SoochnaPreneurs in Rural Development

The Outcomes of 'Saksham' Program in Tea Gardens of North Bengal

DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT *foundation*



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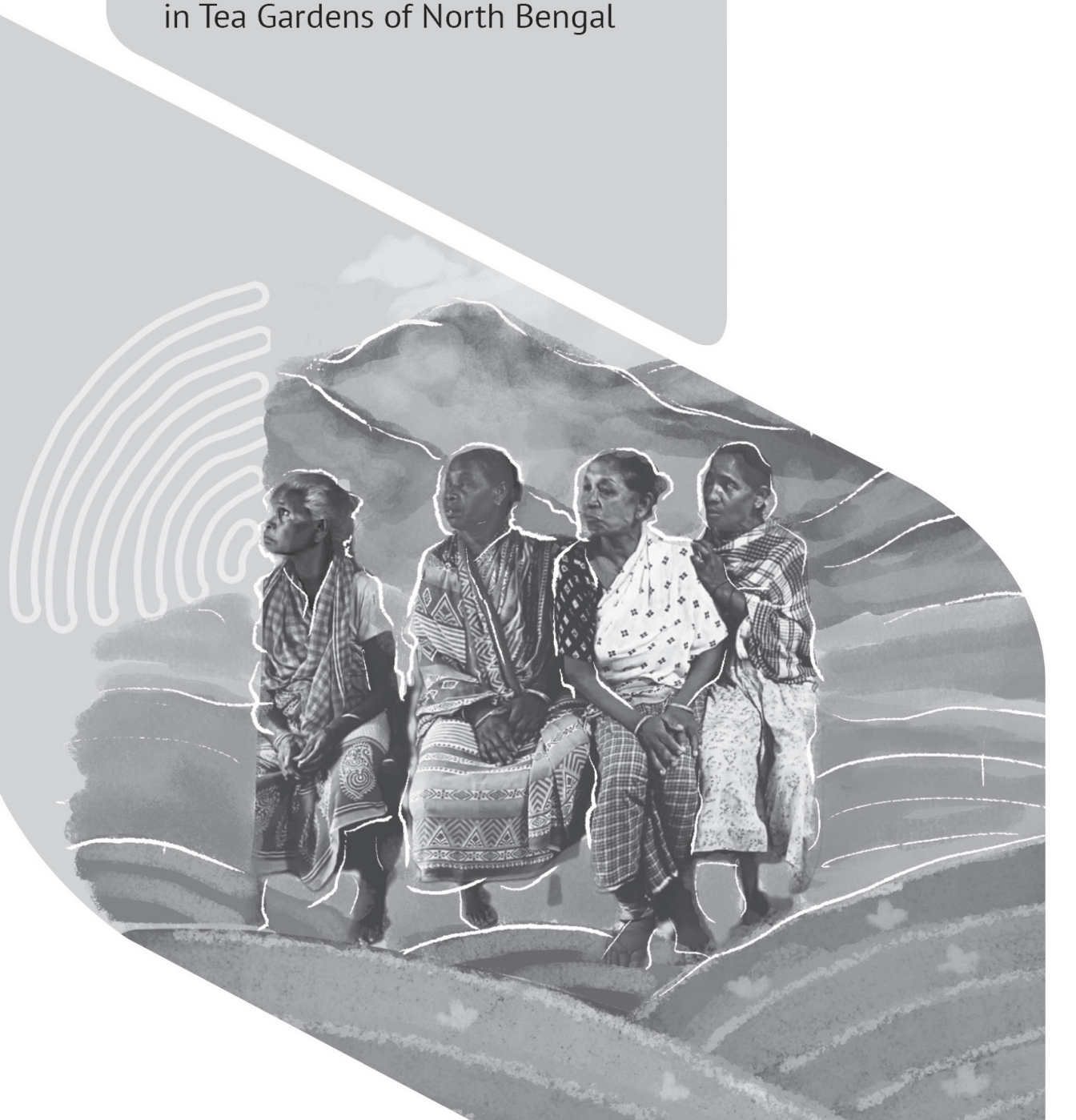

"SoochnaPreneurs in Rural Development: The Outcomes of 'Saksham' Program in Tea Gardens of North Bengal"

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List of Abbreviations

ASHA	:	Accredited Social Health Activist
CSC	:	Common Service Centres
DEF	:	Digital Empowerment Foundation
ICDS	:	Integrated Child Development Scheme
NFHS	:	National Family Health Survey
PRI	:	Panchayati Raj Institutions
SAKSHAM	:	Strengthening access to Social Security and Protection in tea gardens of West Bengal
WB	:	West Bengal

Abstract

Tea gardens in West Bengal (WB) have historically been subject to various forms of oversight and governance, ranging from colonial management boards to post-colonial political unions, government bodies, and development organizations. Despite these interventions, tea garden workers still face numerous socio-economic challenges, including low wages, gender discrimination, inadequate working and living conditions, and limited opportunities for socio-economic advancement. These challenges are further compounded by restricted access to accurate information, digital platforms, and state welfare schemes. To address some of these issues, the Digital Empowerment Foundation (in collaboration with Swaniti Initiatives) launched the Saksham Project (Strengthening Access to Social Security) for tea garden workers in North Bengal covering four districts of WB: Alipurduar, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, and Darjeeling. The project is based on DEF's 'SoochnaPreneur' model and follows a multi-stakeholder approach, aiming to tackle the issues faced by garden workers. As part of this initiative, 16 women were trained as SoochnaPreneurs to help their communities navigate digital platforms and access welfare entitlements. This study examines the outcomes of the Saksham Project using qualitative methods, including focus group discussions and interviews with various stakeholders and beneficiaries.

The findings underscore the crucial role of women SoochnaPreneurs in challenging deep-seated gender norms, improving community access to information and welfare services, and enhancing the effectiveness of local governance. The study also provides suggestions received from various stakeholders and beneficiaries for refining and expanding bottom-up policy frameworks in the future.

1. Introduction

West Bengal (WB) is often celebrated for its scenic tea gardens that produce some of the finest teas globally. As the second-largest tea-producing state in India, WB contributes 24% of the nation's total tea output, following Assam. The tea cultivation areas are predominantly located in the northern regions, including the hilly terrains of North Bengal, covering districts like Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, and Alipurduar. Additionally, the plains of Uttar Dinajpur and Cooch Behar are becoming notable tea-producing areas. These plantations not only anchor the state's economy but also provide employment to a significant portion of its population, with over 360,000 workers and staff members engaged in this sector (Government of West Bengal, 2012, cited in Sarkar, 2019). Given the labor-intensive nature of tea cultivation, which requires more workers per hectare than any other crop (Sarkar, 2019), the demand for labor remains exceptionally high.

Beneath this scenic facade, however, lies a complex history of exploitation and marginalization. Tea gardens in WB have been under various forms of oversight and governance, from colonial management boards to post-colonial political unions, government bodies, and development organizations. Despite numerous interventions, tea garden workers still endure persistent socio-economic challenges, including gender discrimination, low wages, inadequate living and working conditions, and limited opportunities for upward mobility. The lack of access to accurate information, digital platforms, and state welfare schemes further aggravates these issues.

These challenges are symptomatic of deeply entrenched structural problems in these labor-intensive sectors, often characterized as



'enclave' economies. The tea industry in West Bengal continues to operate under a quasi-feudal system, marked by low wages (Sarkar, 2019) and a gendered division of labor. It is because women are generally assigned tasks that are considered to be cheaper forms of labor such as cleaning, plucking and processing tea leaves, whereas men occupy supervisory or managerial positions.

India's tea production costs are among the highest in the world, which suggests that the industry maintains its competitiveness primarily by minimizing labor costs. The wage determination process, heavily reliant on collective bargaining, is skewed in favor of employers, further limiting workers' capacity to negotiate fair wages (Sarkar, 2019).

The plantation system also exhibits a stark hierarchy and entrenched gender discrimination. While women constitute a larger share of the workforce in tea plantations than in many other industries, this representation does not translate into equitable treatment. Women

in the tea industry face double marginalization; they receive lower compensation due to discriminatory definitions of dependents. For example, male workers' non-working spouses and parents are considered dependents, whereas female workers' non-working spouses and parents are not, leading to lower overall compensation for women and violating the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976 (Sarkar, 2019). Local unions and human rights organizations have frequently highlighted these issues, pointing to low wages, inadequate housing, insufficient healthcare, and limited labor rights (Nitnaware, 2024). Although there have been efforts to improve working conditions, the complexities of accessing statutory social benefits, inadequate health and education infrastructure, poor access to clean water, firewood, and proper sanitation facilities persist (Gurung & Mukherjee, 2018).

In recent years, the Internet has emerged as an essential infrastructure for accessing welfare, entitlements, and information. It is not only a fundamental right but also a tool for democratizing knowledge and enabling broader access to other rights. However, India's efforts to bridge the rural-urban digital divide still face significant challenges. With a population of 1.3 billion, only 25-30% are proficient in using computers. The National Statistics Office (NSO) reports that just 15% of rural households have internet access, compared to 42% in urban areas (Khatun, 2021). The digital divide is even more pronounced in West Bengal: as of September 2022, there were only 35.04 internet subscribers per 100 people in rural areas, compared to 98.94 in urban areas (Government of India, Ministry of Communications, Department of Telecommunications, 2023). For women, the disparity is particularly stark; the NFHS-5 (2020-21) survey reveals that while 70% of urban women have used the internet, only 49.6% of rural women have done so. Barriers to access include inadequate technical skills, cultural

constraints, insufficient education and infrastructure, limited network connectivity, and financial dependence (Upadhyay, 2021).

A 2024 study by the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) on the socio-economic and digital contexts of Adivasis and tea plantation workers in Assam and West Bengal highlights the stark digital divide within WB's districts. For example, Jalpaiguri district shows the highest smartphone ownership at 38.66%, but only 26.3% of its residents are aware of online financial frauds. In contrast, Cooch Behar has the lowest smartphone ownership at 5.80%, reflecting severe digital exclusion. Alipurduar also faces significant challenges, with low online payment usage and just 3.32% awareness of online financial frauds. The affordability of mobile data, lack of reliable cellular networks, and limited digital literacy further hinder digital accessibility in these regions (DEF, 2024).

To address some of these barriers, the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), in collaboration with Swaniti Initiatives and other civil society organizations, implemented the Saksham Project (Strengthening access



to Social Security and Protection) near tea plantations in four districts of West Bengal—Alipurduar, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, and Darjeeling. DEF and its partners propose to embed dedicated teams within each selected district to collaborate with local ecosystems, ensuring effective program delivery in partnership with local authorities. The overarching goal of this Saksham project were threefold: one, is to identify the availability and accessibility of government welfare schemes and entitlements for tea garden workers; two, is to strengthen systems, processes, and capacity-building efforts in collaboration with state and district administrations, ensuring efficient public program delivery by tailoring interventions to the local context; thirdly, establish a robust, bottom-up policy framework that can be scaled across the state for broader policy adoption and long-term impact.

The Saksham Project was implemented using DEF's 'SoochnaPreneur' model, which aims to connect rural citizens to information about government entitlements and digital services while fostering entrepreneurial opportunities (for more details, see Manzar & Chaturvedi, 2017; Yadav et al. 2022; Chatterjee et al., 2024). Under this initiative, digital centers managed by local women Soochnapreneurs offer digital financial services like banking, governance, education, and healthcare at nominal fees, enhancing access to essential services and improving the quality of life for tea garden workers in North Bengal. To implement the project, 16 SoochnaPreneurs were identified from the villages in tea gardens from four districts. The initiative aims to assess how accessible government welfare schemes and entitlements are for tea workers, enhance systems and processes by working with state and district officials to improve public program delivery that are tailored interventions according to the local needs.

Over one year, these centers have facilitated access to various welfare

schemes, organized entitlement delivery and awareness camps, and strengthened local partnerships for effective delivery of government welfare. This study aims to document the outcomes of these activities using qualitative methods, providing insights into the broader context of digital exclusion and its impact on tea garden workers.

Before discussing the needs and outcomes of this initiative, it will be helpful to delve into the socio-historical context that continue to shape the living and working conditions of tea garden workers today. This will provide essential insights into the persistence of hierarchical and inequitable practices in the tea industry, revealing the complex web of factors that modern interventions, such as digital inclusion initiatives, must navigate and address.



2. Understanding the Socio-Historical Context

The existing social structures of labor, gender discrimination, and economic exploitation in tea gardens are deeply rooted in colonial and post-colonial practices of management.

The history of tea cultivation in India, particularly in West Bengal, is marked by the commodification of tea during the mid-19th century, driven by growing domestic and international demand. This period saw the fetishization of tea in elite cultures and the identification of suitable soils for its cultivation. British administrators undertook large-scale projects to map the best soils, lands, and people for growing tea, recognizing the acidic, fertile soils of so-called wastelands or forest regions as ideal for tea plantations (Johnson, 1951, p. 121). Regions like Terai or Dooars in northern Bengal and northeastern India were identified as the best fit for this purpose, leading to the need for labourers with strong physiques to clear and transform the forested wastelands into cultivable land. While local communities were initially relied upon for activities like clearing and cultivating, the expansion of the plantation economy led to further demand for labour (Ramsden, 1945, p. 45).

Knowing that tea plantation work was 'unhealthy,' the British favoured labourers from 'good castes/Adivasis'—those with strong physicality, stamina for hard work, and a willingness to settle near their workplaces. They found 'Adivasi' men, particularly from the Chotanagpur Plateau, to be ideal and intensified labour recruitment in Assam, Terai, and Dooars gardens from the mid-19th century onwards (Xaxa, 1985; Chatterjee,

2003). Administrators also considered the issue of settling Adivasis within the tea garden premises. As part of their recruitment policies, they noted that women constituted only 5%-15% of immigrants in the northeastern regions, raising concerns about maintaining a gender balance among recruits. Unmarried or single men were seen as an unstable labour force, often absconding back to their families. To address this, settlement policies emphasized recruiting families, particularly married women, with the belief that the presence of children and women would encourage men to stay and not return to their homeland in the Chotanagpur region (Chatterjee, 2003). Consequently, the Transport of Native Labour Act III of 1863 mandated recruiting at least one woman for every four men. This policy led to a 75% increase in the female population, as noted in a special report on the workings of the Acts around 1886-1888 (see Behal & Mohapatra, 1992). Organizations like the Tea District Labour Associations (TDLA) were established by the



1920s and 1930s to formalize and m onitor labour management and supply. The TDLA encouraged local agencies (the Sirdars and Arkatti) to supply family groups.

While male 'Adivasi' labourers were valued considering their physical strength, the recruitment and settlement policies also positioned female labourers as stabilizing forces within the workforce. Moreover, given the continuous health crises faced by workers engaged in 'unhealthy' cultivation under harsh climatic conditions—resulting in high mortality rates and an expensive labour force—women were seen as crucial reproducers of labourers through pro-natal policies (Chatterjee, 2003; Sen, 2004). Administrators promoted practices such as offering full pay with additional bonuses and leave days to pregnant women, which led to an increase in birth rates after 1922 (see Das, 1931). In addition, the idea behind recruiting women was also driven by an imperial fetish for 'pure labour,' where the act of plucking tea leaves by virgin women became a symbol of 'taste in high cultures.' The romanticized imagery of women delicately holding two leaves and a bud was not just a branding strategy, but a reflection of how gendered labour was commodified within the plantation economy (Chatterjee, 2003; Dutta, 2015).

Though significant changes have occurred since independence—such as the introduction of the Plantation Labour Act of 1951, the Equal Remuneration Act of 1975, and the formation of tea boards and trade unions—these historical developments have left a lasting impact on the social and cultural lives of people in tea gardens. As mentioned above, despite changes in governing bodies, the socio-economic condition of these people has not improved significantly. They now face multiple challenges—ranging from intermittently operational tea gardens, poor wages, isolated residences, unhealthy living and working conditions, irregular rations, defaults in annual bonuses, cheating,

malnutrition, lack of access to amenities and infrastructure, government entitlements, alcoholism, and even starvation (Sen, 2015; Sarkar, 2023). As immigrants of Adivasi origin, they are ghettoized in tea gardens and socially stigmatized in various ways.

Within such condition, women bear a double burden due to the roles expected of them. Despite constituting around 60% of the workforce in Dooars region, they still remained marginalized in the political trade unions (Sarkar & Bhowmick, 1998), face mistreatment, intimate partner abuse, etc (Bhattacharya, 2024). Despite their grievances about systemic inequalities, a substantial portion of the workforce is unable to relocate or seek better conditions, often finding themselves in critical situations of near starvation if their tea estates are abandoned or closed. Despite the government's efforts through welfare initiatives like Kanyashree and Lakshmi Bhandar , the conditional nature of these programs has yet to achieve significant upliftment of the workers' livelihoods. This



clearly highlights that the tea industry is largely surviving on the relative backwardness of these regions, where economic dynamism and inclusive growth are limited, unless supported by strong state or institutional interventions.

Saksham project, undertaken by DEF and Swaniti Initiatives, played a crucial role in this regard. It aimed to contribute to the discourse of fighting against all such odds, by incorporating the possibilities offered by digital and information ecosystems. The following section highlights the methods that helped to unfold and document these possibilities.



3. Methodology

A qualitative approach was employed to explore the outcomes of this program and the pivotal role SoochnaPreneurs have played. While qualitative data are sometimes perceived as unscientific and subjective, and therefore less valuable as evidence, it's important to recognise that subjectivity and value-based decision-making are integral to the practice of impact assessment. There is an increasing demand for qualitative methods, especially in assessing the social impact of projects, due to their ability to uncover deep meanings through dialogic and democratic processes (Sorde Marti et al., 2020). These methods are inherently participatory (Walker et al., 2024) and enable beneficiaries to actively engage with the study and provide meaningful feedback (Reed et al., 2021), aligning with the emphasis on learning from program outcomes.

For this study, three out of sixteen SoochnaPreneur centers across different tea gardens (2 from Alipurduar and 1 from Jalpaiguri districts) were selected for fieldwork. The initial aim was to focus on gardens where Soochnapreneurs were performing exceptionally well, allowing us to better reveal the potential of such programs. However, the selection process was also influenced by practical considerations, such as the availability of garden workers (as it was sought to minimize disruption to their daily work) and limitations related to time. Consequently, those gardens were selected where both the Soochnapreneurs were high-performing and the workers were available to participate in the study.

Three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted, one in each garden, to gather insights from the villagers. Considering the multi-stakeholder approach of the program, interviews were also conducted

with SoochnaPreneurs and key local figures, including elected PRI members, ICDS workers, and garden managers. Interview participants were carefully selected in collaboration with the SoochnaPreneurs, to identify individuals who could represent the impact of the SoochnaPreneur centers.

The stakeholders selected were those with whom the SoochnaPreneurs regularly collaborate and view as allies in their ongoing efforts. The interviews and FGDs were guided by a set of semi-structured questions, allowing for in-depth exploration of relevant issues. Details of the participants are presented below in Table 1.

Table 1: Details of the Participants from Various Locations

Gardens	Type of Participants	Method Applied	Number of Participants	Sex	Age/ Group
Garden 1	Villagers/ Beneficiaries	FGD	7	F only	19-32
	SoochnaPreneur	Interview	1	F	28
	PRI Member	Interview	1	M	43
	ICDS Worker	Interview	1	F	63
Garden 2	Villagers/ Beneficiaries	FGD	11	F=9; M=2	21-64
	SoochnaPreneur	Interview	1	F	24
	Garden Manager	Interview	1	M	59
	PRI Member	Interview	1	F	36
Garden 3	Villagers/ Beneficiaries	FGD	9	F=8, M=1	21-67
	SoochnaPreneur	Interview	1	F	29
	PRI Member	Interview	1	F	32
	ICDS Worker	Interview	1	F	49

Source: Primary Data, Digital Empowerment Foundation

The FGDs and interviews were conducted in community halls, mostly situated on the outskirts of the villages. Communication was facilitated through a mix of Hindi and Bengali, depending on participants' language

preferences. With participants' consent, the discussions and interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. A thematic analysis was carried out using an inductive approach. Initially, the oral narratives were coded in their original form and subsequently conceptualized within a theoretical framework during the analysis phase. Translation of the narratives occurred during the writing process. This approach revealed three major thematic areas, along with several sub-themes, where the program has made significant contributions. These are discussed in detail below.



Illustration is made using AI tools

4. Major Outcomes of Saksham Program

4.1 Reshaping Gender Roles

One of the immediate outcomes of the Saksham Programme has been the creation of opportunities for a few young, educated women to become SoochnaPreneurs, thereby reshaping the norms around gender roles regarding access to sources of information, in the following ways:

4.1.1. Enabling Awareness and Information

Like any other place, the flow of information in the tea gardens of North Bengal region typically aligns with existing social hierarchies, which often restrict women's access to information crucial for social mobility. The Saksham Program has been an attempt to disrupt these existing patterns by fostering awareness among women SoochnaPreneurs about the various stakeholders in their communities. For instance, one SoochnaPreneur from Alipurduar noted:

> *"Earlier, I didn't even know anyone—not who the Pradhan was or who held which position. But ever since this program started, I've begun to connect with people, whether they are government officials or local leaders. Now, I have a bit of familiarity with them."*

This awareness is critical, as it fosters an understanding of the power dynamics within their communities, identifies allies with shared goals, and tailors their actions to meet the needs and expectations of different stakeholders. By navigating these power dynamics effectively, they can locate themselves strong for coalitions in future endeavors.

4.1.2. Trickling Down of Information Flow

The benefits of the Saksham Program extend beyond the SoochnaPreneurs, creating a ripple effect that enhances the overall information ecosystem within these communities. Traditionally, particularly those less educated, faced significant barriers in accessing information, often feeling intimidated or excluded from formal channels. Discussions with participants revealed that SoochnaPreneurs have made information more accessible and approachable for all. As described by the participants:

> "Participa*nt 1 (F): What to say now. We used to go to the GP (Gram Panchayat) earlier. Some ask, some don't ask anything. Some just walk around and leave out of embarrassment. Out of fear (laughed).*



Interviewer: Oh, out of embarrassment?

Participant 1 (F): Yes. Out of fear. You know, sir. When you're around important people. Whom should I talk to? How should I talk to them?

Participant 2 (F): They don't even know what documents are needed and what aren't. The educated ones manage, but the uneducated ones just keep wandering around. They get rejected. Sometimes they may have to listen to abuse. Get scolded. They say, 'Bring the right documents tomorrow.' Then they come the next day and get sent back again. Keep wandering around. But when our own person (indicating SoochnaPreneurs) is there, they explain clearly what is needed."

This change is significant because it not only improved access to information but also reduced the social barriers that previously inhibited one's engagement with formal processes.

4.1.3. Enabling Agency and Delayed Marriage

Historically, the tea gardens of West Bengal have been a site where women, despite their crucial economic contributions, have been largely confined to roles that reinforce their dependency and subservience, particularly through the expectation of early marriage. The Saksham Program, by offering alternatives to this path, is fostering a sense of agency among the unmarried SoochnaPreneurs. One SoochnaPreneur indicated how the program has allowed her to pursue her aspirations despite the pressure to marry early:

"Even my family doesn't support me. They want to get me married off quickly, but I don't want to. I have one elder brother. One of them is sick. I have two brothers. One has some issues,

*and the other is fine, but he doesn't help at all... Is it not good? I want to stand on my own feet, and yet he doesn't help. They get angry, especially because of my marriage. Marriage will happen someday, but not so soon. When they hear others talking, they get furious. They get angry with people. But they even threaten to kill the*mselves."

This narrative underscores the program's role in challenging the internalized expectations that women often face within their families. The program has enabled a hope by creating a space where women can envision and pursue their aspiration.

4.1.4. Navigating through Deeply Embedded Gender Norms

The entrenched gender norms in the tea gardens often manifest in various forms of social control, including jealousy, conflict, and even physical violence. The interventions have somehow placed positioned SoochnaPreneurs in a field of power dynamics, where they struggle as well as navigate these manifestations. For example, a 26 year old female, educated with entrepreneurial as well as political aspirations, mentioned how she used to be subjected to such deeply entrenched patriarchal forces, in the following way:

"There's a lot of incitement. Like, when someone comes to the shop here, some people provoke them by saying, 'Don't go there, they might even steal your money.' Like that. They don't trust easily. But those who do trust, they come and ask everything. That's why when I withdraw money for someone, I also show them the balance. If they need a printout, we do that too. I mean, quietly, from the back. The problem is that as a girl, they don't like me getting ahead so much....

…. There was a campaign here once. And another time when there was some work related to the Panchayat, they came to hit me. They even came to my house. There was some work with the GP (Gram Panchayat) that I had been given directly by the Pradhan. But they were saying, 'How are you doing all this?' They brought all the boys with them, like they were ready to kill me. They suddenly showed up, and there was such a big crowd. It was good work because people didn't have to go far; it could be done here.

…. So, I mean, the people here are like this, they don't support. They tend to get violent. Later, I told them, 'Look, the Pradhan himself gave me this work. You are part of the Panchayat, go and confirm it there.' I called there and told them, 'There's trouble happening here, this and that.' After that, they all sat for a while, and then they didn't come back again."

Though it is difficult to chipping away from these oppressive norms, the program has been an attempt that enables hope and capacity to change it. The entrenched gender norms, at least as they appear today in tea gardens, are not just social customs but are deeply intertwined with the economic and historical fabric of the region. Patriarchal ideologies and practices underlying the recruitment and settlement policies involved in capitalist expansion of tea economy have continued to shape expectations related gender roles.

Even though partial access to education and governmental initiatives or social media have shaped some hope for social justice nowadays, but they are ineffectively handled by poorly trained and gender unresponsive socio-legal and bureaucratic agents (Bhattacharya, 2024). Within such context, the Saksham Program added a small but significant

contribution in the discourse of counterforce against patriarchy & exploitation. It has offered some hope to perform unwillingness to the intergenerational cycle of labour reproduction, introducing them with the tools and knowledge to pursue their aspirations and make a difference in their lives and communities. While reflecting upon changes in her life, one of the SoochnaPreneur mentioned that:

> *"We didn't have much information either. We are people from just a tea garden, so we didn't know much. But now, what has happened is that we are stepping out, going outside. We've been able to learn a lot, and we've received many training sessions. We have learned so much through this Saksham project and the Digital Empowerment Foundation. We've realized how far behind we were and that there is still a lot to learn, which can help improve our tea garden."*

4.2. Improving Conditions for Availing Information & State Welfare

Tea gardens have long been areas of critical oversight and governance, subjected to the scrutiny of various agencies, from colonial and post-colonial tea management boards to political unions, government officials, and development organizations. Despite this, interviews and discussions reveal persistent challenges faced by tea garden workers in accessing accurate information and state welfare in a timely manner. The role of SoochnaPreneurs in addressing these challenges has been notable, especially given the isolated and often inaccessible locations of these villages within the hilly terrains of the North Bengal region.

The settlement policies have left most villages isolated, nestled deep within vast tea gardens, often surrounded by rivers and prone to natural

hazards such as flash floods and animal conflicts. For outsiders, reaching these villages often involves navigating treacherous terrain, making regular communication and access to information particularly difficult. In this remote environment, SoochnaPreneurs have played a crucial role in mitigating some of these constraints, particularly in reshaping the conditions around documentation errors and improving the flow of information essential for accessing state welfare.

4.2.1. Reshaping Conditions Around 'Wrong' Documentations

One of the most pressing conditions that garden workers face is the mechanisms that generate inaccuracies or discrepancies in critical documents such as voter cards, Aadhaar cards, ration cards, PAN cards, and reservation certificates. These documents are vital not only for proving citizenship or belongingness but also for accessing a wide range of government entitlements.

While discussing around why they think they have 'wrongs' in documents, participants speculated that:

> *"Participant 1 (M): We can't really say, sir. How things happen, you know. They are told everything properly, but they still make spelling mistakes.*
>
> *Participant 2 (F): Maybe they do it intentionally.*
>
> *Participant 3 (F): It happens that if the Aadhaar card is made, some people might do things deliberately. It became like a circular. If everything is correct, everyone will settle down. Where will the money come from?"*

Though it can be a question of human capacity—to rightly spell one's name by just hearing or by decoding one's handwriting. But there are

several adoptable measures to keep this problem of misspelling in check. The participants find discrepancies in their documents as result of some intentional acts and their skepticism sounds reasonable for the kind of negligence that they face, indicati. It is of course not that government bodies are unaware of the problems and implications about 'wrong' documents among tea garden laborers. Additionally, the informal economy surrounding this process of 'wronging' and 'correcting' documents, can also be considered as relevant reason for such emerging scepticism.

Furthermore, the task of correcting documents is also complicated by various socio-historical factors, as many workers and their families are immigrants from other states, nearby the region of Chhotanagpur plateau. Tea garden management of hold record or seize relevant documents (in some places), containing their original IDs. Documentation in such situation, without consultation with multiple stakeholders of laborer's life, may result difficulties in their life, in accessing government entitlements due to mismatches between their original place of residence and their current location. Women, in particular, encounter problems when they change surnames after marriage, making it difficult to produce necessary documents. The burden of incorrect documents often flows intergenerationally, perpetuating the cycle of exclusion from government entitlements.

> *Participants in discussions highlighted these issues, noting the intergenerational impact of documentation errors:*
>
> *"Participant 1 (M): Yes, it's easier to get it right for the children, but the biggest problem is when the parents' names are incorrect. If the guardians' names are wrong, it affects the children too. Fixing this can take a lifetime.*

Participant 2 (F): If the parents documents are wrong, then the children's will also be wrong. The problem will continue inter-generally.

Participant 3 (F): There is a family here without Aadhaar cards despite spending so much money. They had to go back to Bihar to get it done. Having the SoochnaPreneur centers nearby helps a lot with these spendings."

In between such social conditioning and human limits, these issues related mismatch in documents are exacerbated by the recent push towards linking every document under new digitalization initiatives, where any discrepancy, even a minor one, can cause significant anxiety among these already marginalized communities.

On the other hand, whereas errors in these documents can lead to many problems, tea garden workers are less aware of why they often fail to avail themselves of their entitlements. Lack of awareness about the 'wrongs' in their own documents (may be due to their less educational attainment) have often disable them to claim some entitlements, leading to a general mistrust against government processes, like the way few participants have speculated (mentioned above). SoochnaPreneurs, with their capacity, have played a crucial role in addressing this condition and provided space to form well-informed citizens.

SoochnaPreneurs inform tea garden workers about the loopholes in their documents, guide them on the correct application processes, required documents, and facilitate their access to rightful entitlements. Reflecting on her experience, one SoochnaPreneur shared:

"SoochnaPreneur: Many people don't know if there are errors in their Aadhaar or voter cards. For example, women often face

issues because they don't have caste certificates, which prevents them from accessing benefits like Lakshmir Bhandar. Before our SoochnaPreneur center was established, people would try to apply, often going to the Madarihat block office. But they would fill out the forms incorrectly. For instance, if there was an error in the Aadhaar card name, they didn't know why their application got canceled. When applying for a caste certificate, they would sometimes submit proof of their husband instead of their father, not realizing that proof from the husband wouldn't suffice. They would keep reapplying without understanding the reason for rejection. They didn't even ask why—it was just, 'We submitted it, but it keeps getting rejected. Who knows why?' They didn't understand the cause.



Interviewer: Didn't the officers tell them anything?

SoochnaPreneur: The officers were there to explain the forms, but they didn't tell them, 'Look, there's an error in your Aadhaar card, and that's why it might get rejected.' They didn't provide that information. When we started our center, people came to us asking, 'Why aren't we getting the caste certificate? What should we do?' I would ask them, 'How did you fill it out?' They would give me their acknowledgment number, and I would check what was wrong. I'd tell them, 'You've put your husband's name. Proof from your husband won't work. You need proof from your father. If your father isn't around, you need proof from two family members, like a brother or sister, who are from your original home.' After that, they would bring the necessary documents, and we would complete the process for them.

Interviewer: Did their husbands not tell them anything?

SoochnaPreneur: No, their husbands in fact supported us, by telling them, 'Go there and find out what's wrong.' But even they didn't know what the issue was."

4.2.2. Reshaping the Culture around Information Dissemination

SoochnaPreneurs have also played a pivotal role in reshaping how information used to get disseminated and reached these communities. The need for accurate and timely information is essential for effectively accessing state welfare programs. However, as mentioned, the information dissemination related entitlements also conditioned within the mould of existing social structure, resulting into system where information remain secluded to few people/ networks, who are closely connected to sources of information.

Despite the recent initiatives of digitalizing India, discussions revealed recurring problems of late information. Few of the student participants (pursuing under-graduation) mentioned that:

> *"Participant 1 (F): When the job applications come out, we usually find out later that the form was available, and by then, the time has already passed. It would have been better if we had known earlier.*
>
> *Participant 2 (F): If we could get updates as soon as the forms are released and know about it in advance, we could apply on time."*
>
> *During 'Duare Sarkar' initiatives of West Bengal's government, where only a few villagers would receive timely notifications, often via mobile phones, while the majority remained unaware due to limited access to technology. For instance, a participant explained:*
>
> *"Participant (F): During Duare Sarkar, only some people received the news, either from the Panchayat office or through mobile notifications. But many didn't get the information because most people don't have smartphones, and they spend most of their time working in the gardens. This (indicating SoochnaPreneur's center) has helped us only."*
>
> *The situation is even more challenging in remote villages like Chaibasa, located in the border areas near Bhutan, where internet connectivity is very less. A participant from Chaibasa highlighted the difficulties:*
>
> *"Participant (F): Our village is surrounded by rivers on all sides,*

and we don't even get proper network coverage. We struggle to get all these information here."

Given such conditionings manifested through information inequality and digital divide, traditional methods of information dissemination have limited reach and often arrive too late. Even owning a smartphone doesn't guarantee timely access to information. Under the Saksham Program, SoochnaPreneurs acted as source of information, a counter-network to the existing, for the downtrodden garden labourers—for whom the process of leaving the village to visit the nearest internet café or Panchayat office is both time-consuming and costly, cutting into already inadequate daily wages.

Additionally, amidst the increased chaos of rumours or misinformation in social media or political campaigns, SoochnaPreneurs have been useful to the villagers in correcting/verifying information. During the discussion around information dissemination, participants revealed that:

"Participant 1 (F): Often we get 'Ulta-pulta' news. If there's any news about work, like when she [indicating Kavita] was working here, she would inform others. So, if someone had a question or needed help, they'd think to come here and ask her.

Participant 2 (M): People come directly here. All the kids gather here in the evening. She also tutors them, provide lessons to some kids. If there's an issue with their health, how can they go outside the garden [pointing to a women labourer/participant who is suffering with a wounded/swollen leg]? If some news about to her, she would tell us.

Participant 1 (F): They [indicating people in general] tell lies.

Interviewer: Where you all used to go before this program started?

Participant 1 (F): We used to go to the GP [Gram Panchayat]. Whenever there was work, we went there. At that time, this girl [SoochnaPreneur] wasn't here.

Participant 2 (M): It's much more convenient now that this center is here. Whenever we have questions, people come here.

Participant 3 (F): If something comes up, we're told to bring our documents here.

Participant 2 (M): It's a great convenience. Before, we had to go elsewhere.

Participant 4 (F): We even had to pay for travel as well.

Participant 1 (F): But now, everything is handled from here."

SoochnaPreneurs act as intermediaries with their capacity, ensuring that villagers receive the information they need promptly and correctly. By improving the challenges of obtaining and verifying information, the program has significantly reduced the uncertainties and delays that often plague the application process for state welfare. Since cost is another barrier in going outside the tea gardens, towards nearby marketplaces, the Saksham Program, through its network of SoochnaPreneurs and local stakeholders, has enabled more cost-effective solutions for these villagers. By bringing services closer to the community and reducing the need for expensive and time-consuming travel to distant government offices with an uncertainty of results.

The experience of applying for government welfare can be daunting, especially for those who are unfamiliar with bureaucratic processes

or had bad experiences in the past. This often makes hardworking labourers reluctant about these processes, preventing them applying for entitlements. Women SoochnaPreneurs, who are simultaneously working against the forces that discourage them to work, work with most of their capacities to improve these experiences. During the interview, an SoochnaPreneur's involvement with the program got highlighted:

> *"Whatever is correct, we send it, and it gets approved. Everything we've processed from here has been approved. Because we ourselves, whenever we apply, we worry, right? Will it happen or not, will it happen or not, we check repeatedly. Will it happen or not, will it happen or not. Every caste certificate we've applied for has been approved within three days. So, we're really happy that it got done in just three days. We can hardly believe it got done in just three days."*

With an awareness of local issues, this hands-on assistance has not only improved the success rate of applications but also reduced the frustration and anxiety that often accompany interactions with government agencies. SoochnaPreneurs have immense potential to reshape the conditions around documentation and information access, enabling workers to navigate the bureaucratic hurdles that have long disconnected them from their entitlements

4.3 Enabling Assemblages to Make 'Local Governance' Work

Local governance in tea gardens is often hindered by communication gaps, which obstruct effective implementation and democratic decentralization. These gaps are primarily due to limited access to vital information in these remote and isolated villages (Odendaal, 2003).

The term "assemblage" refers to the coming together of distinct entities to create something greater than the sum of its parts. In this context, it captures the synergy generated when SoochnaPreneurs engage with diverse stakeholders in the tea gardens. SoochnaPreneurs play a critical role in forming and maintaining these assemblages by connecting villagers with people in positions of relevance, from local leaders to government officials. Interviews highlight how their efforts catalyze a networked community, enabling collaborative actions and optimizing the effectiveness of local governance institutions.

4.3.1. Connecting with the Institutions

SoochnaPreneurs have leveraged social media to create groups that connect various stakeholders, allowing them to share information, discuss issues, and organize collective actions. These groups serve as virtual extensions of the physical assemblages within the village, providing a space where ideas can be exchanged, and collective decisions can be made. In the words of one SoochnaPreneur:

> *"When there's work at the Panchayat, they tell me, 'Please spread the word.' They can't go everywhere and communicate right. So, we've created a group. It includes all the Panchayat supervisors, block-level officials, the local president, ICDS workers, ASHA workers, everyone. I've made a WhatsApp group. They share whatever information they have, or they call us. And we pass it on to the people."*

4.3.2. Working with Formal Institutions

In addition to connecting stakeholders, SoochnaPreneurs also work closely with formal institutional bodies. This ability to collaborate with traditional actors strengthens their ties and helps build a robust

framework for addressing community needs. During an interview, an ICDS worker shared how they rely on SoochnaPreneurs:

> *"We have a group for ICDS workers. We get information about upcoming campaigns there, which we share with people during monthly mothers' meetings. If they face any issues regarding government benefits, I give them the contact number [of SoochnaPreneurs] and tell them, 'You can also reach out directly.' It's a relief because they don't have to miss work or worry about losing their daily income—they can do their job and handle their duties at the same time."*

Similarly, a PRI member noted the usefulness of SoochnaPreneurs in reaching villagers:

> *"If there's a list with beneficiary names, finding those people sometimes become difficult. So, we rely on the SoochnaPreneur to share any information they have and prepare them with the needful documents. This way, the villagers don't have to run around—they can get things done right here."*

Another PRI member from a different tea garden mentioned:

> *"When Duare Sarkar sets up, we tell people, 'Go to that center [indicating the SoochnaPreneurs' center], they will help you.' They have residential certificates from the Panchayat. If there's an issue with filling out forms or getting printouts, we send them [to the SoochnaPreneur]. We tell people, 'Get it print and filled out there.'"*

The interview with the tea garden manager revealed that they have no objections to SoochnaPreneurs' initiatives, provided these efforts do not interfere with the garden's operational efficiency. The manager

emphasized the importance of maintaining transparency in the work. A significant concern for the tea gardens has been the increasing disinterest among youth in tea garden work and the resulting out-migration. This concern reflects an underlying anxiety, rooted in the fear of losing access to affordable labor. Programs like Saksham align with the gardens' interests by offering opportunities for youth employment through NGOs, thereby helping to reduce the out-migration trend. As the manager stated:



"We, the company, aren't always involved. Only when there's a technical issue does the company get involved. Otherwise, we're not. We have an intelligence group that goes around gathering information to help run the administration. So far, we haven't noticed anything negative about this program...

...Maintain transparency. Tea workers have always been deprived—always. The new generation needs to do better. The youth, both men and women, are leaving. We need to stop this out-migration. We need to generate jobs here, so they can support their families locally. Otherwise, they leave, and their families suffer. The children don't study because their fathers are away earning money."

The manager's perspective highlights the potential for SoochnaPreneurs to work in parallel with tea garden management. It also underscores how SoochnaPreneurs have positioned themselves within the local power dynamics, navigating highly monitored and governed areas like tea gardens to address practical problems effectively. However, participants have also highlighted that managers often do not give permission to conduct some camps in their garden areas.

4.3.3. Making Institutions Work

The assemblages facilitated by SoochnaPreneurs have led to various collaborative actions. SoochnaPreneurs not only connect and serve various institutions but also have the potential to make democratic institutions work more effectively. Whether organizing Aadhaar camps, health camps, facilitating access to government schemes, or addressing social issues like gender inequality, their networks have significant potential to create a more substantial impact.

For instance, consider the health crisis in tea gardens. Healthcare in these areas has long been in crisis, with management intervening only during emergencies that threaten the workers' lives—an intervention driven more by the need to maintain a labour force than by genuine concern for worker wellbeing.

Despite the presence of government health workers like ASHA workers, the distribution of medicines remains inconsistent and often untimely. This issue is compounded by the isolated and remote locations of the tea gardens, where natural hazards and human-animal conflicts further hinder access to healthcare. These geographical and infrastructural challenges make it difficult for workers to receive necessary medical care, leaving them vulnerable to chronic illnesses and other health issues.

In such situations, the role of SoochnaPreneurs extends beyond merely facilitating access to healthcare schemes like 'Swasthya Sathi' or 'Old Age Pensions.' One SoochnaPreneur shared how they have helped facilitate access to preventive healthcare:

> *"We have a few cases of paralysis here. The ASHA workers do their rounds, but not as frequently. And with malaria, they didn't pay much attention. So, I informed the Panchayat about a woman who had a paralysis attack. She had become very ill due to mosquito bites. The doctor's intervention has improved her condition, but the paralysis remains. For elderly or housebound individuals, the ASHA workers don't visit often. We put some pressure on them. We go door to door, and the villagers tell us, 'The ASHA workers don't do much, they don't come.' So, I send a message in the group, and then they come to check on them. There are people here who can't afford medicine, so we try to arrange it for them."*

Conclusions and Ways Forward

Considering the above, the transformative potentials of initiatives like Saksham can be remarked. Overall, the outcomes of this project have positively impacted the lives of women in the tea gardens of the North Bengal. SoochnaPreneurs have emerged as intermediaries who not only connected villagers with essential information and services that were previously out of reach but have also improved the conditions for availing those information and services.

More importantly, the women SoochnaPreneurs have been resilient, despite facing significant challenges, including navigating deeply embedded gender norms and dealing with resistance and threats. Their active participation in this program has led to the correction of documentation errors, reducing the uncertainties and delays that often hinder the application process for state welfare, and has made accessing government services timelier and more cost-effective for the tea garden workers. By forming and maintaining assemblages that enabled to connect villagers with local leaders, government officials, and other stakeholders, SoochnaPreneurs have enabled more effective local governance. They have facilitated collaborations and have made efforts towards better functioning of local democratic institutions, making them more responsive to community needs.

The success of the program lies in its ability to empower women to challenge oppressive norms, improve access to essential information, and pave the way for future initiatives that build on these foundational changes. By reshaping the flow of information, addressing the challenges

concerning proper documentation, and by simply participating in male dominated spaces, the SoochnaPreneurs of the Saksham Program have contributed to the larger discourse of fighting against patriarchy and labour exploitation in the tea gardens of the North Bengal.

However, despite the multifaced potential of the SoochnaPreneurs in bridging gaps in access to information and services, there are several areas where their effectiveness can be improved. A few suggestions can be made, based on the insights gained during interviews and discussions, to improve future endeavors with such models, to move towards more robust bottom-up policies and interventions:

5.1. Enhance Accessibility and Support for Documentation

The ability of SoochnaPreneurs to streamline documentation processes is essential for effective service delivery. One participant highlighted a need for better support with Aadhaar-related issues, especially for older adults who experience delays and difficulties. They noted:



"It would have been better if we could get CSC IDs. And if we can address Aadhaar issues among elders, then problems in the garden might decrease somewhat."

Though there are practical and technical challenges involved in implementing CSC IDs for SoochnaPreneurs (e.g., formal processes of conducting and passing an examination), it will be better to at least enable an environment which support such aspirations. If SoochnaPreneurs can manage to get the id, this undoubtedly will simplify the documentation process, addressing these challenges and improving overall efficiency.

5.2. Increase Outreach and Communication Efforts

Effective outreach and communication are vital for ensuring that all residents are aware of available programs. A PRI member suggested:

"Before the program, it would be helpful if you visit the villages and make announcements. This way, people who don't hear about the program through other means will still receive the information."

To enhance outreach, SoochnaPreneurs should organize village visits and utilize public announcements to ensure comprehensive information dissemination. Additionally, another PRI member suggested to increase engagement with local stakeholders, by saying:

"When your higher-ups visit, it would be beneficial to include garden managers in the meetings. Involving everyone on the committee can help provide information and ensure participation."

Including garden managers and other local stakeholders in discussions will help ensure that information is effectively shared and acted upon.

5.3. Accelerate and Expand Program Implementation

To build trust and encourage greater community engagement, the program must focus on accelerating implementation and expansion. A PRI member remarked,

> *"The work is progressing a bit slowly, in my opinion. It needs to pick up speed. For that, if our existing organization takes some visible steps, it will help. Also, since the garden is so large, and with a significant population, it would be great if there was another center opened in addition to the existing one."*

Setting clear milestones and demonstrating progress will help maintain momentum and enhance community involvement.



Furthermore, they were also suggesting increasing the scope of SoochnaPreneurs' roles. In addition to the emphasis on information related entitlements, they highlighted the need for interventions where livelihood options can be generated, in the following way:

> *"Just getting the news is not enough, right? Like, we are associated with your organization, and we are very happy to be a part of it. News can be received in many ways. Everything is available on mobile nowadays. But what we need is work."*

Infrastructural support for education and transportation is also a significant concern. An ICDS worker pointed out for the need to resolve infrastructure related issues:

> *"You've arranged education for the children, but it's not feasible for them. In our tea garden, children, especially girls, cycle 12-13 kilometers just to get to school, and there's no transportation available. If these girls are cycling such long distances now, what will their condition be tomorrow? A young girl who will one day become a wife and mother has a long life ahead of her, and she's already struggling by cycling so far just to study. There isn't even a vehicle available for them to make the journey easier. Parents can't afford to give them 100 rupees every day for school. Where will they get money for transportation? The people in the garden area don't have that kind of income"*

Exploring ways to support transportation for students, particularly girls, will ensure they can access education without enduring long journeys.

5.4. Enhance Support and Training for Local Representatives

Providing comprehensive training and support for local representatives and garden managers is essential for effective program implementation and strengthening the organizational presence. A participant noted,

> *"We were about to do something. The manager is new, so he doesn't know everything. He didn't give the NOC for this. It could also be because what we understood, we couldn't explain to him properly. We can't explain. For example, she [indicating SoochnaPreneur] is currently involved in this. If one of your staff members could help us, they would be able to explain things*



clearly because we don't have that knowledge. We just want your work to progress. If something happens one day, and a staff member from your organization comes, it would be easier for them to explain. She is here, but she is not complete yet to do such work. More support is required from your side."

Providing on-site support and regular follow-up can address issues promptly and ensure that activities are carried out effectively. To address these, detailed training will empower the role of SoochnaPreneurs to communicate and implement the program more effectively.


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