHG is an informal group of 10–20 members of similar socio-economic background that come together for a common objective, holding regular meetings to engage in savings and credit activities to improve livelihoods. A CLF usually covers 25-30 villages and has membership of around 4,000 to 6,000 women with resources of INR 2-5 million. It mobilises share capital and savings from the SHGs (called “owner’s investment/equity”) on which it pays annual interest. It also holds capital grants from the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) in the form of Community Investment Fund – Seed Capital (CIF), Vulnerability Reduction Fund (VRF) and Livelihood Fund (LF) and may further receive additional revolving funds under specific government programmes. The CLF uses this money for lending to its members and may decide to fund them for specific purposes. From within these community institutions, a selected women members are trained to form Community Resource Persons (CRPs) then provide capacity building and technical support to the SHGs and CLFs against payment. Some SHG members are also deployed as Business Correspondents / BC Sakis to provide last mile delivery of financial services within and outside the CLF system.

Despite SHGs and CLFs presenting an unparalleled opportunity to shape the empowerment landscape for women and local communities, their role has been restricted to inter-lending, with 48% of it being used for consumption activities. Deep listening with women has shown that the key to real transformation of these collectives and through them, of the community, lies in creating systemic shifts that enable them to become ‘agents of change’ and unlock choice-based



Listening session conducted with CLF members in Bhadohi, Eastern UP

entrepreneurship. [2] Placing the ownership of empowerment solutions in the hands of such women’s institutions is pivotal in realising their full potential.

Under its mission of creating 100,000 women enterprises and 1 million jobs by 2027, Development Alternatives has adopted this approach and will be working with the CLFs supported by the State Rural Livelihood Mission (SRLM) in States including Uttar Pradesh. Through exposing them to social innovation tools and processes and setting in place mechanisms like District Entrepreneurship Coalition, Finance Coordination Committees and Block Entrepreneurship Facilitation Hub, the mission aims at empowering CLFs to become enterprise creating engines in the State. Knowledge and learning from this, over a period of time, may feed into cluster promotion policies at State and national levels. □

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Redefining Women's Identity and Unleashing Aspirations through Deep Listening



Listening session conducted with CLF members in Bhadohi, Eastern UP

In Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bundelkhand, Development Alternatives has been engaging in a series of dialogues and conversations with rural communities and stakeholders to uncover narratives from different segments of the rural population. By listening to the narratives of the local population, including the voices of men, women and youth, we are creating forums that recognise and amplify their voices. The deep listening approach has proven to be instrumental in understanding the

perspectives and stories of individuals within their local context.

A continuous and comprehensive process was initiated to engage in deep listening activities with the purpose of discovering individual perspectives and establishing a shared understanding of the local dynamics. Various tools and methods, such as comic workshops, community canvases, focus group discussions and 'a day in the life of' exercises were utilised to facilitate deep listening with

the communities, allowing them to tap into their personal and entrepreneurial abilities. The primary objective of these listening sessions was to gain insights into the overall ecosystem in terms of aspirations, challenges, barriers to entrepreneurship and the prevailing belief systems within the community.

During a listening session with one of the cluster-level federations (CLFs), a community member in Bhadohi made a powerful statement about identity, saying, '*Apni pehchan sirf ek chiz nahi hain*', or 'Identity is not just a thing'. This statement emphasises the idea that one's identity is something to be earned and cherished. While the concept of identity can be interpreted in numerous ways, the most striking insight from the session was the emphasis on how women deserved to be recognised for their own achievements and identities rather than solely being known as someone's wife, mother or daughter-in-law. One woman in particular shared her remarkable journey during the conversation. She spoke about setting up a successful enterprise, creating jobs for women in her community, founding a self-help group (SHG) to support other women and becoming the primary earning member of her family. Her efforts have ensured that none of her children drop out of school. Her journey is a powerful illustration of the profound power of self-made identity and the impact of women's empowerment.

Alongside their personal aspirations, women also expressed keen interest in pursuing entrepreneurial aspirations, in terms of setting up their own enterprises or contributing to the workforce economy. The majority of the women were already engaged in some form of economic activity, with a significant number of them running their own enterprises. Their business ranged from flour mills, poultry farms, department stores and clothing stores to cycle shops, dairies, fertilizer shops and utensil stores. It was evident that the women were eager to not only expand but also scale these businesses, showing a strong preference for entrepreneurship. Moreover, it was encouraging to see that both women and youth were enthusiastic about acquiring new skills, demonstrating a strong desire for continuous learning and skill enhancement.



Young members of CLF taking part in a Comic Workshop in Bhadohi

They also expressed a willingness to gain financial digital literacy, highlighting the importance of mastering online platforms like PhonePe and Google Pay for small transactions. This eagerness to adapt to digital financial tools signifies their commitment to achieving economic independence.

The significance of utilising these tools to provide a platform for communities to voice their thoughts underscores the importance of listening as a crucial step in designing solutions with communities. As a strategic step towards fostering innovation and promoting social inclusion, our aim is to conduct large-scale listening exercises involving 84,000 members from 350 CLFs. The overarching goal is to promote entrepreneurship, eventually establishing 100,000 women-led enterprises for 60,000 women. And while so much remains to be done, women and their institutions can act as 'agents of change' to unlock entrepreneurship and boost the local economy through the ownership of empowerment and entrepreneurship solutions. □

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Empowering Change: The Journey of Sunita Sahu



Sunita Sahu in her flour mill

In the village of Simrawari in Jhansi lives Sunita Sahu, an inspiring example of woman empowerment. As an entrepreneur, she has established her own business to support her family financially. With six members, including her husband, sons and daughters, Sunita's venture has become essential for their livelihood. Originally, her husband was the only source of income for the family as a daily wage labourer.

As her children grew older, so did her household obligations and expenses. To support her family, she decided to take

'I believe in taking care of my family and confronting life's challenges head-on.'

Sunita Sahu

over some of the financial responsibilities by offering tuition classes for the village children. However, she aspired to make a more significant contribution and started a sewing training centre for youth and women in her village, aiming to inspire and equip others like her.

During the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic, she faced the impact

of reduced household income and disruptions to her work. In response to these new realities, she sought support and guidance from the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) group. This encounter marked a pivotal moment in her professional journey. It was through NRLM that she learned that she could secure a loan and use it to launch her own business, with the intention of repaying the loan from the business's profits.

Despite facing many challenges, she managed to secure a loan of Rs 50,000 to buy machinery and raw materials and started a masala and atta chakki unit. This change allowed her to focus on earning money to support her family during tough times. As her business grew, she encountered obstacles such as competing with lower flour prices and navigating market fluctuations. However, her determination and business skills kept her moving forward. Connecting with representatives from Development Alternatives helped her address her challenges. She was introduced to new opportunities, including sustainable energy solutions like solar power, to run her business, eventually leading to a profit of Rs 20,000 per month.

After thoughtful consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of setting up solar power, she made the decision to install a 6 kW solar rooftop setup for her atta chakki. This initiative is a testament to her dedication to enhancing her business's income by harnessing solar energy to improve her units operational efficiency and extend working hours. With the installation, she anticipates cost savings, a reduced environmental footprint and increased reliability in comparison to the unreliable grid supply. Her commitment to her community extends beyond her

business, as she also leverages her masala unit to cater to local culinary needs and creates employment opportunities for four other women, thereby supporting local entrepreneurs.

'Equality4Progress' is a project of Development Alternatives, in collaboration with the Bank of America National Association. The project aims to empower women in rural India who face socio-economic disempowerment and have limited access to resources and livelihood opportunities. The initiative, based on a social innovation approach, aims to leverage women-led federations and empower them by co-creating a solidarity-based platform. It seeks to enhance women's participation in local decision-making processes as well as promote entrepreneurship for green and inclusive development.

With pride, she exclaimed, 'I believe in taking care of my family and confronting life's challenges head-on. Since starting my business, I've become more aware of the social environment around me. My goal is to continue growing my business and expanding it further someday. It truly feels good to do something entirely on my own for the betterment of my family.'

Sunita Sahu's journey is a testament to the potential of entrepreneurship. Through determination and hard work, she transformed her life and became a catalyst for change in her community. She encourages aspiring entrepreneurs, showing them that with perseverance, vision and hard work, anything is possible. □

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Home Decor Products: Carriers of the Ethnic Essence!



Bamboo Craft Cluster Gujarat

The bamboo handicraft products has been instrumental with the cultural development among the Kotwalia community of the Tapi district in Gujarat. The speciality of these clusters include various bamboo handicrafts, baskets, furniture, housing and many domestic and utility products crafted by 500 artisans in the southern region of the state.

Mat and Babui Grass Cluster West Bengal

Engaging 500 artisans in the Pashchim Medinipur district of West Bengal, this cluster produces various eco-friendly, biodegradable, fair trade utility items and fashion accessories like table mats, bags, boxes using naturally grown Madhurkathi grass that is used for weaving traditional mats.



Rope Weaving Cluster Uttar Pradesh

With the involvement of 311 artisans, the major focus is to revive the charpoy weaving skills by generating employment for artisans based in the Muzaffarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh. Products include Macrame bags, charpoy bags, charpoy stool, tables, chairs using textile waste and jute rope, which are uniquely sustainable with a prime focus on promoting conscious production and consumption patterns.

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