

The power of the marginal: Institutions and technology as the game changers¹

Dhananjay Ray², Subrata Majumdar³,

Mitali Ghosh⁴, Rajeshwar Mishra⁵

Revisiting the power of the Marginal

In an earlier formulation (Mishra, Sugden and Schmidt; 2017) underlined three important defining elements – institutions, technology and innovation - to add to the power of the marginal communities. Reading through the formulation one can easily pick up the strands of their empowerment. The institutions help them focus and direct their collective goal and channel action for accessing various opportunities and endowments in their favour. Technology helps them build through the opportunity and endowments - physical, natural, human etc. If the two work well with promising result there is a further move toward exploration and innovation which can bring new insights, opportunities and possibilities. The above formulation syncs well with the goals of the DSI4MTF and SIAGI - the two sister research initiatives sponsored by ACIAR. DSI4MTF endeavour to examine the potentials for empowerment of the small, marginal and tenant farmers, engineered through institution building and collectivisation, on the one hand and technological support on the other. SIAGI, building through the above, looks for inclusivity of agriculture intensification as result of the interventions of the sister initiative. CDHI, building through embedding in its community and community engagement approach interfaces with the farmers and the projects and has the responsibility to facilitate and advance the empowerment by evolving strategies for institution building/strengthening and building enabling space for innovation. Another partner, Uttar Banga Krishi Viswavidyalaya (UBKV) offers inputs on technology and bio-physical aspects of the research.

¹ This is an addendum to an earlier formulation note by Rajeshwar Mishra, Fraser Sugden and Erik Schmidt, January, 2017 based on insights from the farmers (male and female) from the two DSI4MTF and SIAGI (ACIAR) villages of Dhoulaguri and Uttar Cahkuakheti during a two day capacity strengthening reflective workshop facilitated by Rajeshwar Mishra, Mitali Ghosh, Dhanajay Roy and Subrata Majumdar. The report has been prepared by Dhanajay Roy and Subrata Mjumadar with special inputs by Mitali Ghosh.

² Chief Executive of CDHI and Program Executive

³ Program Executive CDHI and technology interface

⁴ President Uttar Banga Terai Mahila Samittee (UBTMS), Gender specialist and Program Executive CDHI

⁵ Visiting Director, CDHI



Following ethical community engagement approach the project acknowledges and respects the the famers wisdom and strength as a core value. Farmers are equal research partners rather than information providers or beneficiaries or recipients of the perceived benefits. Over the period, the project is functional, there has been emphasis on understanding and analyzing the institutional land escape and dynamics and, based on the understanding, working together to reorient the institutions, build their capacities and try collective endeavours in agriculture and water management. Institutional functioning have been closely monitored and results reflected through to see what possibly could be done to build on the learning. The above formulation has evolved (Mishra, Sugden and Schimdt, 2017) has partly as result of the analysis of institutional trajectory.

Reflection on the trajectory analysis - so far

A preferred strategy in trajectory analysis has been encouraging greater participation of the farmers – male and females. The last qaurterly reflection (February, 25-26, 2017) was attended by, besides the farmers and CDHI/UBKV /DSI4MTF team, Erick Schmidt⁶, Ram Baskoti⁷ and Manita Raut⁸. The reflection analysed the evolving SWOT- strength, weakness, opportunity and threat - and priority ahead. Strengthening of the institutions was considered as number one priority.

The two villages of Uttar Chakuakheti and Dhoulaguri have – (1) farmers clubs, (2) self-help groups and (3) producers groups. The institutional needs varied– getting them formerly registered (farmers club in UC and producers group in Dhoulaguri), capacity building of SHGs and planning

⁶ Deputy Director, University of South Queensland, Australia

⁷ Institutional and policy specialist, IWMI, Nepal

⁸ Field Coordinator, DSI4MTF, IWMI, Nepal

and project formulation in particular, common for both the two villages. The farmers in both the villages felt that strengthening of the institutions was essential and agreed to attend two days reflection and training workshop in Jalpaiguri (CDHI). The idea was to go for intensive work, during the workshop, to have concrete outcome.

A necessary condition for the workshop was sharing of the expenses - while farmers would meet their travel expenses CDHI would offer boarding and lodging facilities besides professional support in facilitating the workshop. The community from the two villages nominated their representatives to attend the workshop.

The reflective training workshop - 20-21, February, 2017.

The basic goal of the workshop was to attempt a reflective analysis focused on the capacity, identifying gaps and *making plans for the future*. Again the basic approach was self-evolving and participatory based on the ethos and pedagogy of ethical community engagement. Encouraging and supporting each other to *'participate and contribute'* was agreed upon to be the guiding principle.



Followings steps were taken:

Priority/goals setting: In order to create ownership and involvement the goals/priority for the workshop were set by the participants. They were also ranked. The priorities are given as in the table below:

Priority for the workshop

Sl	Priority	Priorities/ ranking
1.	Farmers club / producer organisation	2
2.	Maintenance of book keeping / recording	1
3.	Maintenance of pumps, solar irrigation and protected structure	4
4.	Agriculture planning (crop plan, insurance, scheme - KCC etc)	5
5.	Schemes for schedule caste and tribe people	7

6.	Health: drinking water	6
7.	Bio-modelling	8
8.	Project proposal development	3

Setting the priority turned out to be an exciting exercise which provoked serious reflection taking the participants across the wide spectrum of their work so far and their own evaluation of the extent to which some of the activities have functioned. This also helped in keeping the flow of the workshop going steady.

As is evident from the above, the participants consider institutional aspects – (Book keeping and recording, farmers club and producers groups) as important. Interestingly, the concern is now on taking the institutional goal forward from the current dependance on the project. They would like to have the skills to develop project proposals which they could submit to different agencies – government/non government agencies. The priority (1-3) are focused around institutional matters. Close on these, there is concern for the maintenance of the technologies which are helping them. Crop plan, insurance credit access are all integrated to see agriculture as an integrated endeavour. Others (5-7) appear peripheral. It seems that sense of identity is evolving reflected through development of institutions and maintenance of technology which they perceive as contributing to their livelihoods. There is appreciation of the need for accessing entitlements which perhaps has been triggered by the recent issuance of caste certificate.

The workshop proceedings

Appreciating their priority the workshop moved focusing on the same order as that of the priorities as spelled out . The pedagogy and process remained participatory and interactive. It all began with a discussion on the maintenance of records and accounts for the various institutions like *farmers clubs, producers groups and self-help groups*.

The session began with a discussion over rationale and the need for documentation. This was found to elicit creative response. The response is summarised as follows:

- To show the officials (Birsha Oran)
- ***Important evidence to show group based activities (Dukha Oran)***
- To see the group performance and group dynamics (AsitKindo)
- To do cost-benefit analysis (Subhas Oran)
- ***To maintain the transparency, especially inter-loaning (Noni Bala Roy)***
- Evidence of what group is doing (Tapan Chick Baraik)
- To avoid conflict among the group members (JharnaKarjee)
- Follow up of actions (Joy)
- Self-analysis and self-confidence (Subrata)

The responses are interesting, common thread being emphasis over transparency and openness essential for collective endeavours and accessing benefits under government schemes and programs. An important confirmation is power and potential of the marginal given a right enabling environment and supportive facilitation. Reference can be made to the two persons - (**Dukha Oraon-UC**) and (**Noni Bala Roy-Dhoulaguri**) the only two apparently illiterate persons. One can see their responses are not only valid and important they touch the most important aspects of transparency supported by evidence. Presently no generalisation can be made but their responses – representing deep concerns - are pointer to confirming our assumption of power of the marginal.

Impromptu work on recording of records: Having seen their ingenuity, the next exercise was to let them have a group exercise – an impromptu meeting - conduct the same, document the process and outcome and also identify follow-up. Groups were mixed comprising of members from the two villages involved in the group work. The sense of solidarity was so much visible – they did not consider themselves as belonging to a specific **X or Y village**. They considered themselves as members of the two groups with common goal of transacting effective meeting and documenting the minutes.

The procedure of book keeping of women SHG under SRLM (State Rural Livelihood Mission) implemented by DRDC (District Rural Development Cell, Govt. of West Bengal) was discussed in detail by Mitali Ghosh who is associated with local level institution building for last 19 years and presently also working as SRP (State Resource Person, SRLM). During the discussion, two members from SRLM also participated and shared their record keeping process. This encouraged farmers greatly.



Following were planned

Actions

- Need to follow “ Pancho Sutra” (Five formula) to maintain and capture day by day activities and outcome of collective farming groups (CFGs), farmers club and women SHGs.

- The institutions in both project village will be strictly maintaining five (5) record books – resolution register (institution), savings book (individual and institution), loan book(individual member), cash book (cost-benefit analysis) and hand book (individual member).
- The project will be providing the five numbers of record books to all CFGs in Dhaloguri and UC by 10th April 2017.

The two groups presented a picture of intense interaction touching upon various important facets of their respective institutions. Again the power of the marginal was vindicated in a logical documentation with each member contributing to the quality of interaction and documentation there of. Be it, Dukha or Noni and Subhas or Mrinal they all gelled so very well. The most important aspect was encouragement by a seemingly better endowed person to the seemingly less endowed person. The intellectual divides were almost missing with each other cutting jokes, making and appreciating anecdotes and slangs - real fusion.

Institutional analysis: As part of priority two, building and strengthening institutions - farmers club/producers groups/self help groups, the participants from the two villages set of goals for the discussion – what was to be done to strengthen/develop institutions. The facilitator encouraged them to reflect upon what needs to be done during the workshop. The response from the two villages was interesting:

1. Assess and analyse the current situation of their respective institutions
2. Analysis to be made in the context of their strengths, weakness, opportunity and threat
3. Strategy for strengthening them

Farmers Club

NABARD (National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development) recognises farmers club as PO (Producer Organisation). To access the facilities and project (both on-farm and off-farm) from NABARD, the farmers club needs to get registration under the government. The farmers club at Dhaloguri already had received the registration and now illegible to submit the need based project proposals to NABARD and other agencies. The farmers clubs in both villages are supporting the collective groups and women SHGs. In fact all farmers (n=69) of collective groups along with selected women of SHGs are also active members of farmers club. This emerged through discussion that there are no major conflicts among the local level institutions due to strong social bonding.

The analysis by the farmers of their institutions suggests the following:

1. Delay in registration – Dhaloguri already registered but UC is in the process
2. Capacity building to manage their institutions and programs

3. Missing support/uncertainty/irregularity of support from the agriculture/agronomic professionals
4. Missing enthusiasm among the farmers which can be jacked-up with adequate/appropriate support
5. Lack of clarity about future vision and programs

Follow-ups

Following were planned:

Actions:

- Registration process of UC farmers club / producer organisation under West Bengal Co-operative Act to be facilitated by CDHI and UC producer organisation to be registered within June 2017.
- Regular activities related to capacity building of the famers in the areas of crop planning, agronomy and allied subjects. CDHI to coordinate.
- CDHI will be organising training for farmers club to build their capacity in preparing project proposal and linkage building.

Writing proposals

Since the farmers' club has come into being the farmers have started aspiring for accessing various opportunities available with and under the government sponsored programs. Accessing such opportunities would call for preparing concept notes and proposals. Interestingly, there has been demand from the farmers to help them develop such skills.

The session had discussion around questions such as:

- What is a project?
- Why we need proposals?
- Why preparation of proposal is necessary? and
- What are the elements and aspects of proposal writing?

The discussion broadly based understanding on project proposals. Following process evolved:

- Thinking (Explore the thought process to get answer of many questions)
- Objectives (Both short term and long term)
- Rationale (why)
- What is needed (Capital, raw materials, man power etc)
- What needs of the farmers it addresses
- Inputs (Supply of all to run the project)

- Market (Sales and promotion)
- Cost-benefit analysis (Income-expenditure and profit –loss)
- Time frame
- Monitoring
- Expected impact outcome

Hands on project proposal

To let the participants have hands on trials they divided themselves into two groups – representing the two villages. They had intense discussion on the priority themes and prepared and shared their respective draft proposals. An important aspect of the exercise was their confidence – **they focused on priorities and enjoyed project preparation.** For now this was a great positive shift.

Following were planned:

Actions:

- Farmers club in both villages to implement the projects on agriculture based on their own skills and abilities. The others institutions (SHGs and CFGs) will also be participating in those project to support to enhance their livelihood income.
- SHGs already have a large spectrum of activities under the SRLM. Projects can be prepared and implemented with the funding already available.
- UC and Dhaloguri farmers have prepared two projects in following above process. Dhaloguri is planning to do stock business on paddy and mustard so that all farmers in Dhaloguri and surrounding villages can get better market price. UC has planned to set up “ Brittle Nuts Process Unit”. The farmers are already having good numbers of brittle nuts tree as well they will encourage farmers to grow it at large scale.

Management of technology and technological innovation

Technology is an important component for the power of the marginal. The irrigation technologies are used to ensure availability of irrigation even during the dry season. Agricultural technologies are supposed to help innovation in agriculture intensification. Under DSI4MTF tube wells, sprinklers and solar power have been used. Protected agriculture is another alternative being tried. For these technologies to be sustainable in their use, farmers must take onus of their operation and maintenance. It was realised that the farmers need to have skill to use them and management acumen to ensure sustainable use even after the project is completed. Field level training, demonstration and hand holding have been regular features. This is time for the farmers to acquire complete ownership.

A session was devoted to sensitize the farmers to evolve and work out operational framework and strategies to maintain them and develop structure and norms for cost recovery etc. The farmers, during the session, realised that this is their responsibility to take good care of the various technological interventions and develop maintenance protocol to ensure sustainability. Various training needs were identified and milestones developed for the same.

Accessing institutional benefits and opportunities

The state and central governments have various measures to help the marginal communities empower themselves. Knowledge about the program components, processes and eligibility are necessary. This need was spelled out by the farmers. A training has been planned to impart awareness and procedural mechanisms on the above.

Bio-economic modelling

An interesting component in the training was discussion over choice of crops, analysis of profit and loss under various scenario. So far we considered this as highly technical and beyond the comprehension of the common people. An intense engagement took place with this topic for discussion. The farmers were not only able to understand the concept and its necessity but also offered critical inputs. Dukha Oraon, Nonibala Roy and Jharna Karji were as reflective and insightful as anybody could be. This proved that the marginal have the potential to understand and analyse even the most complex modelling exercises.

Planning for the next crop season

The farmers from both the villages have found the rabi season as important opportunity to experiment with technologies and agriculture practices. They did not want to lose the momentum and accordingly wanted to have the authentic inputs from the experts. Both the field coordinator from IWMI and UBKV agreed to take the discussion further and organise a planning exercise with the help of the agriculture scientists from UBKV.

The voices from the ground that confirm an important formulation

The two days of interactive session marked by reflection and intense engagement demystified several things. The participants:

- Considered this opportunity as critical to trigger reflection
- Found the engagement conducive to allow innovative insights
- Considered this as an opportunity to develop their capacity and
- Found this as an opportunity to initiate actions

Foremost, the farmers showed that encouragement and reflective engagement could encourage innovation and insights even from among the marginal communities. This confirms our (Mishra, Sugden and Schmidt, 2017) earlier formulation on the power of the marginal. This also has support

from the two contemporary stalwarts from Bangladesh (Mohammad Yunus and Rehman Sobhan, 2012) who believe that ‘... *poor people themselves can dramatically change their own lives for better if institutional opportunities are created to do so...*’(2012).

Post script: The follow-up training on crop planning

Encouraged by performance of their rabi cultivation a noticeable buoyancy in the moods of the farmers, from the two villages, can be seen. Their aspirations seem to be soaring. The two villages have started moving toward getting their clubs formally registered and internal governance improved. Their priorities are getting clearer. Against this background they attended the Jalpaiguri training and demonstrated their focus and creativity. A decision was taken to immediately start planning for the pre-khariff. A training for planning was planned under the aegis of UBKV. This could not materialise because of pressing engagement of the UBKV faculty in the year end administrative activities. But the farmers also needed urgent planning to catch up with the season. A way out was found and government officials contacted to support such a planning training. Happily they agreed to use their weekends and prepare and organise the training in the two villages.

Salients of the training: The training, supported by the Government department of agriculture, was need based and participatory jointly facilitated by the officers and CDHI team. The combination proved effective in:

1. Assessing the need
2. Evolving priorities
3. Finalising crop choices
4. Package of practices
5. Follow-up and
6. Regular hand holding

Considering the appropriateness of time two crops – **Sesame and jute**. Sesame, according to them, has ready market and does not attract wild animals, importantly, elephant. An important aspect of the training was engagement by the facilitators on feasibility and cost benefit analysis.

The training organised, quick on the heels of the Jalpaiguri visit, was appreciated by the farmers who appreciated the training right in their respective villages and on time. The long term view of agriculture as explained by the trainers was also appreciated. Regular monitoring is planned.

Implications for DSI4MTF and SIAGI

The marginals gradually gaining substantial ground points to the direction of empowerment and inclusion of the marginal communities. The situation is a positive pointer to the hypotheses of DSI4MTF suggesting that technology and institutions (collectivisation) could lead to the small and marginal farmers getting the benefits of dry season agriculture. Based on the inputs from its sister

project – (DSI4MTF); SIAGI can clearly see the potential for inclusive agriculture intensification. This could further lead to empowering the marginals, creating enviable space for themselves for equity. Innovation and value chain can add further to this. However, certain conditions are to be made:

1. Technology, historically, is considered as superior and most important requiring higher order learning. Its formulations and theories are considered as domain of a specific class of people with certain level of academic standing . The common people more so than the marginal communities may be advised/discouraged not to venture into this. This assumption is erroneous and needs attention. For the technology to be of optimum human use it needs to develop a freindly and inclusive interface with the community. The marginal farmers in the project areas have shown and proved that they could easily handle technologies and analyse and interpret the human – technology interaction, dynamics and processes. It is heartening that some of the technology experts and scientists have offered opportunities and allowed space to the community. This has resulted in good outcomes. This re-orientation must cut across all disciplines and professionals.
2. To be able to have the optimum benefits of technology encouragement for collectivisation and institutional development for the marginal communities must precede any initiative. Collectivisation and institutional development builds confidence and fosters risk taking behavior - a precondition for innovation and entrepreneurship development. An enabling space should be created where common people could feel inclined to take actions. ***The technology and institutions are not either or propositions - they must co-exist and work in tandem.***
3. Community, which has been a hesitant and subdued voice in research initiatives, must be encouraged and supported to enjoy a position of partnership and mutual collateral with the research community. They have unique wisdom and insights on the subjects – their vocabulary and grammar may be different. An empathetic engagement can encourage them to open up opportunity and bring out their wisdom to the fullest play. The engagement must continue.
4. On specific themes the training to the community must be need based, participatory with space for appreciative enquiry. The pace and frequency of such training needs to be logically spaced and linked to in a way that a particular training event must follow from the previous one and must offer insights for future. This logical link and consistency helps build insightful knowledge and wisdom blocks and may invariably lead to innovation. ***Sporadic, whimsical and directive trainings are counter-productive and contrary to the tenets os participation and ethical engagement.***
5. In research projects field insights in the form of data are often collected. The data collection may be in the form of quantitative observations, case studies, anecdotes etc. The researcher - often a specialist and scientist (Principal Investigator) decides and often dominate the data collection protocol, storage, analysis and reporting. The stakeholders

are often ignored after the data has been collected. The data, where it is regularly collected, must be shared with the stakeholders periodically before it is analysed and conclusions made.

In DSI4MTF series of data touching upon bio-physical, agronomy and cropping behaviour, social processes and dynamics are being collected. How the data is collected, how it is used and even the raw nature of the data needs to be regularly shared and discussed among the research partners and stakeholders – most important being the marginal farmers. Besides adding to the validity the farmers can squarely benefit from the reflection around the data.

The data collection professionals may be vulnerable in not appreciating the given bio-physical and agronomic realities because of their limited understanding of the context and subject. They may not be able to have a nuanced understanding a social scenario. Just picking up an isolated social episode may lead to inadequate standing and misinterpretation. A continuous sharing of data may be beneficial to the communities and even more beneficial to the community of researchers.

The research outcome can be explained in terms of the extent to which they have passed the scrutiny and validation by the community interatively. Ignoring this, would necessarily, lead to erroneous analysis and false generalisation. Policy recommendations may not really work well and up-scaling based on the same would face the test realism.

Reconfirming the power of the Marginal

The event (training workshop at Jalpaiguri), discussed above, may appear to be short and inconsequential. Our understanding of the event, marked by strong participation encouraged under empathetic engagement, suggests that such events (micro) trigger important insights and set convincing milestones. Most important. these events and processes keep the interest and enthusiasm of the participants (in this case community) engaged and evolving leading to innovative initiatives. It is such events which help build on the growing power of the marginal.

There is a lesson to be learnt. Organising such events should not be considered as trivial and sloppy to be performed by the field level practitioners. They are inevitably important. The micro-events offer convincing informal space for the marginal to feel free and shun hesitation. This opens stream of creative surge that the marginal communities, otherwise, do not get in a formal class room situation. The scientific community must recongise this as a pre-requisite for creative learning process and outcome. The science and society must learn to benefit from each other rather than defining a one way rule of the game.



Myths and realities

Ironically, there are stereotypes explaining the small and marginal communities. These stereotypes, often undermine the potentials and power of the poor. All efforts at their empowerment are summed up – ‘they are made like this - these limitations are inherent in their lineage, upbringing and personality make up’! The potentials are not well appreciated to offer them credit for what possibly signifies their power. Without understanding this dynamics the power of the marginal cannot justifiably be explained. Let us underline some of the critical stereotypes - myths and realities.

Myths and realities related to the marginal

Myths	Realities
1. They are born with limitations	The limitations are socially constructed – they have all the potentials to excel and prosper.
2. They are illiterate and lack creativity	They may be illiterate but their creativity needs to be properly understood and appreciated. They possess extraordinary level of creativity.
3. They are slow learners and therefore they benefit less with training	Their hesitation and silence is an outcome of the long years of exploitation and deprivation of opportunities and marginalisation. Dealing with such marginalisation is important before calling them slow learners.
4. They are risk adverse	Missing access to resources and opportunities has kept them hesitant and subdued. The existing power dynamics keeps them over cautious. Encouraging environment and policy support can change the scenario.
5. They are too poor to invest on knowledge, technology and other services	They are quite apt in judging the quality of service and inputs they pay for. Once they make judgement they mobilise resources for

	investment on appropriate services and technology. Farmers from the two villages attend the training spending money from their own. They promised doing same in future too.
6. They are late adopters	They are careful adoptors and weigh the intentions of the scientists and extension persons. There is missing trust in them. They have no much true success to show and convince - manipulations and camouflaging has restricted their decision for adoptions.
7. There is lack of social coherence and cooperation for collective action among the marginal	This has been an outcome of the divisive dynamics of the state and there is no conscious effort at mitigating this. The state writes the scripts for institutional governance and functioning. Inherent in this situation is tacit support for maintaining the status quo. Profuse failure of cooperative movement in India is an example. The state controls these people institutions.

Ensuring power to the marginal would call for serious rethinking over the above myths and realities. Wherever such myths have been well understood and appropriate initiative on empowerment taken, the marginal have shown their clout. Their innovations have transcended beyond technology and institutions. DSI4MTF and SIAGI have the opportunity to proactively deal with these and catalyze level playing opportunity for them. Power of the marginal may rewrite a new saga of equity and inclusion.

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