Mid-Term Evaluation Report - SEWOH_VSS II: Building a community-based, resilient, and sustainable food security model through community Participation and advocacy in Madhya Pradesh and Bihar

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terre des hommes
Help for Children in Need
INDIA

Submitted to:

terre des hommes
Germany

Contents

Table of Figures

List of Abbreviations

PDS	Public Distribution System
HH	Households
AAY	Antyoday Anna Yojna
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Scheme
PMVVY	Pradhan Mantri Matrutva Vandana Yojana
ST	Schedule Tribe
SC	Schedule Caste
OBC	Other Backward Class
NFSA	National Food Security Act 2013
AWC	Anganwadi Centre
GoI	Government of India
THR	Take Home Ration
ANC	Antenatal Care
PNC	Postnatal Care
INR	Indian National Rupee
KVK	Krishi Vigyan Kendra
VSS	Vikas Samvad Samiti
S4E	Sports for Empowerment

Acknowledgement

The outcome of any development initiative has to be seen through the eyes of the person who is the targeted beneficiary of the initiative. Ensuring that we heard firsthand from the project participants was a critical need, and the evaluation immensely benefited from it. First and foremost, we extend our heartfelt appreciation to the project beneficiaries, stakeholders, and community members who generously shared their time, experiences, and insights, forming this evaluation's cornerstone.

We are indebted to the management and staff of Abhiyan, Centre DIRECT, and Vikas Samvad Samiti for their unwavering support throughout the evaluation process. Their guidance, feedback, and logistical assistance greatly facilitated our work and ensured the smooth execution of the evaluation activities. We want to acknowledge the invaluable support and cooperation extended by them during this process, without whom this evaluation would not have been possible. Their dedication, collaboration, and commitment to the project's objectives were instrumental in facilitating access to relevant information, resources, and field visits.

We would like to acknowledge the financial support provided by terre des hommes, Germany, which enabled the execution of this evaluation. Their commitment to promoting accountability, transparency, and learning in development programming is commendable.

Lastly, we express our deepest appreciation to all individuals and entities involved in this evaluation, whose collective contributions have enriched our understanding and informed the ongoing improvement of the project's outcomes and impact.

Sincerely,
Rahul Ranjan Sinha
Purna Roy Chowdhury

Executive Summary

Malnutrition, one of the key development issues, has surged from 7.5% to 9.2% globally, with India as the largest contributor at 224 million undernourished individuals, disproportionately affecting women and children and resulting in nearly half of all deaths in children under five. The "SEWOH_VSS II" project, jointly implemented by Vikas Samvad Samiti, CENTER Direct, and Abhiyan, aims to tackle the multifaceted issue of malnutrition and enhance food and nutritional security for 19,981 marginalized households in six districts across Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. The project primarily targets women, children, adolescents, and youth, striving to build a community-based, resilient, and sustainable food security model through active community participation and advocacy. In response to the alarming rates of malnutrition and food insecurity in Madhya Pradesh and Bihar—two states known for their high levels of undernutrition—the project sets out several objectives:

- Alleviate food and nutritional insufficiency.
- Promote dietary diversity and better nutritional practices.
- Enhance the resilience of communities through sustainable agricultural practices.
- Advocate for policy changes at local, state, and national levels to support food security.

The intervention areas are characterized by high malnutrition rates, with baseline studies indicating that 60% of children in Bihar and 40% in Madhya Pradesh were malnourished. Additionally, 60% of adolescent girls in 140 target villages were anaemic, with a body mass index below 18.5. Given these severe nutritional deficiencies, the project focuses on immediate nutritional needs and long-term sustainable practices to ensure food and nutritional security.

The mid-term evaluation, commissioned by terre des hommes Germany (tdh) and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), aimed to assess the project's progress, effectiveness, and strategies. The evaluation focused on 1) **Accountability**, Ensuring that the project is on track to meet its objectives and deliver results; 2) **Learning**, Identifying strengths and weaknesses to inform future programming; and 3) **Information distillation**, Gathering valuable insights and lessons for adaptation and sustainability.

Evaluation Procedure, Implementation, and Methodology

The evaluation was conducted over two months, from December 15, 2023, to February 15, 2024, and adopted a mixed-method research design incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. A gender lens was applied to ensure that the needs and the project's impact on women and girls were adequately captured. The evaluation followed the OECD/DAC framework, assessing the project on its relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability.

The evaluation process included: 1) A comprehensive desk review of project documents such as proposals, annual reports, and baseline studies, 2) Field visits to all six districts involved in the project, 3) Quantitative data collection through household surveys, 4) Qualitative data collection through focus group discussions and key informant interviews, 5) Engagement with local implementation partners and stakeholders. The evaluation team, led by Rahul Ranjan Sinha and Purna Roy Chowdhury, ensured a thorough and participatory assessment, gathering a wide range of perspectives to inform the evaluation findings.

Evaluation Findings

Relevance -The project was found to be highly relevant to the needs of the targeted areas. The baseline study revealed severe malnutrition and anaemia among children and adolescent girls in both states, indicating a critical need for interventions like the VSS project. The mid-term evaluation's household survey captured the poor socio-economic status of the targeted households, reinforcing their vulnerability to food insecurity and poverty. The project formulation started with reviewing available secondary data on health and food security. It was followed by commissioning the baseline study to refine the project design and

activities further. The evaluators observed a lack of thorough contextualisation in project activities, particularly in light of the diverse socio-economic contexts of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. Project activities such as renovating water structures and backyard poultry had limited relevance in Bihar.

The evaluation confirmed the project's high relevance for its target groups, including women, children, adolescents, and youth. Desk research and field visits indicated that the project addressed critical needs and gaps in food security and nutrition. For example, an adolescent girl in Bihar highlighted the project's impact, stating, "The project has been an eye-opener for us in many ways. We have learned to live a hygienic life and got a voice in the community." The project also positively influenced women's health-seeking behaviour, dietary practices, and childcare.

The project design, approach, and execution were well-aligned with the strategic objectives of the implementing partners. Vikas Samvad Samiti's focus on health and nutrition in Madhya Pradesh, and Centre DIRECT and Abhiyan's work on child rights in Bihar were well-integrated into the project, enhancing its relevance and impact.

Coherence - The evaluation found strong synergies with tdh's strategic goals, policies, and regional priorities. The project contributed to tdh's objectives of reaching marginalized and vulnerable populations in India, and aligned with their global strategic goal of Young Environmental Voices. The formation of community groups (Women, Adolescents, Youth, and Children) in all target villages served as 'Springboards' for advancing socio-economic well-being and empowerment, aligning with tdh's objectives.

The project was highly coherent with local, regional, and national initiatives, particularly in the context of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, two of India's poorest-performing states on health and nutrition indices. Engagement with state governments and local agencies demonstrated the project's alignment with regional priorities and policy landscapes. Strategic partnerships with entities like Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) and the Horticulture Department provided technical and climate-sensitive training, enhancing local coherence.

Effectiveness - The project demonstrated effective monitoring and supervision with a multi-layered approach that included outcome-monitoring methods. However, there was limited adoption of digital tools and technologies, which could further enhance effectiveness and efficiency. Training and capacity-building efforts were comprehensive, equipping both beneficiaries and staff with the necessary skills and knowledge. However, technical knowledge about disease and pest management in kitchen gardens and BYP was an area for improvement.

The project's progress was commendable, especially considering disruptions due to COVID-19. Most targets were met or on track. The results management framework (RMF) was robust, effectively capturing outreach, targets, and baseline status. However, categorizing RMF indicators into output and outcome measures could provide clearer insights into project progress and impact. Additionally, setting specific output targets for marginalized groups, including widows, disabled individuals, and the landless, is crucial for ensuring equitable access and inclusion.

The project engaged effectively at the policy level, influencing nutrition policies and strategies in Madhya Pradesh and, to a lesser extent, in Bihar. In Madhya Pradesh, the project supported the formulation of state-level and tribal nutrition policies and engaged with the Women and Child Department and Health Department. At the national level, the project organized a National Consultation on Food and Nutrition Security in New Delhi and a national conclave on climate change and food security in Patna, demonstrating its effectiveness in shaping broader policy discourse.

Efficiency - The project demonstrated cost-effective use of funds, with no evidence of unnecessary expenditures. Fund management was efficient, ensuring timely disbursement and utilization. Flexibility in using underspent funds for immediate relief measures, such as distributing dry rations during COVID-19, highlighted the project's adaptive capacity.

The availability of financial and human resources was moderately efficient, though gaps were noted. Outdated budget rates, lack of MIS staff at the district level, and the need for staff to steer knowledge management and advocacy efforts in Bihar were identified as areas needing improvement. Community mobilizers were highly efficient, managing project activities across multiple villages. However, gaps included the lack of a designated MIS position at the district level and low representation of women staff at state and district levels.

Oversight was assessed at three levels: TDH, VSS, and district teams. TDH provided close collaboration and handholding support through regular partner meetings, capacity-building initiatives, and fund management assistance. VSS provided oversight in Bihar, tracking progress and offering MIS support and training. However, the quality of support for policy-level engagement and advocacy was weaker. District-level oversight was satisfactory, but the lack of digital tools for monitoring and tracking was a critical gap.

Impact - The project significantly improved awareness and access to food and nutritional security among households in intervention areas. A notable 95% of surveyed households reported increased understanding of health and nutrition issues. Improvements were also seen in Anganwadi Centers (AWCs) and mid-day meal (MDM) programs. However, uptake of health insurance schemes like RSBY and Ayushman Bharat remained low, highlighting an area for potential improvement.

The project effectively enhanced dietary diversity among target populations. An IDDS survey indicated that 45% of women had at least three food groups in their diet, and a mid-term evaluation found that only 14.3% of households reported consuming three or fewer food categories. These improvements were achieved through a multi-pronged approach addressing both supply and demand side gaps.

Gender disparities in food distribution within households persisted, with women often eating last and consuming leftovers. Limited programming initiatives addressed this issue. The project must intensify efforts to promote gender equity in food distribution to achieve desired outcomes.

The project had a profound impact on the self-confidence and public participation of children and adolescent girls. Members from both groups gained confidence, public speaking skills, and a better understanding of health, hygiene, and nutrition. The shift from using cloth to sanitary napkins during menstruation was particularly notable.

The project strengthened and improved access to Anganwadi Centers within targeted communities. Community monitoring systems for PDS and the MDM scheme were effective, contributing to improved service delivery. However, the lack of safe drinking water in some villages remained an issue.

Sustainability - The project demonstrated promising sustainability, particularly in kitchen gardens and seed banks. These initiatives saw consistent participation and engagement, with 83% of surveyed households maintaining kitchen gardens. High attrition rates among youth and inconsistent participation of women, however, posed challenges. Continuous community engagement and support are crucial for sustaining these initiatives.

The project's integration with government initiatives and efforts to empower communities to demand services were vital to its sustainability. Convergence with government departments and local agencies was a key factor in building long-term resilience. However, the project could benefit from strengthening linkages with livelihood schemes to enhance sustainability further.

Despite the huge advancements attained through the project, there are opportunities for further strengthening the program delivery and creating a deeper, long-lasting impact amongst the communities. The evaluators have identified some opportunities for improvements as listed below; these **Recommendations** have been discussed in detail in the main report:

- Strengthening of Program Monitoring Efforts
- Refining the Results Management Framework

- Improve the financial and Human Resource Management by aligning budget heads with current prices and adjust for inflation in future budgeting to ensure adequate resource allocation for program activities, considering allocating MIS staff at the district level or training youth as MIS staff at the district for greater coverage and capturing of results
- Strengthening Policy-Level Engagement and Advocacy Efforts in Bihar
- Elevate Gender Transformation Efforts by conducting Gender Intra-Household Dialogues, developing male engagement strategy, and intensifying programming efforts to promote gender equity and intra-household food distribution
- Enhance Strategic Focus on Sports for Empowerment
- Strengthen strategic engagements with KVK and Animal Husbandry departments at the district level to address pest and disease issues in Kitchen Garden and Backyard Poultry.
- Focus on Girls' Education and Vocational Training
- Integrate Economic Activities with the Women and Youth groups
- Promote Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Farming
- Measure the benefits of the water structure repair work
- Replicate Good Practices and Drive Adoption of Health Insurance Programs:
- Develop and implement an exit strategy to be rolled out during the program
- Develop Youth Cooperatives

When implemented, these recommendations will help refine the program, enhance its impact, and ensure its sustainability. They will also contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the project's achievements and areas for improvement, guiding future interventions in similar contexts.

1. Introduction

In the labyrinth of global challenges, malnutrition emerges as a formidable adversary, silently affecting millions. Globally, 735 million people are undernourished, and the share of undernourished people has increased from 7.5 percent in 2017 to 9.2 percent in 2022[i]. COVID-19, the Russia-Ukraine war, and economic stagnation have undone the achievements made in the past decade, exacerbating food and nutritional insecurity to unprecedented levels. Women and children disproportionately bear the burden of this crisis, facing heightened vulnerability across the globe. The UNICEF reports that nearly half of all deaths in children under five years are attributable to undernutrition as it puts children at greater risk of dying from common infections, increases the frequency and severity of such infections, and delays recovery. The interplay between undernutrition and infection has the potential to trigger a dangerous cycle, escalating illness and compromising nutritional well-being. Inadequate nutrition during the initial 1,000 days of a child's life may result in stunted growth, linked to impaired cognitive function and diminished academic and professional performance, resulting in non-realization of full human potential. The effects are inter-generational and add to the cumulative deficit that women gain over the lifecycle.

India is home to 224 million undernourished people and holds the unfortunate distinction of being the largest contributor to undernourishment globally. The Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) publication, "The State of Food Security and Nutrition in 2022," reveals a concerning trend: undernourishment prevalence in India increased from 14.6% in 2018-2020 to 16.3% in 2019-2021. Disturbingly, the report highlights that 17.3% of children under the age of five experience wasting, while 30.9% suffer from stunting. Additionally, over half of Indian women aged 15-49 grapple with anemia. Given the alarming prevalence of food and nutritional insecurity in the country, urgent and comprehensive interventions are imperative to safeguard the health and well-being of its population. In India, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar are unfortunately acknowledged for having elevated levels of malnutrition and food insecurity. According to the fifth round of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), Bihar records 43% stunted and 23% wasted children. In Madhya Pradesh, the figures stand at 36% for stunting and 19% for wasting.

Poor food and nutritional security in Bihar and MP can be attributed to multifaceted challenges on both the supply and demand sides. On the demand side, issues arise from a poor understanding of entitlements, hindering individuals' ability to access the benefits of government programs and schemes. Low socio-economic development significantly impede food and nutritional security in the two states. Additionally, marginalized sections of the population often bear a disproportionate burden, facing increased challenges in securing adequate nutrition. While on the supply side, Lack of infrastructure, lower agricultural productivity, and the lack of awareness, coupled with limited accessibility to essential government initiatives, exacerbates the struggle for food and nutritional security in these states.

In such a backdrop, Vikas Samvad Samiti, Centre DIRECT, and Abhiyan are implementing “SEWOH_VSS II: Building a community-based, resilient and sustainable food security model through community participation and advocacy in Madhya Pradesh and Bihar” with funding support from Terre des Hommes Germany e.g. (tdh) and Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The project is implemented in six districts of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, targeting 19,981 households for 12 months of food security across 140 villages. The project duration is 01-01-2020 to 31-12-2024. As the project approaches its last year, a mid-term evaluation has been commissioned by the TDH and BMZ. Evaluation details are presented in the following section.

1.1. Objectives and Purposes of Evaluation

The mid-term evaluation was commissioned with two main objectives: 1) Accountability and 2) Learning. The mid-term evaluation assessed the project's progress and strategies to achieve the planned goals through an external review. It also evaluated the effectiveness of the project results in terms of planned project results, learnings and challenges encountered during the project implementation, recommendations

for adaptation or expansion of the existing strategies, and sustainability of the project. Specific objectives, as mentioned in the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the mid-term evaluation,[1] are as follows:

- Critically analyze the planned project objectives, results, strategies, measures, and activities, as well as the target group and the stakeholders, organizations, and institutions involved, and evaluate whether the applied strategies have resulted in the desired outcomes.
- Critically examine the planned project measures according to the OECD DAC criteria of relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability.
- Resulting from the analysis, the evaluation shall provide clear recommendations for all stakeholders involved regarding the project outcome, project monitoring, or project management by implementing partners and tdh until now.
- Ensure financial accountability and transparency.
- Identify potential risks or challenges that could impact the actions or results proposed and the mechanisms and methodologies to ensure the sustainability of the results.
- To analyze the present project monitoring system at different levels.

1.2. Evaluation Details

The evaluation took place from December 15, 2023, to February 15, 2024. It commenced with a joint kick-off call involving participants from TDH, VSS, Centre DIRECT, and the evaluation team. Field visits were conducted between December 26, 2023, and January 10, 2024, covering all six districts. The evaluation team engaged in both quantitative and qualitative data collection during this period. Table below contains the visit details of the evaluation team across the six districts.

S. No	District Name	Date of Visit	Visited by:
1.	Sitamarhi	22 December 2023	Rahul R Sinha & Avance Research
2.	Jehanabad	26 December 2023	Rahul R Sinha & Avance Research
3.	Umaria	3 January 2024	Rahul R Sinha & Avance Research
4.	Satna	3 January 2024	Purna R Chowdhury & Avance Research
5.	Panna	6 January 2024	Purna R Chowdhury & Avance Research
6.	Rewa	9 January 2024	Purna R Chowdhury & Avance Research

[1] ToR available in Annexure.

Team Structure: The overall management approach towards planning and implementation of the evaluation manifested itself in the following team structure. The mid-term evaluation was led by Rahul Ranjan Sinha, and Purna Roy Chowdhury was the gender expert for the evaluation. Avance Research and Branding Solution supported the evaluation through quantitative and qualitative data collection across all six districts. Purna and Rahul covered three districts each during their field visits in Madhya Pradesh and Bihar. The local implementation partners facilitated the field visits for the evaluation team. Mobilizing research participants and seeking appointments with the government staff and departments were carried out by the local implementation partners.

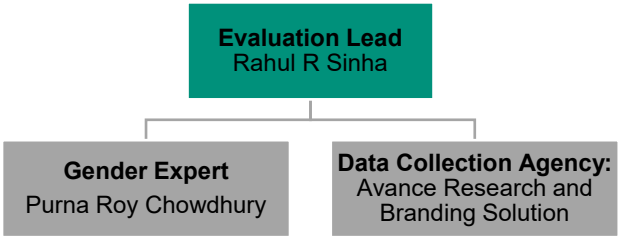


Figure 1: Team Structure

2. Evaluation Methodology

The mid-term evaluation was guided by the below-mentioned framework to successfully achieve the objectives set during the inception meeting. Through employing a mixed-method, utilization-focused evaluation, a consultative and participative approach was adopted during the design and implementation of this mid-term evaluation. Within the **Utilization-Focused Evaluation approach,** a gender lens was used to discern the program's impact on women. A gender-sensitive/transformative lens was adopted in the evaluation to discern the program's impact on women and girls and evaluate the inclusivity of the project interventions. The evaluation cohesively and comprehensively included gender indicators and generated gender-disaggregated data for analysis through a gender lens. Furthermore, the evaluation also examined the impact on vulnerable and disadvantaged sections in the region.

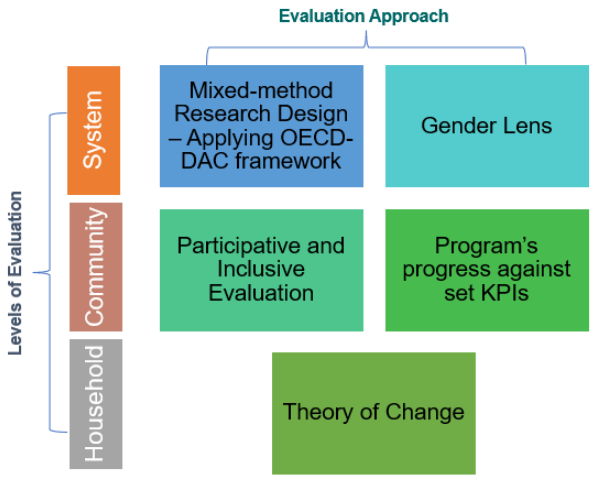


Figure 2: Guiding principles for Mid-term evaluation

The evaluation kickstarted with an inception meeting involving TDH and the local implementation partners in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. The meeting set up the evaluation agenda, timeline, and ways of working during the evaluation period. Next that, a stakeholder mapping exercise enabled the evaluation team to identify key actors and their priorities and responsibilities under the program. Leveraging that, the consultant adopted a consultative, inclusive, and participative approach to ensure that different stakeholders' voices were captured during the evaluation.

The evaluation focused on three levels: 1) System, 2) Community, and 3) Household, to assess the impact of the intervention and apply the OECD/DAC framework to assess the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability of the program.

The evaluation was based on gender (as enshrined in CEDAW) and child rights principles (as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child), both of which India has ratified. The evaluators and enumerators derived guidance on these policies at the outset of the assignment. Informed verbal consent was taken prior to the start of the data collection exercise. The research participants were explained about the research objectives, data privacy & confidentiality, and their voluntary participation in the research study.

2.1. Data collection toolkit

The consultant deployed six (6) lines of evidence for this mid-term evaluation. The methods and their contribution to the different levels of evaluation have been outlined in the table below, mapping the competence that they would lend to the overall impact assessment.

Lines of evidence	Methods	Impact at Household Level	Impact at the Community Level	Impact at Systemic Level	Unexpected /Unintended Impact
Desk Review • Stakeholder mapping • Project and visit reports • Theory of Change, LFA • Literature review • Baseline Report	Contribution analysis	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) • Govt. representatives • Community Leaders • Staff – Local Implementation Partners	Key Informant Interviews	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Survey • Project Beneficiaries: Women and Children	Statistical analysis	Yes	No	No	No
Impact Stories - Most Significant Change • Key Informant Interviews with project beneficiaries	Qualitative analysis	Yes	No	No	Yes
Focus Group Discussion • Project beneficiaries	Qualitative analysis	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Participatory Rural Appraisal	Qualitative analysis	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

Table 1: Lines of evidence and supporting evaluation methodology

2.2. Sampling Plan and Size

In line with the methodology outlined in the ToR, a mixed-method research design was used to drive the data collection activities. Quantitative surveys through structured client interviews via Computer Aided Personal Interviewing (CAPI) formed the core of the evaluation process, and a research instrument was developed. The evaluators used the research matrix and tool used during the baseline study to develop an exhaustive questionnaire.

Considering the research design and objective of the study, a one-sample formula was used to arrive at an effective sample size, and a total of 280 households were interviewed, with a margin of error of 5% at a 95% confidence level. All field enumerators were trained in research ethics, correct use of tools, and safeguarding through online training. The research instrument used during the evaluation is presented in Annexure I. Since the program didn't have a digitized database of beneficiaries, the program team provided a list of five villages across each of the districts, wherein the sample survey was conducted. The quantitative data collection happened between 26 December 2023 and 9 January 2024.

The qualitative research methods included Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with women and adolescents, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with Youth, Children, Women, and Adolescents, Participatory Rural Appraisal of villages, and KIIs with Community leaders and government staff. Research Instruments used for the qualitative research methods are presented in Annexure.

S.No	Method	Sample Size	Remarks
1.	Household Survey	280	Non-random selection of five villages across six program districts
2.	Focus Group Discussion	12	6 with Women groups; 6 with adolescents
3.	Key Informant Interviews – Project Beneficiaries	25	Youth – 6; Women – 7;Adolescents - 8 Children – 4
4.	Key Informant Interviews –	16	Community Leaders, Government Staffs
5.	Participatory Rural Appraisal	6	One across each of the six villages

The evaluators also used some participatory exercises during their visit to gain deeper insights during their interaction with the project beneficiaries. These exercises were:

- **Imagination Exercise**: The imagination exercise was conducted primarily with women, and they were presented with a scenario. E.g., A 5-member household in the community, comprising of a Mother-in-law, husband, wife, son, and daughter, decided to have egg curry for dinner but had only nine eggs. The research participants were asked to identify who in the household would eat only one egg.
- **Recall Exercise:** This exercise was primarily carried out with women, adolescents, and youth during the field visit. Participants were tasked with recalling the number of meals and various food items they consumed the previous day.
- **Activity Mapping:** Conducted mainly with adolescents, youth, and children, this exercise involved mapping their key activities throughout a regular day, from waking up in the morning to going to sleep at night.
- **Vignette Study:** The vignette study was also part of the quantitative survey. During the field visit, the evaluators implemented it on the field themselves as well. It captured the responsibilities and eating practices of the community.

2.3. Limitation of the evaluation

- **Attribution vs Contribution** – As the evaluation design lacked a comparison group, the evaluation is limited in attributing the impact to the program. Multiple programmatic interventions have been ongoing in the domain of food and nutritional security, further limiting the ability to attribute the changes to the project. Using multiple lines of evidence, the evaluators have tried to minimize this limitation. However, the program's contribution in the outcome areas has been established through desk review and KIIs.

- **Limited sample size for state/district level analysis** – The sample size for the quantitative survey was limited to establish statistically significant results at the state or district level. This limitation was negated with the extensive use of qualitative research methods.

- **Non-random selection of villages for the quantitative survey** – Due to the lack of availability of digitized data of program beneficiaries, the program team provided a list of five villages in each of the districts for the quantitative survey.

2.4. Ethical Compliance

Verbal consent was obtained from all research participants before commencing interviews. Informed consent ensured that individuals had a comprehensive understanding of the research's objectives, processes, potential risks, and benefits, thereby fostering trust and promoting voluntary participation while safeguarding participants' well-being and privacy. The consultant adhered to ethical guidelines, anonymized sensitive information, and secured data storage, ensuring the highest level of protection for participants' data while consistently respecting their trust and privacy during this evaluation.

3. About the Program

"SEWOH_VSS II: *Building a community-based, resilient and sustainable food security model through community participation and advocacy in Madhya Pradesh and Bihar"* is a project jointly financed by terre des hommes Germany and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The project is being implemented by Vikas Samvad Samiti, Centre DIRECT, and Abhiyan in 4 districts in Madhya Pradesh (Panna, Satana, Rewa, and Umaria) and two (2) underdeveloped districts in Bihar (Jehanabad and Sitamarhi) since 2020. The target groups in MP are Tribals and Dalits, while in Bihar, they are Dalits and the victims of feudal society. The project mainly focuses on children, youth, and women of vulnerable and marginalised communities. The target groups share the common challenges of food and nutritional security due to ignorance, lack of access and information among the communities, and lack of effectiveness and transparency in service delivery (among others).

The project aims *to build community institutions' capacity to access state food programs, nutrition, and health care services and promote food sovereignty to address the lack of nutrition among women and children.* The key program objectives are mentioned below:

- To strengthen the capacity of community-based institutions
- To improve the access of the target populations to state health, nutrition, and care services
- To ensure that communities would produce various and sufficient food to overcome dependence on external food supplies
- To establish a clear lobbying strategy and practice through community-based monitoring mechanisms and facilitation of demand generation
- *To establish and maintain an effective program MEL.*

The project was initially implemented by VSS directly in the target geography of MP. VSS has a long-standing engagement with these marginalised communities, working on the specific issue of their food security and political participation. VSS nurtures a network of community mobilisers who have been enrolled under this project. With the FCRA amendment in 2020, Centre DIRECT and Abhiyan were included and commissioned as direct implementing CBOs in Bihar under VSS's technical guidance and assistance. In 2021, with the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation of food security and health in the target communities was deeply affected. Both these incidences, FCRA amendment and COVID19, affected the planned course and implementation of the project, leading to two amendments to the proposed project.

Project Impact Numbers
• 140 villages • 19,981 households – achieve food security • 560 Groups of Children, Youth, and Women (120 in Bihar and 440 in MP) formed • 13896 children – access services; 8336 adolescent girls – access services

- 2100 adolescent girls - organised and capacitated
- 6874 malnourished and underweight children – growth tracked
- 4803 pregnant women – access services
- 7500 households under kitchen garden/seed bank/poultry interventions
- 140 Legal Committees will participate

The Project designed extensive strategies that integrated different intervention components and implementation approaches. Consistent with this, the Project adopted and deployed a comprehensive strategic approach that led to the diversification of opportunities.

Strengthen the capacity of community-based institutions	Improve the access of the target populations to state health, nutrition, and care services	Overcoming dependence on external food supplies	Establish a lobbying strategy and practice
• Establish Dastak community groups (Children, Youth, Adolescent Girls and Women) in each village • Train them on various topics related to rights, food security, leadership, etc. • Facilitate monthly meetings to discuss issues and determine action plan • Conduct Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) with women stakeholders	• Conduct dialogue with state Legislative Committees and other community stakeholders • Identify bottlenecks to service delivery and arrive at a consensus on the way forward. • Facilitate social audit process in select areas. • Track the health and nutritional status of women and children through Dastak Committees in collaboration with Anganwadi staff, ASHA, ANM, and Medical Officers, Sarpanch.	• Maintain Bio-diversity Register • Practice Kitchen Gardening • Set up Seed Banks • Practice Organic Farming • Repair defective Water Structures • Support Poultry Farming • Organize Food Fairs	• Organize Roundtables with thematic Experts • Facilitate Dialogue with Key Stakeholders • Sensitize Media through workshops and provide context-sensitive, thoughtful content inputs • Document and disseminate project learnings and conduct thematic studies.
Levers of Change *Community Empowerment and Participation | Capacity Strengthening and Training | Lobbying and Advocacy | Need-based and Context-specific Interventions | Evidence-based Reporting and Dissemination of Learning*			

4. Evaluation Findings

This section of the report includes the evaluation findings, organized using OECD/DAC Criteria. The evaluation findings are an outcome of the synthesis of results from the quantitative and qualitative research methods, desk review, and analysis of the project documents such as the annual reports, budgets, proposals, etc. Results have been captured across six OECD/DAC criteria: Relevance, Coherence, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Impact, and Sustainability.

4.1. Relevance

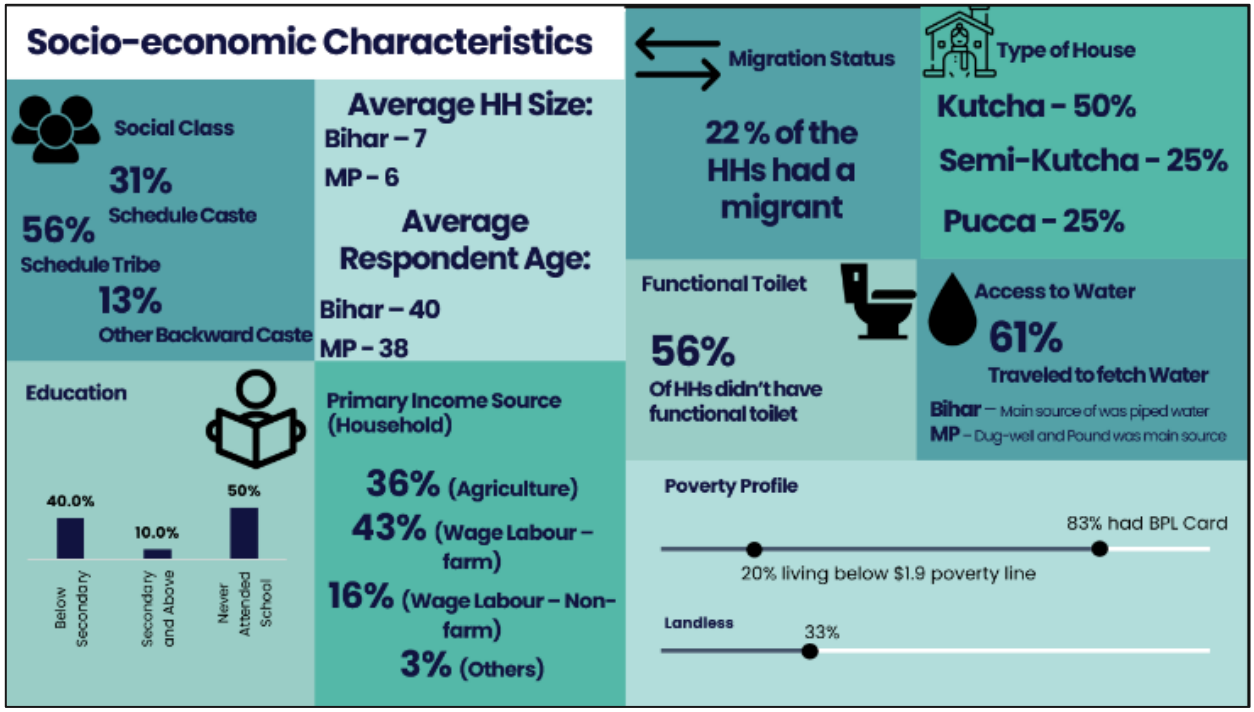
This section of the report captures the relevance of the VSS project at the household level. Results of the mid-term evaluation, capturing the relevance of the project at the household level, have been categorized in the following areas:

- *Relevance in the context of the targeted area,*
- *Relevance for the targeted group,*
- *Relevance of Project Design and Project Activities, and*
- *Relevance for the implementing organization.*

4.1.1. Relevance in the context of the targeted area

Referring to project documents, proposals, and annual reports, it is gathered that malnutrition remains a significant public health challenge in the targeted geographies in Bihar and MP, affecting various segments of the population. The project chose Madhya Pradesh and Bihar as target geographies, which are consistently reported to have the highest incidences of malnutrition in India and one of the highest rates of child mortality in the world. The maternal and child undernutrition scenario in the states of MP and Bihar represents a complex set of determinants, including poverty, lack of knowledge, and access. Other factors also confound the complexity of the issue: prohibitive gender and social norms, adverse behaviour and mindset towards accessing institutional health care, the ebbing of traditional food consumption practices, lack of access to safe water, limited agricultural productivity, and poor hygiene and sanitation.

Access to government schemes under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) was low in the targeted areas before the start of the project. 60% of 6,990 eligible households in Bihar and 20% of 12,991 eligible households in Madhya Pradesh do not have access to subsidized, high-quality food recognized under the National Food Security Act 2013.



The baseline study found that around 60% of 6,581 children in Bihar in the project region and 40% of 7,315 children under the age of 6 in Madhya Pradesh were malnourished. Further to that, 60% of 8,336 adolescent girls aged 15-19 in 140 target villages of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh were anemic, and their average body mass index was below 18.5. Dietary Diversity was also poor, and the baseline study found that 90% of the households in the target villages only ate Dal, wheat, and rice in their daily meals. They couldn't afford to buy vegetables and didn't grow vegetables.

The household survey during the mid-term evaluation also captured the socio-economic characteristics of the targeted population, as presented in the exhibit above. Results indicate the poor socio-economic status of the targeted households, indicating their vulnerabilities to poverty and hunger. The field visits by evaluators also augmented the understanding further, leading to the conclusion that **the project was highly relevant for the targeted area. There was a dire need for an intervention such as VSS to alleviate the deep-seated food and nutrition insufficiency issues in the targeted area.**

4.1.2. Relevance for the target group

The evaluation critically assessed the project's relevance to the target group. Deep-diving into this, the evaluation assessed the project's relevance for women, children, adolescents, and youths in the targeted geographies.

During the evaluations, the stakeholders at the Nutrition Rehabilitation Center (NRC) and Anganwadi Centers and the women groups endorsed the importance of addressing malnutrition in the region, given the bleak situation. Though malnutrition has largely been arrested in the target communities of the project under the influence of the project, it still exists in other underserved and backward areas of the states, and there is a lack of general awareness of the gravity of the issue. Earlier, many cases of anemia in the community went undetected. Women did not go for regular check-ups with any health expert or get their haemoglobin tested. After being attached to the program, many women stated that they inculcated the habit of seeking medical help. As a result, they discovered that they were anemic. With the right supplements and nutritious food, they recovered from anemia. The field visits also indicated that the VSS project has been primarily targeting Scheduled Tribes in MP and Scheduled Castes in Bihar. Both these social classes have been historically marginalized and impoverished. Health and nutritional concerns have been significantly widespread within these social groups, exacerbated by their departure from traditional dietary practices. **Results emerging from the desk research and field visits strongly indicate the high relevance of the VSS project for the target group**. One of the adolescent girls in Bihar aptly captured the project's relevance in her remark," *The project has been an eye-opener for us in many ways. We have learned to live a hygienic life and got a voice in the community*".

> I had much work throughout the day at home and on the farm. But I carried on without understanding why I was constantly feeling so weak. I did not think I should go to the health center for a checkup. I just accepted that I was not strong. - Member of VSS Women Group, Majhgawah Block, Satna

> "Earlier, women used to feed the child only when the child cried, and the child would be given a biscuit or a stale roti. Today, women are aware of the importance of fresh meals. A disciplined and healthy eating habit for the entire family keeps the energy high for all throughout the day." - (Member of VSS Women Group, Satna)

Many of the respondents interviewed during the evaluation mentioned that a wide gender gap existed in the community. Once menstruation sets in, girls are discouraged from mingling with boys. The gender gap starts to manifest its stark impact on girls/women starting from the adolescent phase, and it is also reflected in their health, education, nutritional access, and choices. In that light, the project interventions with adolescent girls on issues related to Menstrual Health and Hygiene have been highly relevant and have brought about a small yet noticeable shift in mindset and practices related to menstruation among adolescents and other stakeholders (youth and women).

> "Mobilising adolescent girls is challenging, as they are not allowed to mingle outside of home. Gender norms and restrictions start to be imposed on adolescent girls, which make it difficult for the girls to engage proactively and freely with the project." - (Field Mobiliser, Panna)

4.1.3. Relevance of Project Design and Project Activities

The project formulation started with the review of available secondary data on health and food security. It was followed by commissioning the baseline study, which aimed to refine the hypotheses and critical questions presented in the approved proposal, assess the community needs, and set the baseline for Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The baseline study was conducted by VSS and covered the six intervention

districts in Bihar and MP. Results emergent from the baseline study were used to finetune the project design, hinting at an adoption of an evidence-based approach. The evaluators observed a lack of thorough contextualization in project activities, particularly in light of the diverse socio-economic contexts of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. For instance, water scarcity emerged as a critical issue in Madhya Pradesh, prompting the inclusion of specific components in the project to address it through the restoration and rejuvenation of traditional water structures in the villages. Conversely, water scarcity was seldom a significant concern in Bihar, particularly in Sitamarhi and Jehanabad. However, due to the uniformity in the project design across both states, borewells or pumping sets for irrigation were provided in Bihar to make up for the focus on water structures.

Similarly, Backyard Poultry (BYP) had limited acceptance in quite a few locations in Bihar due to prevalent social norms and practices in the communities. Many of the households reported not practising BYP as either they or their neighbours were *Vegetarian*. The problem is compounded due to dense population areas and subsequent lack of Backyard for poultry. Available secondary literature also suggests issues in promoting BYP in Bihar. The Bihar Livestock Sector Analysis[ii] reports that the poultry sector in Bihar is currently constrained due to factors such as inadequate availability of feed resources and technical support services and poor quality of feeds, amongst others. Furthermore, it reports that BYPs in Bihar are often reared by Muslim and tribal communities. Given that most of the project's outreach in Bihar is amongst SC communities, it faced uptake challenges in many locations.

To sum up, the evaluators note that the formulation of the project design was relevant through adopting a data and evidence-based approach but lacked contextualization, especially in the context of Bihar. Using the secondary data and the baseline study, the project design was able to assess the extent of health, food, and nutritional insecurity in the communities and refine its approach.

The evaluation also assessed the relevance of project activities in the socio-economic context of the targeted households and geography. The pervasive presence of poverty (82% BPL), landlessness (33%), and low nutritional status - as found during the baseline survey, highlights the relevance of the project's activities. By ensuring access to nutritious food, the project directly addresses issues of malnutrition and poor health, which are prevalent in these regions. Additionally, the project supports activities such as kitchen gardens, seed banks, and BYP that increase food production and income for these communities. This holistic approach not only improves the immediate well-being of individuals but also fosters long-term resilience against economic and social challenges. The formation and collectivization of women and youth groups in the targeted communities were deemed extremely relevant to fight against the traditional marginalisation of the ST and SC communities. Overall, the evaluation concludes that the project activities were highly relevant for the targeted communities.

4.1.4. Relevance for the implementing partners

VSS has been extensively working in the domain of food and nutritional security since its inception. Through its deep engagement at the policy level and advocacy efforts, it has extensively worked on the issue in MP. The project is an extension of its efforts, thus highly relevant to its strategic objectives. Similarly, Centre DIRECT and Abhiyan have been working on child rights in Bihar and strongly align with project objectives.

> "The presence and work of VSS in the community also eases and improves our intervention, in terms of outreach, regular monitoring of services delivered through the Anganwadi Centers, increasing awareness and sensitization among the community members" - (CDPO-WCD Rewa Block, Madhya Pradesh)

Furthermore, the deliberate focus of the States to address the issue of malnutrition among women and children positions the SEWOH_VSS II project as relevant and timely to address these crucial social developmental issues. Further to that, the project has selected the most remote, underserved tribal communities of Madhya Pradesh and Bihar, catering to the most vulnerable and marginalized sections of the country's population. The convergence model involving ICDS, the Health Department, PDS, and nurturing the

community influencers in generating demand has been an effective model successfully implemented by VSS. Access to varied services has improved, as the community is now better informed and capacitated to generate demand on issues that concern their community and demand their rights on food security.

To sum up, the evaluators note that the project was relevant in its design, approach, and execution to address the issues of malnutrition and food security in the target locations. The identification of a certain section of the most backward region and the most vulnerable communities only draws attention to the need for more expanded intervention that goes deeper into the target communities and beyond in other underserved parts of the state.

New promises

The UN General Assembly adopted India's resolution to declare 2023 as the International Year of Millets. Since then, several central ministries and government organizations have worked towards promoting this "Nutri cereal." Tribal and forest communities of MP have traditionally produced varieties of millets, like Kodo, Bajra, Kutki, pearl millet, Jowar, etc. The crop is known to be climate resilient and apt for production in arid regions. Under the project, there is more scope for intentional collaboration with agencies like Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) and the Department of Agriculture to promote the cultivation of millets and sensitize the community towards its revival.

"Women are mostly engaged in millet farming. Advancing and increasing the production and consumption of millets will not only benefit the people from a health and nutrition point of view but will also help in advancing women's economic engagement, especially for women from rural, tribal, and agricultural communities of the Bundelkhand region of MP."
(Senior Scientist and Chief, Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Panna)

4.2. Coherence

This section of the report captures the coherence of the VSS project at the household level. Results of the mid-term evaluation, capturing the coherence of the project, have been categorized in the following areas:

- *Synergies with tdh strategic goals, policies, and regional strategies and*
- *Synergies with local, regional, and national initiatives.*

4.2.1. Synergy with tdh strategic goals, policies, and regional strategies

The project SEWOH_VSS II is being implemented directly by Vikas Samvad Samiti (VSS) in Madhya Pradesh and by Centre DIRECT and Abhiyan in Bihar. VSS is positioned to steer the work by building capacities of the CBOs in Bihar, advising them to implement the activities, guiding them in creating monitoring tools, and accompanying their advocacy initiative at the local and state levels. Tdh and VSS are aligned in their strategic organizational objectives to improve the living conditions of marginalized communities (Dalits and Adivasis). The consortium is committed to the progressive development of women and children in the areas of nutrition, health, and political participation through participatory and collectivized engagements and empowerment-driven capacity development endeavours. The long, solid and trusted partnership between tdh-G and the implementing organisation has positively impacted the lives of the country's most marginalised and vulnerable population.

Group members of 140 adolescent girls have been mobilized to address issues pertaining to health, nutrition, gender base violence, and gender rights. *Extracted from Annual Report_VSS_2022-23*

A total of 420 groups of children, youth, and women in Bihar and MP were functional and monitoring 147 Anganwadi's, 160 schools, and 71 Fair price shops (FPS). *Extracted from Annual Report_VSS_2022-23*

The project positions women, children, and youth at the heart of the intervention. The four community groups, VSS project groups (Women, Adolescents, Youth and Children), have been successfully formed under the project in all the target villages of the two states. As *'Springboards'* (as coined by tdh-G) these committees have advanced socio-economic wellbeing and empowerment of marginalised groups by addressing malnutrition and food security in their community. The project's mechanism of strengthening the capacity of children and youth is in alignment with tdh's global strategic goal of *Young Environmental Voices.* The focus on the youth has been the pillar of the project. Interaction with representatives of VSS Youth Group strongly manifests leadership, confidence, and motivation among Youth as change agents and role models. Their engagement with the program has improved their lives (confidence/influence). Their progressive growth has extended their circle of influence in solidarity and support to the community's children and women's groups. The adolescent girls have come out of their homes and participate in meetings and hold confident conversations with adults and persons in positions of authority, now.

The evaluation results strongly indicate synergies with the tdh's strategic goals, policies, and regional priorities. The VSS project contributes to the tdh's strategic objectives of reaching the marginalised and vulnerable section of the society in India. Furthermore, it strengthens the tdh's global strategic goal of *Young Environmental Voices.*

4.2.2. Synergy with regional and national initiatives

Food and Nutritional Security is one of the topmost priorities of India's policymakers. National Food Security Act (NFSA) 2013, Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), POSHAN Abhiyaan (2018), Mid-Day Meal (MDM), National Food Fortification Program (NFFP) are some of the critical government programs targeted at improving food and nutritional security for the low-income segments of the country. Despite such longstanding and multi-layered efforts to enhance food and nutritional security in the country, India continues to struggle for food and nutritional security. With such a background, the VSS project is highly coherent with the country's needs and policy priorities. Especially in the case of Bihar and MP, two of India's poorest performing states on health and nutrition indices, the VSS project is highly coherent with regional initiatives. Some of the regional initiatives in the two states are:

1. Madhya Pradesh (MP) is one of the few states in India that has a nutrition mission (the Atal Bal Evam Arogya POSHAN Mission, or ABM), bringing health and nutrition under a common umbrella of interventions and representing a unique partnership between two important departments critical for food and early childhood care and development: the Department of Health and the ICDS. The state is also attempting a decentralized model of service delivery (including healthcare services).
2. The Government of Bihar has been proactive in developing a State Nutrition Policy under the Manav Vikas Mission, and the Department of Social Welfare has been working on implementing the policy with the participation of a number of development partners. In 2014, a statewide campaign called Bal Kuposhan Mukt Bihar was launched to address child undernutrition in the state.

VSS has a proven record of effective collaboration and good rapport with various government departments, community influencers, and the media. They have been successful in their effort to empower communities to generate demand for government action and service delivery and claim their rights on various issues related to nutrition, health rights, gender, climate change, forced migration, and displacement through evidence-based advocacy.

As a result of this sustained collaboration, the Madhya Pradesh state government, through a collaborative process with VSS, officially sanctioned a nutrition policy and made it effective from June 1, 2021. VSS, in partnership with the Department of Women and Child Development (WCD), played a pivotal role in formulating a comprehensive framework for the execution of this nutrition policy in the state. **This deeper engagement with the state government can be seen as a testimony of the project's coherence with the regional priorities and the policy landscape**.

The project has generated awareness among the community, especially women and youth, on the various schemes and benefits that the communities can take benefit of. Schemes like Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY), Chief Minister Kanya Utthan Yojana, Chief Minister Mahila Udyami Yojana, Subsidized food grains under National Food Security Act (NFSA), MGNREGA, etc. are regularly discussed in VSS Committee meetings. The program participants are seen to have the most substantial convergence with ICDS, PDS, and NRC, given the primary focus on the issue of health and nutrition. However, collaboration with departments that promote livelihoods needs to be strengthened with the emerging needs. **There is scope for strategic partnership with Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) and the Horticulture department that provides seeds and samplings and imparts technical and climate-sensitive training for women who are engaged in farming and agriculture (including kitchen gardens). It would further enhance the project's synergies with the local governance structures in the operating areas.**

The community, especially the youth, has sporadically involved the Department of Rural Development in repairing defective water structures (hand pumps), bringing in electrical lines to the villages, and pleading for the construction of roads to increase accessibility. However, it is time for the dialogue between the community and various government departments to be expanded and proactively facilitated by VSS project nurtured community leaders, so that the community can benefit from the various schemes and benefits towards its upliftment. Tribal communities in the villages of MP are still struggling with their landlessness, security of land tenure in forest areas, and women's land rights. **Continued enhancement of capabilities through rights, access to resources and training, dialogue, and strategic convergence are the way forward.** The Youth leadership that has emerged from the VSS program shows great promise for bridging the gap between demand, access, and action.

Harnessing India's Demographic Dividends: Empowering Youth Through Program Synergies

Nafisa (name changed), from Khairasiyanagar Village of the Debora Block Rewa, was involved with VSS as a Youth Leader. The exposure during the project motivated Nafisa to contribute to the development and upliftment of her community through her participation in Local Governance. Today, Nafisa works as the Counselor for Nagar Parishad in the Debora Block of the Rewa district. As the Counselor, Nafisa has ensured that the village's target population receives the benefits of the social protection schemes. She encourages girls and youth to come forth and take on active leadership roles in advancing the interventions and addressing any concern that emerges from the community.

"I am committed to advocating against the evacuation of the village from the site and for extending a permanence for the community to stay in their current location, with access to all essential amenities, infrastructure, and services."

4.3. Effectiveness

This section of the report captures the evaluation findings on the Effectiveness of the VSS project. The evaluation findings were synthesized through evaluators' field observations and the information received during the structured interviews; the authors have categorized this section into three parts as listed below:

- *Project Formulation, Implementation and Management*
- *Results Management Framework*

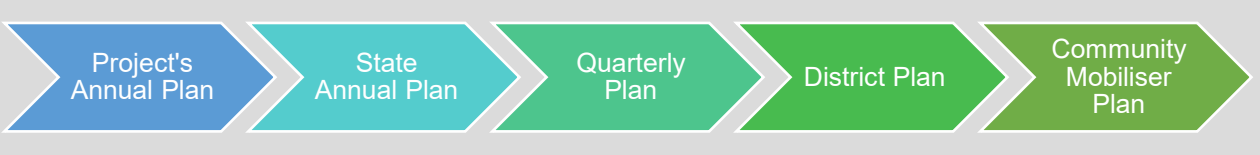
- *Policy Level Engagement*

4.3.1. Effectiveness of Program Implementation and Management

Project Planning and Implementation

VSS took the lead in overseeing the overall project management and implementation in Bihar and MP, with Centre DIRECT and Abhiyan implementing the project activities in two districts of Bihar. VSS supported the organizations in Bihar through technical assistance, providing handholding and backstopping support with its two-member team in Patna, Bihar, and led the project planning and implementation in MP through its local and state teams in Bhopal.

The project planning was spearheaded through an annual work plan, which was broken down into quarterly and, eventually, monthly work plans for each district. The outputs set out under the district plan were further distributed amongst community mobilizers present, and the district project coordinator was tasked to guide and ensure quality attainment of the results.

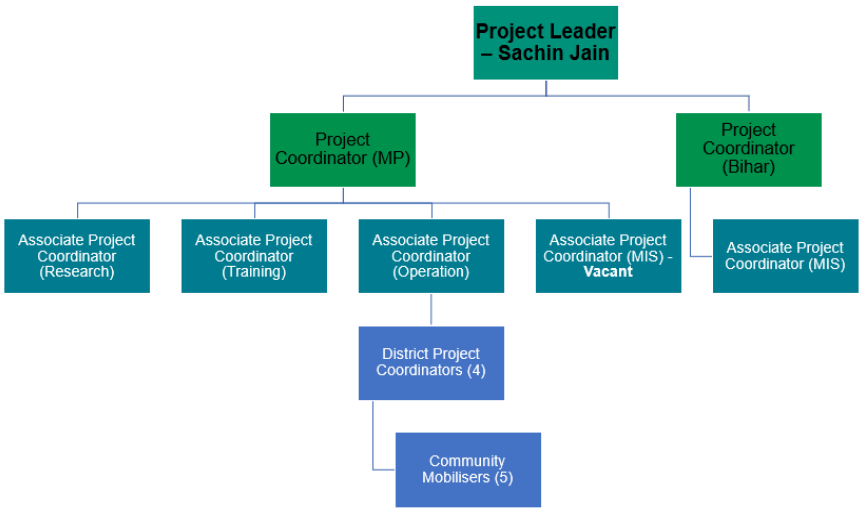


At the onset of the project, a two-day meeting involving all project employees was convened to discuss the implementation plan and establish responsibilities and roles among the employees and organizations. Additionally, in each project village, a community meeting was conducted to introduce the project, delineate community groups, provide explanations regarding various interventions, and define responsibilities and roles among project partners, CBOs, and community group representatives.

The evaluators noted consistency in the project planning and management across the six districts. **The overall planning and implementation were thorough and organized, resulting in the effective implementation of the project activities.**

Project Management Structure

The project management was led by the Project Leader at VSS, with each state's operations overseen by a State Project Coordinator. These coordinators managed the overall operations of the project in their respective states and provided technical backstopping support for the effective execution of the project. In Madhya Pradesh, there were four Associate Project Coordinators – one each for research, training, operations, and MIS, as outlined in the adjoining exhibit. Conversely, in Bihar, there was only one Associate Project Coordinator responsible for managing MIS. The research function was handled from the Bhopal office, while training and operations were managed by the two-member team.



At the district level, the project was led by the District Project Coordinator, with five Community Mobilisers delivering interventions to the last mile. Each mobilizer covered approximately five villages, typically spread across 5-15 kilometres.

Figure 2: Project Management Structure - VSS

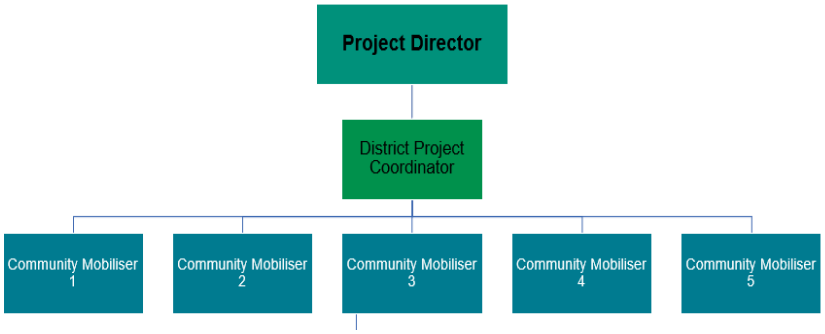


Figure 1: Project Management Structure - Abhiyan & Centre DIRECT

At Abhiyan and Centre DIRECT in Bihar, the project was led by a Project Director, with project operations based in Jehanabad and Sitamarhi, respectively. The district operations were overseen by the District Project Coordinator, with five community mobilizers assigned to each district. In Sitamarhi, there was a slight deviation in the management structure, with block coordinators supervising community mobilizers in two blocks – Majorgunj and Bairgania. Although these positions were not originally approved in the project design, they enhanced the project's effectiveness due to the geographical spread of project operations.

Project Monitoring and Supervision

The approach adopted for project monitoring and supervision was multi-layered, with daily monitoring primarily led by District Project Coordinators at the level of project activities and implementation. They monitored the execution of the weekly activity plans of Community Mobilisers and backstopped when necessary. At the next level, regular field visits by State Project Coordinators supplemented this oversight, while yearly visits by the project director and leader monitored progress.

Outcome monitoring utilized a data-based approach, employing various tools such as the IDDS survey, BMI monitoring for adolescents, growth monitoring for children, and anemia tracking for adolescents to assess the nutritional status of the target group. This approach proved highly effective, providing an accurate depiction of the project's impact and facilitating course correction and linkages to government schemes.

However, a notable limitation was the limited usage of digital tools and technologies, exemplified by the project's reliance on a Microsoft Excel-based Management Information System (MIS). This system failed to provide real-time information on project activities, impeding effectiveness and efficiency. This deficiency is discussed further in the subsequent section of the report.

In summary, **project monitoring and supervision were deemed highly effective. The multi-layered approach was fit for the purpose, and the adoption of outcome-monitoring methods enhanced the project's effectiveness. An area of improvement was the limited adoption of digital tools and technologies to enhance the project's effectiveness and efficiency further.**

Effectiveness of Group Formation, Attrition, and Group Dynamics

The effectiveness of group formation, dynamics, and attrition within the VSS project in Bihar and MP was critically assessed. Group formation was deemed effective as the project team engaged with community leaders and members, leveraging existing social capital. In Bihar, Jeevika groups were also utilized for the formation of women's groups in some places. For children and adolescent groups, an intensification strategy was observed, with multiple group members from the same household. Group dynamics were vibrant, with members demonstrating a strong sense of association and solidarity, evidenced by actions such as sharing produce from kitchen gardens and poultry, which further enhanced community social capital.

However, attrition rates, particularly among adolescent and youth groups, were high, reaching up to 50% in some cases, primarily due to marriage and migration. The annual project report of 2023 also captures such incidences in some of the project districts. The transition from children and adolescents to youth groups was also noted in some cases. In MP, where the program entered its second phase, significant attrition was observed among women's groups, attributed to factors such as COVID-19 and the gap between the project phases. Women's unavailability due to the burden of multiple tasks also contributes to their attrition.

To address attrition, steps such as linking groups with economic activities are recommended, as there was high demand among members, especially women and youth, for such linkages. These efforts aim to enhance group sustainability and mitigate the impact of external factors contributing to attrition. **In conclusion, while group formation and dynamics were generally effective, attrition remained a challenge, particularly among adolescent and youth groups, requiring strategic interventions to sustain group membership and engagement.**

Effect of COVID-19 on the project implementation

India bore the world's second-highest burden of cases. The Indian government's early lockdown measures, which were among the most stringent globally, resulted in the loss of livelihoods and income for over 400 million daily wage earners in the informal economy. The project coincided with the onset of the pandemic and COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown affected the project implementation severely, as the field operations were halted. Group meetings were stopped, and the project groups were mostly dysfunctional during the period. However, the project demonstrated flexibility and adapted to the changed context as it shifted its focus to immediate relief against COVID-19. The project effectively enhanced the food and nutritional security of vulnerable households by facilitating linkages to social security linkages, ration distribution, and hygiene education. As the country lifted the lockdown restrictions and the pandemic phased out, the project restarted its operations. The project has caught up and is now poised to achieve the targets set in the project proposal. In the context of COVID-19, this is a significant achievement, demonstrating resilience and adaptability despite the challenging circumstances posed by the pandemic.

4.3.2. Results Management Framework

The performance evaluation assesses if the program objectives arrived at from the elaborated Theory of Change were achieved or not. The assessment of the overall grant performance involves the assessment of progress against the project's Key Performance Indicators, implementation, and program outcomes, as well as factors that may have hindered each of these elements.

As per the latest annual report (2023) on the project, its progress is on track. An analysis of the progress against the set target is presented in Annexure II. Out of the 11 key indicators present in the RMF, nine have been achieved or overachieved for the project's lifecycle. This is a commendable achievement of the project, given that it lost about two years due to the disruptions of the pandemic. Two indicators that are reported to be sluggish at this stage are related to the outreach targets for improving the food and nutritional status of the households in the target geography (77.5%) and the linkages of the pregnant and lactating women to the government hospital for receiving pre and post-natal care (68.5%). As the project enters into the last year of its implementation, it is expected that the targets will be met by the project closure. **To conclude, the evaluators note that the project's progress has been laudable, especially in the context of the disruptions due to COVID-19. Most of the project targets are met or on track and are expected to be completed during the project's tenure.**

VSS' work in the selected villages has shown positive results. Most stakeholders have mentioned that the project's holistic approach to addressing malnutrition and ensuring food security has been effective. The table below highlights the effectiveness of the VSS project:

Effectiveness of Interventions	
Activities	**Output**
Community-based Monitoring of Health, Nutrition and Care Service Delivery (FPS, Anganwadi, NRC); Kitchen Garden	Out of 22450 (MP-15690 and Bihar-6760) families in the project area, the food and nutritional status of 9999 (MP 5622 and BH 4377) families improved by sustained food availability throughout the year. 2342 (MP 1565 and BH 777) malnourished children have been supported. 107 Children (MP-100, BR-7) were sent to the Nutrition Rehabilitation Centre and recovered from the treatment. 42 villages in Madhya Pradesh were reported free from Severe Malnourishment (SAM), and no single death of under 6-year children was recorded in 91 project villages.
Awareness, Capacity Development, and Formation of Community Groups	Group members of 140 adolescent girls have been mobilized to address issues pertaining to health, nutrition, gender-based violence, and gender rights.
Convergence with Government Stakeholders and Institutional Mechanisms	3919 of 5079 childbirths took place in government institutional setup. A total of 2961 pregnant and lactating women availed pre-natal and post-natal care from the government hospitals, and 5416 eligible pregnant and lactating mothers received financial (PMMVY) and the JSY Scheme.
Food Diversification through Kitchen Garden Initiative	9892 households (MP-8213, BR-1679) are producing and consuming diversified food such as a variety of vegetables, fruits, and roots. Spinach and green vegetables are consumed as sources of iron.

The evaluation also focussed on assessing the effectiveness of the RMF for the project. Overall, the RMF of the project was found to be robust, capturing the project's outreach, targets, and baseline status. Furthermore, the indicators used for tracking the health, food, and nutritional status of the targeted beneficiaries were robust and effective. Additionally, the means of verification and measurement approach were clearly articulated in the RMF for a majority of the indicators, lending it a more objective and nuanced approach. Some of the indicators lacked measurement definitions. The evaluation findings also found a few areas requiring improvement in the RMF. Firstly, categorizing RMF indicators into output and outcome measures would provide clarity on the project's progress and impact. Additionally, setting the project's output indicator targets for marginalized groups, including widows, disabled individuals, and the landless, is crucial to ensure equitable access and inclusion. Lastly, incorporating targets for knowledge products would enhance the project's knowledge dissemination efforts and contribute to sustainable outcomes. Addressing these gaps will strengthen the RMF's effectiveness in monitoring and evaluating the project's performance and impact.

4.3.3. Policy level engagement

The evaluation findings indicate that the program has effectively engaged at the policy level to influence nutrition policies and strategies. In MP, the program has played a significant role in supporting the formulation of state-level nutrition policy, as well as working on tribal nutrition policy. Through an extensive engagement with the policymakers and evidence-based advocacy for about two years, VSS supported the formulation of state-level nutritional policy in MP. This policy-level change has ensured that MP has become one of the few states in India that have a community-based nutrition management policy.

An area of extensive engagement was with the Women and Child Department and Health Department in MP. Six expert rounds and consultations were organized in MP, and these sessions provided opportunities to present the project model, share learnings, and discuss challenges, thereby contributing to policy dialogue and formulation. Another notable engagement was the forging of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Atal Bihari Vajpayee Institute of Good Governance and Policy Analysis, Govt of MP (AIGGPA), indicating a commitment to institutional collaboration and policy influence.

At the national level, the program organized a National Consultation on Food and Nutrition Security in New Delhi in collaboration with partner organizations. Additionally, a national conclave on the theme of climate change and food security was organized in Patna, furthering discussions on key policy issues. In Bihar, an expert round was conducted in Patna with the participation of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange.

Overall, **these efforts demonstrate the program's effectiveness in engaging at the policy level to shape nutrition policies and strategies, foster multi-stakeholder collaboration, and contribute to the broader discourse on food and nutrition security, especially in MP. In Bihar, there were sporadic efforts to engage at the policy level and will need a boost in the final phase of the project.**

4.4. Efficiency

This section of the report captures the evaluation findings on the Efficiency of the VSS project. The authors have categorized this section into three parts, as listed below:

- *Use of Funds (Cost-Effectiveness)*
- *Adequacy of human and financial resources, and*
- *Quality and Efficiency of Oversight.*

4.4.1. Use of Funds (Cost-Effectiveness)

The methodology employed in this evaluation does not allow for a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis. Such an analysis would necessitate definitive data on outcomes and costs, which fell outside the scope of this evaluation. Nonetheless, this section outlines the project activities observed, which contribute to cost-effectiveness. Overall, it was noted that there was no evidence of unnecessary expenditure in the field.

The overall fund management mechanism also ensured that grant money was used in a timely manner, and grantees only received subsequent rounds of funds once they had exhausted the granted money. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when the national lockdown was imposed, and project activities were halted, the project demonstrated flexibility by using available funds to provide immediate relief measures through the distribution of dry rations. Changes within the allocated budget were made in discussion with TDH, and families were provided with support. This flexibility facilitated the project's entry into Bihar and the development of connections with the community. Furthermore, it established linkages with local government, and communities began participating in other project activities as well.

There was also evidence of efficient usage of resources provided under the project. The distribution of seeds for the kitchen garden was done once, but the staff motivated the beneficiaries to save the seeds for the next season. Additionally, the produce and seeds were also shared with neighbours in many villages. The repair work of defective water structures in select villages were executed on a cost share basis. While the cost of raw materials (cement, paint, bricks) was borne by the project, the community contributed their labour-hours. This trickle-down effect was achieved without any additional cost. **In sum, the evaluators opine that the VSS project used the funds and resources efficiently, maximizing the returns, and adopted a flexible approach to enhance the project's efficiency.**

4.4.2. Adequacy of human and financial resources

The evaluation critically assessed the adequacy of the human and financial resources available to the project by reviewing the approved budget, observation, and interviews with the project staff. Some of the key insights emerging from the evaluation results present opportunities for improvements in future

programming. One prominent and widely reported gap was the usage of outdated rates for budgeting purposes. For example, the per-day stay arrangement was budgeted at INR 250 in the approved budget. Given the current prices and market rates, this amount was deemed very low, and staff struggled to make bookings within the allocated sum. The evaluators recommend reviewing the budget to align it with current market prices. Lastly, in a long-term project like this, it is recommended to adjust the budget for inflation over the years.

The evaluator also assessed the adequacy of human resources for the project delivery. At the district level, the community mobilizers were highly efficient. Almost all of them managed the project activities across five villages in the district and had to travel 5-15 km to cover their target villages. Two of the critical gaps observed in terms of staffing arrangement were:1. the lack of a designated position for MIS purposes at the district level, and 2. Poor representation of women staff at the state and district levels. The District Project Coordinators were burdened with MIS responsibility and spent a significant amount of their time on it. This curtailed their monitoring and supervisory efforts in the field, ultimately hampering the project's efficiency. The lack of women staff at the ground level has affected the effective mobilization and capacitation of adolescent girls and women and limited the learning on gender barriers and challenges, leading to a missed opportunity of gender-transformative program implementation.

Finally, at the state level, there was sufficient availability of human resources in the MP, with staff available for project management, knowledge management, advocacy, MIS, and training. In Bihar, the availability of staff for knowledge management and advocacy would have benefitted the program.

To sum up, the evaluation results suggest that the availability of financial and human resources was moderately efficient. This efficiency was primarily hindered by gaps in the usage of outdated budget rates, lack of MIS staff at the district level, and requirement of staff to steer knowledge management and advocacy efforts in Bihar.

4.4.3. Quality and Efficiency of Oversight

The evaluation assessed the quality and efficiency of the oversight provided for the project's implementation at three levels:

i. Oversight provided by TDH,
ii. Oversight by VSS, and
iii. Oversight by the district team.

TDH closely collaborated with its grantees during the project's implementation and provided them handholding support through regular partner meets, capacity-building initiatives for FCRA compliance & accounting, and fund management. Grantees valued such support immensely. Additionally, TDH conducted regular monitoring visits to track the project's progress. Moreover, it monitored the project's advancement through bi-annual and annual project reports. Overall, **the evaluators note that TDH was actively engaged during the project's implementation and provided the required handholding and support for compliance and technical assistance.**

At the next level, the evaluation focused on assessing the quality and efficiency of oversight provided by the VSS team, especially in Bihar, where it shepherded the project implementation and played the role of Technical Service Provider (TSP) as well. Through regular monitoring and capacity-building measures, VSS provided oversight of the project implementation. A two-member VSS team in Bihar provided oversight by tracking the project's progress and providing MIS support and training efforts. The VSS team also helped the implementation partners with some of the state-level linkages for project activities. **Overall, the support provided in project monitoring, MIS, and capacity building was found to be satisfactory**. **As**

mentioned in the section above, due to a lack of manpower and strategic focus, the quality of support in policy-level engagement and advocacy was found to be weak.

Lastly, the evaluators also assessed the quality and efficiency of the oversight provided by the district team for the project implementation during their field visits, using observation and structured interviews with the team. District Project Coordinators were responsible for ensuring the quality of project delivery and monitored it through regular field visits and supervision. The project also had components for tracking the project's outcome through periodic surveys and monitoring, such as BMI monitoring for adolescents and growth monitoring of children, amongst others. A critical gap evaluators observed was the lack of adoption of digital tools and technology in project monitoring and tracking. The project's efficiency was marred by this severely. For example, there was no consolidated live dashboard to track the project's status. It could have immensely boosted the project's monitoring and efficiency. Another example of a lack of digital adoption was the process of BMI or growth monitoring. As explained in the exhibit below, it was a paper-based process. The overall process was highly time-consuming and deprived the community mobilizers of real-time information. A simple, inexpensive mobile-based application could have made it real-time and efficient.

In conclusion, **the evaluation findings suggest that the overall quality and efficiency of the oversight were found satisfactory, barring a few gaps, as highlighted above. The project's efficiency would be significantly boosted by embracing digital tools and technologies for monitoring and oversight purposes and allocating more resources for policy-level engagement and advocacy in Bihar**.

4.5. Impact

The evaluation captured the impact of the project at four levels:

- Impact at the household level;
- Impact at the children, adolescents, and Youth level;
- Impact at the community level; and
- Impact at the system's level.

4.5.1. Impact at the household level

This section of the report captures the impact of the VSS project at the household level. Results of the mid-term evaluation, capturing the impact of the project at the household level, have been categorized in the following areas:

- *Awareness and access to food and nutritional security,*
- *Awareness and access to government benefits,*
- *Dietary Diversity, and*
- *Gender Equity and intra-household food distribution.*

Awareness and access to food and nutritional security

The VSS project had a specific focus on enhancing access to food and nutritional security in the intervention area through a multi-pronged approach by working on demand generation as well as strengthening the supply side. The program had interventions at four levels: 1) Household level, 2) Community Level, 3) Policy Advocacy, and 4) Social Networks and Linkages to enhance awareness and access to food and nutritional security for the communities.

The evaluation results suggest significant improvement in the awareness and access to food and nutritional security of the households in the intervention areas. A remarkable 95% of surveyed households reported an increase in their understanding of health and nutrition issues since the inception of

the VSS project, underscoring its impact. The project groups played a transformative role in elevating awareness of health and nutrition education within communities. Through both capacity-building efforts and leveraging their social capital and networks, these groups significantly contributed to heightened levels of health and nutritional awareness among community members. It resulted in improved nutritional practices and behaviour change at large in the community. E.g., *There were many taboos related to childbirth and breastfeeding in tribals from MP. The newborn was not allowed to be breastfed immediately upon being born. The first milk was given as an offering to the Gods. But now, with the awareness that the program has generated, communities know the importance of the first milk and give it to newborns.*

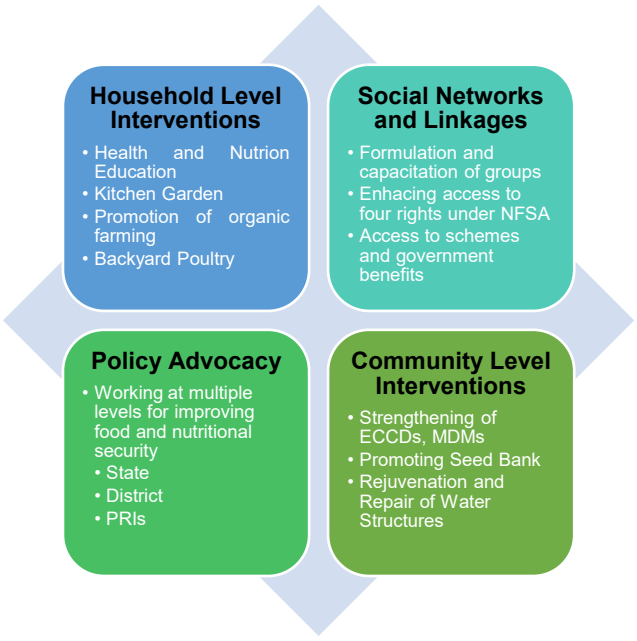


Figure 3: Program Focus and Stakeholders

On the supply side, there was a notable improvement in the condition and operation of Anganwadi Centers (AWCs) during the project period. Similarly, access and quality of mid-day meals (MDMs) improved during the project period. The other underlying causes for the improved awareness and access to health and nutritional security were the kitchen garden, backyard poultry, repair, and rejuvenation of water structures. These have been discussed in the subsequent section of the report. With these efforts on the supply and demand side, malnutrition has reduced significantly in the intervention areas.

In conclusion, the project's impact on improving awareness and access to food and nutritional security was deep and impactful. It not only elevated the discourse on health and nutrition to a public platform but also empowered individuals, mainly adolescents and youths, to advocate for these issues within their households and communities.

Awareness and access to government benefits

The VSS project has been diligently focused on facilitating access to the four entitlements outlined in the National Food Security Act (NFSA): the Public Distribution System (PDS), Mid-Day Meal (MDM) scheme, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), and Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY). Beyond these core schemes, the project has also targeted efforts to improve access to various other social security and government programs.

Evaluation findings indicate substantial progress in ensuring access to and the quality of these schemes within the specified areas of intervention. On the demand side, the project effectively raised awareness about entitlements and program benefits among community members through targeted sessions conducted with the four groups established under the program. Additionally, community monitoring mechanisms were put in place to uphold the quality of access to these programs. On the supply side, the project fostered deeper engagements and collaborations with governmental bodies and officials, thereby fortifying program quality and expanding access to previously underserved populations. **This comprehensive approach, addressing both demand and supply aspects, resulted in heightened awareness and increased access to these four vital programs within the intervention area**.

> The Youth group plays a crucial role in ensuring that all households have their ration cards, and receive their due quota every month without any challenges. They also help the households in registering or making any change on the online portal.
>
> - Community Leader Bilha village in Panna

Additionally, the evaluation made specific inquiries about the awareness and access to some of the important government schemes amongst the communities. Evaluation results indicate that communities had a high

level of awareness about various government schemes (Refer Fig X), plausibly due to the information received through the groups created under the VSS project but had a moderate level of access to these schemes. The qualitative interactions during the field visits revealed that VSS's presence on the ground and its rapport with government stakeholders played a critical role in enabling access to various government schemes. The quantitative survey results suggest low uptake of health insurance schemes such as RSBY or Ayushman Bharat remained low (below 30%). **Given that the health shocks are key to falling back into the poverty trap, especially for low-income households, driving uptake of these schemes would have been extremely beneficial for these households.**

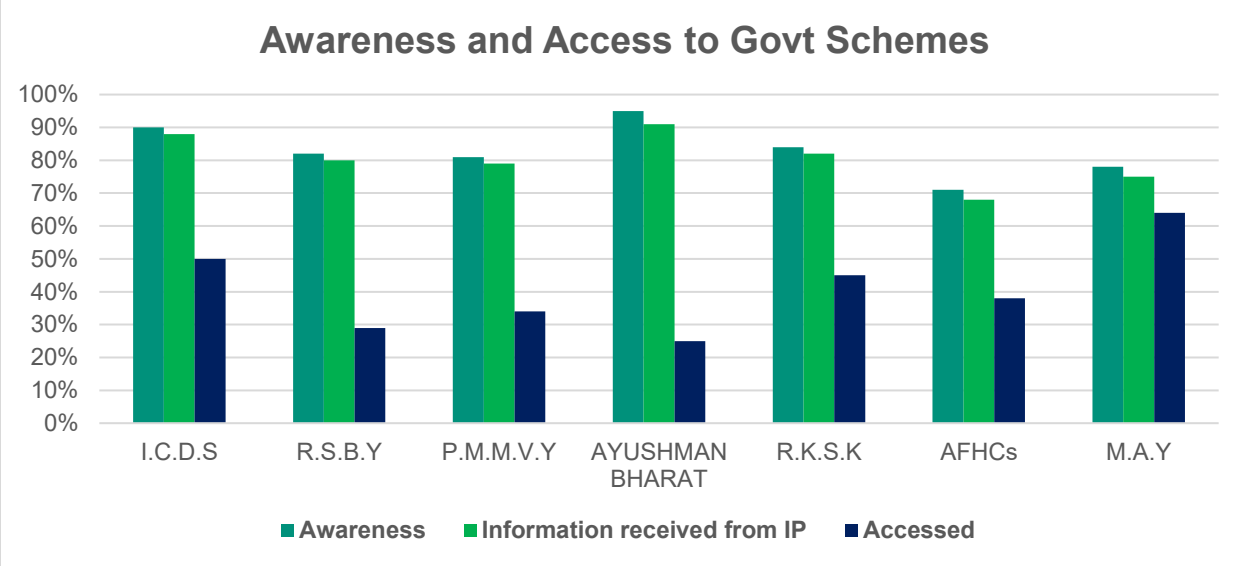


Figure 4: Awareness and Access to Government Schemes

Dietary Diversity

The evaluation results suggest that the project had a notable influence on enhancing the dietary variety within households in the targeted region. By fostering heightened awareness and facilitating improved access to various food security schemes, along with diversifying the cultivation in kitchen gardens, preserving and circulating seeds and engaging in backyard poultry, the communities successfully broadened their dietary options.

Based on the IDDS survey during the second year of the project period, it was noted that about 45 percent of women had at least three food groups in their food intake. The household survey during the mid-term evaluation found that only 14.3 percent of households reported eating three or fewer than three food categories. This was triangulated through self-reported improvements in dietary diversity since the project's initiation, with a substantial 95% of respondents noting positive changes. The consistency of these findings was reinforced through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), where participants universally acknowledged an increased adoption of a broader range of food groups due to the intervention. Even accounting for seasonality, the progress is notable, showcasing the profound impact of the project on the dietary diversity of communities.

> We used to have only Rice, Daal, and Potatoes earlier. Green leafy vegetables were a rarity on our food plate. Only after the Dastak project, we started growing and consuming green leafy vegetables.
>
> - Adolescent Group in Sitamarhi

Embedded in local traditions, kitchen gardening has been a longstanding practice in these districts but was moderately used for the cultivation of green vegetables and was not an organised practice. However, thanks to the efforts of the project, communities have now embraced regular cultivation of green leafy vegetables.

Furthermore, certain communities have ventured into commercial vegetable cultivation as a result of these initiatives.

Delving into the realm of dietary diversity, the assessment results indicate a lower level in Bihar, where approximately half of the households reported consuming four or fewer food groups in the last 24 hours. This stands in contrast to Madhya Pradesh, where only one-fourth of households reported a similar dietary pattern. Examining dietary diversity from a socio-economic perspective, households belonging to the Scheduled Caste exhibited lower diversity compared to Scheduled Tribes. Notably, in Bihar, where SC households were predominantly targeted, the dietary diversity was significantly lower than in MP. Disparities in geography, including access to forests and socio-economic factors such as poverty rates (93% BPL in Bihar vs. 82% in MP), land ownership (15% in Bihar vs 91% in MP), etc., may contribute to this contrast. Additionally, the maturity status of the project in MP could be another influencing factor. The primary occupation of the household also had a significant correlation with dietary diversity. Households with primary occupation as non-farm wage labour had worse dietary diversity, i.e., 45% of the HHs had DDS between 0 – 4.

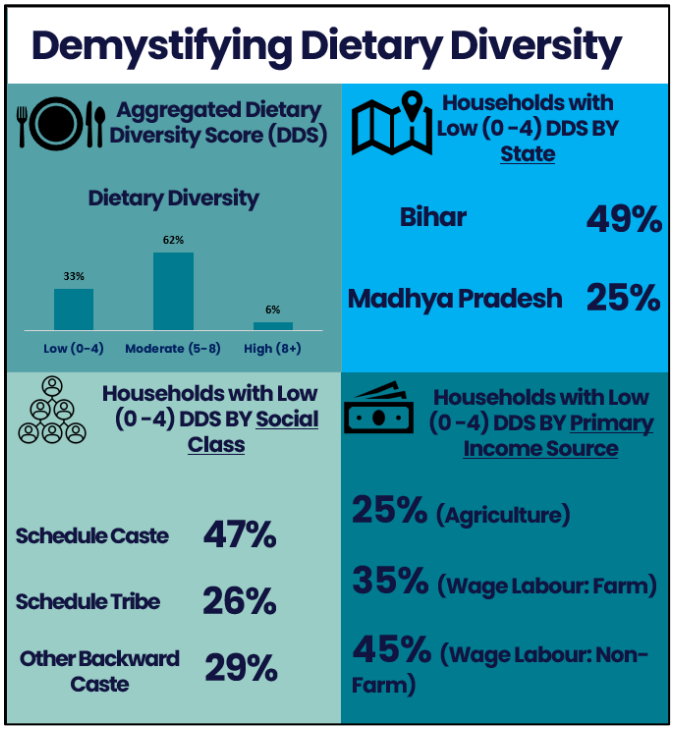


Figure 5: Dietary Diversity Score

> In 2022 (at the outset of the kitchen garden), my hemoglobin was 10.7, today it is 11.9. My younger sisters had an average hemoglobin of 10.5 in 2022, today the readings are 13.9 and 12.9.
>
> - Adolescent group member, Satna

The evaluators note that the notable improvement in dietary diversity was achieved through a multi-pronged approach: 1) Nutritional Education on the importance of dietary diversity through structured discussions, 2) Improving access to a wider variety of food groups through interventions such as Kitchen garden and poultry, and 3) Promoting traditional crops such as millets, sorghum, etc. 4) Keeping women at centre of these activities. Thus, promoting dietary diversity involves a multifaceted approach, addressing various aspects of education, access, affordability, and gender and cultural considerations and creating an environment conducive to the adoption of a balanced and nutritious diet.

Gender Equity and Intra-household Food Distribution

India's food safety nets extend support to millions of vulnerable households monthly, aiming to enhance food accessibility. Nonetheless, individual food and nutrition security heavily rely on intra-household food distribution decisions. These determinations are primarily influenced by prevailing social norms, frequently exhibiting biases against women and girls.

The evaluation made specific inquiries to understand the prevailing status and the project's influence on gender equity and intra-household food distribution**. Evaluation results suggest that significant gender**

disparity existed within the four walls when it came to food distribution within the household. Women were often the last to eat in the family, often resorting to consuming leftovers in households facing resource constraints. The multiple burden of various tasks and responsibilities, at home and outside, also left women to de-prioritise their nutritional requirements. No wonder their food and nutritional security were often compromised. Through Vignette studies, the evaluation found that more than 56% reported that women (daughter-in-law) are served last in their community. Even on special occasions such as feasts, women were last to eat.

Among adolescents and children, the gender disparity persisted, albeit to a lesser extent. Approximately 13% of children reported that boys were regularly fed first (compared to 9% of girls), a figure that increased to 25% for boys (versus 17% for girls) when special dishes were prepared. These findings were supported by qualitative research. Women and girls were engaged in the preparation of food, which resulted in them eating last after having served freshly prepared hot meals to the male counterparts and elderly in the household. Despite some positive shifts noted among girls, with many reporting diminished gender bias within their families, grandparents tended to hold stronger preferences, prioritizing their grandsons for meals and offering their granddaughters leftovers.

> My grandmother always offers the leg piece of chicken to my brother.
>
> - Adolescent girl during FGD in Sitamarhi

> **I am the one who will eat only one egg.**
>
> - FGD participant in Umaria, In response to the Imagination Exercise
>
> **Mummy always eats at the last in the house.**
>
> - Adolescent during FGD in Sitamarhi

Lastly, evaluators observed that there were limited programming initiatives addressing gender equity and intra-household food distribution. Considering the programmatic emphasis of VSS project, it is essential to have concerted programming efforts to improve awareness and sensitivity on gender equity in food distribution within the household to effectively achieve the desired outcomes. A serious gap towards gender equity in the intervention is the lack of male engagement at the household and the community levels, and in collaborative actions. The evaluators suggest strategic intra-household dialogue and gender sensitisation of both male and female members of the community to shift prohibitive gender roles and create a conducive environment for gender equality.

4.5.2. Impact on the Children, Adolescents, and Youth

The project's impact on Children, Adolescents, and Youth has been presented in this section of the report. Results of the mid-term evaluation, capturing the impact of the project at the household level, have been categorized in the following areas:

- *Self-confidence, Awareness, and Self-Development,*
- *Understanding the importance of health, hygiene, and nutritional security, and*
- *Access to public/community institutions and participation in local governance.*

Self-confidence, Awareness, and Self-Development

Through regular sessions and meetings, the project had a dedicated focus on improving the self-confidence and awareness of children, adolescents, and youth. The sessions and training content were customized for each of the groups, addressing their needs and the self-development process. However, training content on food and nutritional security and the cause and effect of malnutrition was a common thread.

Evaluation findings suggest that the project has a profound impact on the self-confidence of children and adolescent girls. Members from both groups gained voice, were confident in public speaking, and were able to articulate their thoughts fluently, sans any fear, especially in front of any figure of authority. As a result of increased self-confidence, many of them are represented in public forums and the community. This elevation in self-confidence and forcing their way into the public forum is a great testament to the program's impact.

> As an exercise, the three youth representatives were given a random topic ' As youth leader what is your role in addressing water pollution'. The girls took 10 mins to prepare a presentation. They leveraged technology (smartphones) to gather information. Each youth made a short speech. They were articulate, confident, and relevant.
>
> - Field Observation in Satna

The program worked extensively with the adolescent girls to enhance their awareness about bodily changes, puberty, and menstruation. Menstruation is still surrounded by stigma, and open discussions about it are discouraged and considered inappropriate in the intervention areas. This has resulted in a culture of silence, making it difficult for women and adolescent girls to seek information about menstrual hygiene or reproductive health. Conversations between mother and daughter about menstrual hygiene and practices are not common. Most girls grow up unaware of their bodily changes and what to expect at the outset of menstruation. This leaves them with acute discomfort and confusion when they enter puberty. The use of sanitary napkins is not common among older women in the community. Hence, the practice of using sanitary napkins is not socially handed down to adolescent girls.

> When my father travels to the market, I sometimes ask him to get sanitary napkins for me. I do not feel shy or ashamed anymore.
>
> - Girl from an Adolescent group in Satna

In such a backdrop, VSS made significant strides in terms of enhancing adolescents' understanding of bodily changes, menstrual health, and hygiene. Over the past three years, there has been a drastic shift from using cloth during menstruation to using sanitary napkins. A few usages of menstrual cups were also reported in Satna and Panna by a few FGD participants. Most of the girls were vocal about their menstrual practices and didn't shy away from sharing their improved menstrual hygiene practices during the FGDs, even in the presence of male staff members. The findings from the quantitative survey aligned with the observations made in the field, revealing that approximately 68% of the respondents from both states reported improvement in awareness about menstrual hygiene. Moreover, a larger proportion, three-quarters of the respondents in MP, reported improvement in awareness about menstrual hygiene. Awareness efforts such as "Chuppi Todo Abhiyaan" (break the silence) elevated the voices of adolescents on the subject of girls' menstrual health and hygiene, resulting in the desired outcome as observed above.

The evaluation findings highlighted several notable outcomes among the youth group, including self-development, adherence to schedules, embracing discipline, and abandoning detrimental habits such as tobacco or pan masala consumption. Amongst the notable gaps, linkages of skill development, enhancing their employability, and soft skills development were key. Most of the youths wanted to get into an income-generating activity and looked up to the project for such support.

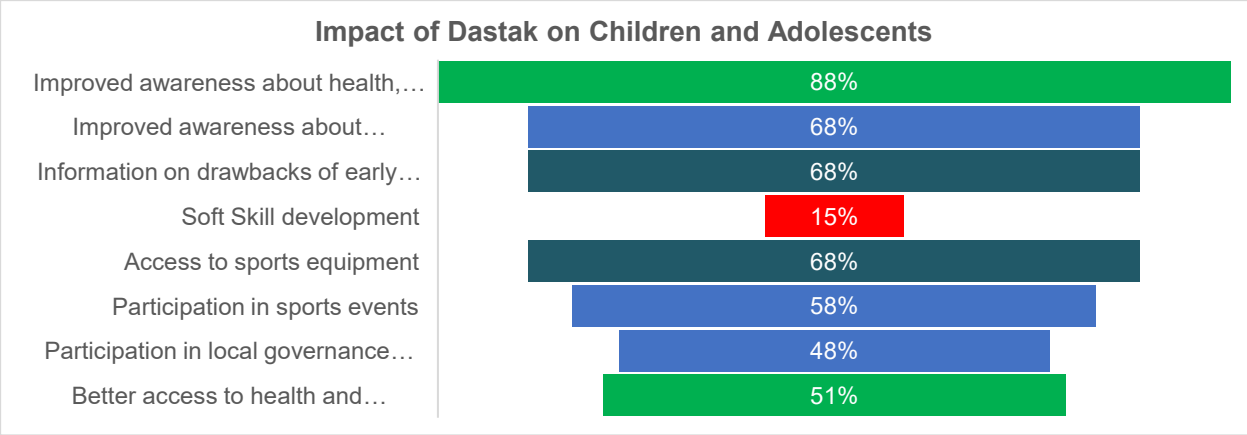


Figure 6: Impact of VSS program on Children

Understanding the importance of health, hygiene, and nutritional security

The evaluation findings suggest a marked improvement in the awareness and understanding of the importance of health, food, and nutritional security among children, adolescents, and youth. About 88% of the children/adolescents interviewed during the household survey reported an increase in awareness about health, hygiene, and nutrition. Most of the children and adolescents were able to understand the role of different food groups in maintaining a healthy life. Especially in the case of adolescent girls, they understood the vagaries of anemia and how to mitigate it by maintaining dietary diversity. The qualitative survey highlighted the active participation of adolescent girls in kitchen garden practices, influencing a nutritional diverse farming of vegetables and fruits in their backyards.

By accessing sports equipment, the children and youth groups engaged in sporting events, and about 58% of the survey participants attributed their participation in the sports events to the initiatives under the VSS project. In many cases, participants reported a lack of open spaces and equipment disrepair for nonparticipation. The evaluators note a lack of strategic focus in integrating *Sports for Empowerment* as a thematic focus of the project, noting that it often appeared as a standalone activity rather than a cohesive program element. The children and adolescent groups presented great opportunities for meaningful engagement through the Sports for Empowerment methodology. TDH also has a history of Sports for Empowerment programming in the global as well as in Indian contexts. The transfer of such expertise to the VSS project could significantly enhance child and youth empowerment efforts, as well as, social cohesion.

Access to public/community institutions and participation in local governance

The evaluation findings suggest a transformative impact of the project on children, adolescents, and youth by enhancing their access to public and community institutions, as well as their participation in local governance. Results from the quantitative survey reported that 48% of the respondents (children and adolescents) opined that the VSS project has enhanced their participation in the local governance system. Based on observations during the field visits, the evaluators opine that the engagement of youth groups for community monitoring and facilitating connections to government schemes and programs resulted in a significant shift towards grassroots participation in the local governance structures. This active involvement not only amplified the voices of marginalized communities but also fostered a sense of ownership and accountability within local governance structures.

Furthermore, the project's support in the access to essential public spaces, such as community centres and school playgrounds, represented a critical step towards fostering social inclusion and cohesion. By creating spaces for interaction and collaboration, the project has not only expanded opportunities for recreational activities but also facilitated avenues for community mobilization and collective action.

Additionally, the project's focus on raising awareness about the detrimental impacts of child marriages has yielded promising results. Through targeted sessions during group meetings, approximately 68% of respondents reported an improved understanding of this pressing social issue. The subsequent initiatives taken by girl and children's groups to monitor and address instances of child marriages in their respective areas, particularly in Bihar, highlight the project's success in empowering youth to become catalysts for social change within their communities.

> When we got to know about the matchmaking of one of our peers in the community, the group went to her house and coerced her father to call off the wedding. - Girl from an Adolescent group in Jehanabad

Overall, these evaluation findings demonstrate the project's impact in empowering marginalized communities and fostering their active participation in local governance processes. By addressing systemic barriers and fostering a culture of inclusion and accountability, the project has laid a foundation for sustainable social development and positive community transformation.

4.5.3. Impact at the community level

Strengthening and Access to Anganwadi Centers (AWCs)

The project has made strides in strengthening and improving access to Anganwadi Centers within the targeted communities. The evaluators noted that multiple AWCs were made operational through demand generation and supporting the community-led efforts. The food quality served at the AWCs improved during the project. Women and youth groups played significant roles in such activation and improvement by bringing the issue to the community meetings and local governance system.

Results from the household survey also recorded this improvement in AWCs. While 92% of respondents acknowledged an improvement in AWCs during the project tenure, a significant disparity was observed between Bihar (84%) and MP (95%). Field observations during site visits corroborated these quantitative findings, revealing that these centers, while improved, primarily functioned as feeding centers for children from marginalized communities and lacked a holistic approach to child development. The evaluators noted that the focus on the cognitive development of children was largely missing at these centers, and there lies a gap that subsequent programming phases of VSS can bridge for quality outcomes. An additional gap observed during the field visit was accessibility to AWCs in some of the villages. Either these AWCs were located far off or were in dilapidated condition. E.g. In the village of Amdi in Umaria, the AWC is situated in a corner of the village, which limits access for residents living on the opposite side. Although the Anganwadi Worker (AWW) gathers children on her way to the AWC, many children are still unable to access the center. Similar is the case of Dadin village in Satna, where the absence of an Anganwadi Center poses a significant barrier to accessing essential services, especially for women and children. In Bihar, many of the AWCs were running in a rented space, sans the required infrastructure, creating barriers to accessing the facilities.

> In the monthly meetings topics related to nutrition, the role and conduct of the Anganwadi Center, the distribution of 'panjini', growth monitoring, etc. are discussed. Samuh members also keep track of any pregnant or lactating women from the community.
>
> - Janki Bai (Name Changed), Chairperson, VSS Women Group, Panna

Under the project, there were two levels of engagement with the AWCs: 1) Project Staff and 2) Project Groups. At the first level, project staff such as Community Mobilisers (CMs) worked in close coordination with the AWCs and supported AWCs in their core activities, such as growth monitoring, BMI monitoring, and generating awareness of malnutrition in the communities. The facilitative work under the VSS project was appreciated by the stakeholders in generating awareness on malnutrition in the target villages,

mobilizing mothers to access the Center, monitoring the growth of children/adolescents, and also referring cases from the remote villages that need attention.

At the next level, the project facilitated engagements through the project groups, especially women and youth groups, for community monitoring purposes. The evaluators noted that the intensity of the engagement was heterogeneous across the districts but a common agenda item for women and youth groups. Regular community monitoring enhanced the efficiency and accountability of the AWWs. Some unique cases, such as setting up a Community Kitchen Garden next to AWC, were also observed in Panna. The produce was used to cook the meals served at the AWC, and the kitchen garden was maintained by the VSS Women and Youth group. Given its efficacy, it would be worthwhile to consider replicating this in other intervention areas.

Functioning of Public Distribution System (PDS) and Mid-Day Meals (MDM)

The establishment of community monitoring systems to oversee PDS, AWC, and MDM programs represented a positive step towards enhancing accountability and ensuring the quality of services provided. Through regular engagements and monitoring by the project groups, the functioning of the PDS and MDM improved in the intervention areas due to increased accountability and efficiency in the system. Results from the quantitative survey also corroborated the same and found that 94% of the respondents reported an improvement in the functioning of the PDS system in their areas since the start of the project, though a significant disparity was observed between Bihar (86%) and MP (98%). Reported gaps during the field visits in Bihar were delayed addition of household members to the PDS list and the quality of grains received. Community mobilizers addressed this by working with group members and community leaders on it.

Loss of livelihoods and returnee migrants exacerbated food insecurity during the COVID-19. The project focused on the addition of households to the PDS list to address the issue, and the impact was profound. E.g., 167 households from marginalised communities were added to the PDS list in Sitamarhi during COVID-19, and it helped them sail through the crisis. It also helped the project in establishing connections and trust among the communities, especially in Bihar.

> Earlier, we used to get bad-quality of Rice in PDS. Since the project started the Community Mobiliser and the group members have actively taken this up and the quality has improved.
>
> - Indu Devi (Name Changed), Jhilora, VSS Women Group, Sitamarhi

The evaluation findings report a similar catalytic effect in the case of MDM, and the quality of service delivery improved in the intervention areas. Through a similar effort, as described above for PDS, there was a notable improvement in the functioning of MDM in the intervention areas. The role of the MDM program in enhancing food security becomes evident when considering that households in the community across the two states typically had only two meals, while children received an additional meal at school through the MDM program. Enhancements in the quality of the MDM are directly correlated with improvements in the food and nutritional security of the children.

Lastly, efforts to improve the biodiversity in the intervention areas were made during the project period, particularly in preserving and cultivating a variety of seeds, fruits, and herbs. However, the evaluators note that more comprehensive actions are required. The intervention should extend beyond mere record-keeping to actively encourage community engagement in producing and conserving diverse agricultural resources. Moreover, awareness programs on environmental conservation and sustainable farming practices should be intensified to foster a deeper understanding of biodiversity among community members.

In conclusion, the project has made notable progress in several areas at the community level, including the strengthening of AWCs and MDMs, the development of community monitoring systems, and the

demonstration of effective practices. However, challenges persist, particularly regarding the limited impact on local health systems and the need for more robust efforts to promote biodiversity and environmental sustainability. Addressing these challenges will be crucial for maximizing the project's long-term impact and fostering sustainable development within the target communities.

4.5.4. Impact at the systems level

Advocacy and catalyzing changes at the systemic level were key focus areas for the project. Given that the VSS has a stronghold on communication and advocacy, it matched with the project design as well. **Through an evidence-based approach, notable efforts were made to drive systemic level change in MP. One of the key outcomes of these efforts was the formulation of state nutrition policy in MP**. The evaluation findings suggest that VSS project was a breeding ground for the State Nutrition Policy in MP through the evidence and data generated during the program. Additionally, VSS is recognized for its contribution to the food security action group in the state. Subsequently, VSS was also approached by the state government for the development of tribal nutritional policy.

On the one hand, the project's engagement and focus on driving systemic changes in MP was found to be continuous and persistent, and the engagement in Bihar was found to be sporadic. The evaluators opine that multiple factors affected the lower engagement level in Bihar. Some of the key factors were: 1) VSS has a strong history and operational stronghold in MP, which was clearly lacking in Bihar; 2) The maturity of the program in Bihar; 3) Lack of concerted efforts in the project design for deeper engagement with state-level actors in food and nutritional security.

The program needs strong realignment in its approach to replicate its MP's success in Bihar. The evaluators recommend strengthening policy-level engagement and advocacy efforts in Bihar. VSS has been a recent entrant in Bihar, and it is not well known in political and bureaucratic corridors for its work in Bihar. Programmatic learnings emerging from Sitamarhi and Jehanabad are interesting and can reap greater dividends if advocacy efforts are strong and result in buy-in from the state government in Bihar. To realize this potential, collaboration with similar civil society organizations and formulation of POSHAN Advocacy and Action Group is recommended in Bihar. It should include VSS, Centre DIRECT, Abhiyan, and other rights-based organizations working in the domain of food, nutrition, and gender.

Engagement at the district level

The project engaged with a wide range of government departments, PRI leaders, and other community leaders during its implementation. The adjoining exhibit captures the key stakeholders that the project engaged with at the district level. **Evaluation findings indicate that the engagement level can be categorized into two tiers: firstly, addressing access and entitlement issues, and secondly, utilizing technical assistance and benefits from departments such as Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, and NRLM**. At the initial tier, engagement was notably high across both states, with effective relationships established with community, block, and district officials at departments such as PRI, WCD, and Health departments. In contrast, engagement at the secondary tier varied between the two states, being robust in Madhya Pradesh (MP) but less so in Bihar. The VSS project and the departments involved mutually benefited from these engagements. Several government departments utilized the project's platform to deliver event-based training or outreach initiatives. For instance, KVK utilized the project's outreach in Umaria for its training and awareness camps. Similarly, NRLM conducted numerous awareness camps and training programs in Panna, leveraging the project's outreach. Conversely, VSS collaborated with NRLM, inviting officers to address women in target communities on enhancing their livelihoods and involvement in income-generating activities.

Evaluation findings also highlight that engagement at the second tier could be more strategic, catering to the specific needs of the community. For instance, in several locations, there was a noticeable lack of

technical expertise in managing diseases and pests in kitchen gardens, yet engagement with entities like KVK or agricultural and horticultural departments remained minimal in addressing this issue. Similarly, households faced challenges in managing Backyard Poultry (BYP) due to insufficient technical knowledge. These findings underscore the importance of fostering more proactive engagement with relevant departments to address such gaps and enhance the effectiveness of interventions.

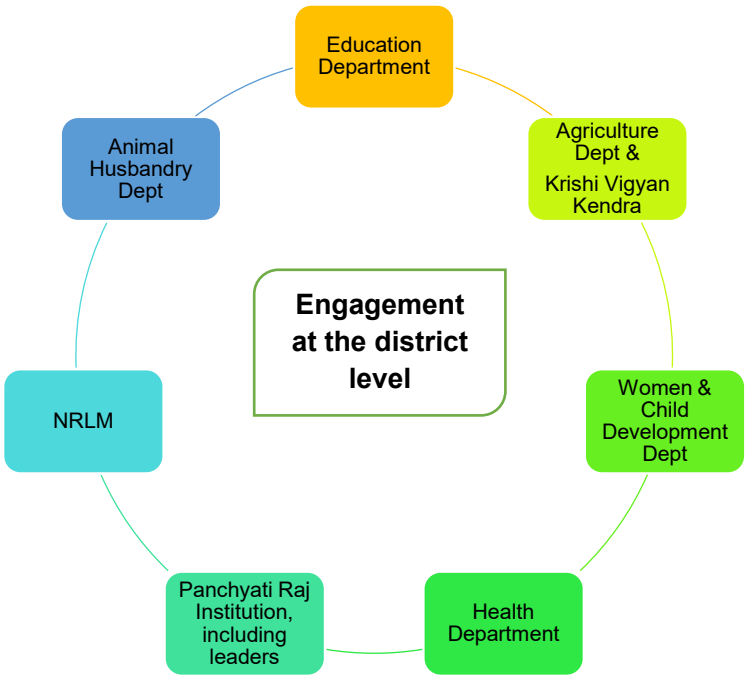


Figure 7: Engagement at District Level

4.5.5. Navigating through the crisis of COVID-19

The widespread repercussions of COVID-19 on the food and nutritional security of impoverished and marginalized populations have been extensively documented. The disruption of livelihoods and employment significantly disrupted the food and nutritional stability of many individuals, particularly those belonging to marginalized segments of society. Notably, the project coincided with the onset of the pandemic and responded to these challenges through coordinated programmatic initiatives. A proposal amendment was done to carve out some funds for immediate relief measures such as ration distribution across the six districts. It ensured that people didn't go hungry to bed. A total of 1,580 families were supported through the distribution of dry rations across these six districts in Bihar and MP. Additionally, these households were provided with Hygiene kits, which included masks and soaps. Lastly, some Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) materials were developed to educate the communities on the prevention and safety of COVID-19. The qualitative survey in MP revealed that VSS project youth in the villages play a significant role in collaborating with the local government and program staff in identifying affected households, and distributing essentials and dry rations. The project also recalibrated its efforts to have an incremental focus on ensuring access to entitlements such as PDS. Targeted efforts were made to link the households from the marginalised society to entitlements such as PDS. For example, 167 households were linked to the PDS in the 20 project villages in Sitamarhi. Most of these households were from the SC community, and the government benefits helped them navigate through the pandemic.

In sum, the evaluation findings suggest that the project was flexible and made multiple impactful adjustments in its design and approach to address food and nutritional issues in the community during the pandemic. By putting the immediate needs of the community in the center, it also gained the community's trust and helped in gaining a foothold on the ground, especially in Bihar.

4.6. Sustainability

This section of the report captures the Sustainability of the VSS project. The results of the mid-term evaluation assess the project's sustainability in the following areas:

- Sustainability of groups formed under the project: Women, Adolescents, Youth, and Children
- Sustainability of project interventions: Kitchen Garden, Poultry, Seed Bank
- Sustainability of behaviour change – Dietary Diversity, Anganwadi visit

- Trickle-down Effect – uptake amongst the community
- Integration with government initiatives or policies
- Cross-sectional/overarching

4.6.1. Sustainability of groups formed under the project: Women, Adolescents, Youth, and Children

The Project implementation approach was highly **participatory** and engaged the community and stakeholders at different levels. The targeted community and stakeholders confirmed that they were proactively approached by the project implementation team throughout the project tenure, which helped them remain engaged, connected, and committed to the Project activities through continued participation. The four community groups that were formed under the project (Women, Adolescents, Youth and Children) met voluntarily on a monthly basis. Group meetings were conveyed by the VSS staff only, and they themselves captured the notes of the monthly meetings in the Committee registers. In the absence of the staff, the youth leaders are also reported to have facilitated sessions with the children's and adolescent girls' groups. The baton of facilitating these meetings and recording their proceedings has yet to be passed on to the group members. Attrition in the Youth and Adolescents group was very high (in some places, they didn't have a functional group) - Marriage and Migration were the main reasons. This also marred the group's sustainability. Women's multiple engagements and responsibilities are seen to limit their availability to participate consistently in group meetings. In Umaria (which was in the second phase), half of the women were new members and had joined the group only after COVID-19 (in the second phase). Women and youth have expressed their interest in tangible benefits or relevance, for example, acquiring new skills or a common economic purpose, in participating in group meetings. This unmet expectation may jeopardize the sustainability of the VSS Group.

> "Under the project, it was the first time that women were collectivized with a common purpose. To further amplify and sustain the impact of the collective, there is a need to promote women and advance women's economic empowerment and their engagement in income-generating activities." *(Representative of VSS Women Group, Rewa)*

However, the efforts of collectivizing the Groups to address the pivotal issue of health and nutrition of the communities were successful under the project. But to ensure the sustainability of the intervention, the project must facilitate the transference of leadership, connect the Committees to local resources, and align their activities towards a common purpose.

4.6.2. Sustainability of project interventions: Kitchen Garden, Poultry, Seed Bank

The approach of the program has a strong emphasis on awareness generation and capacity strengthening at various levels: with the program implementers, the communities, and the stakeholders. The project has facilitated trainings with diverse audiences on issue-based topics like Nutrition, Health, Food Security, Right to Food and Gender. Skill-based training on Organic Farming, Kitchen Garden, Mushroom Cultivation and Poultry Farming have been received by many. Training on topics like Youth Development, Youth Leadership, and PLA have been rolled out. Some of these trainings have successfully led to knowledge transfer to the target community members and have created a wealth of knowledge amongst individuals (diverse target audience) which is expected to remain beyond the project period, and be passed on to the others in the community.

The kitchen garden was noticeably the most popular and successful of the interventions. All households, targeted under the project, have adopted and maintained it. The project encouraged the community to make use of the unutilized and under-utilized patches of land, either in the backyards or in a common land patch next to a water-body/structure. Households are able to produce diverse seasonal vegetables that are sufficient for the consumption of the family for the season. They also produced excess, which are sold in the market, and are also distributed among relatives and neighbours.

The Seedbank is also a successful and sustainable intervention promoted under the project. Earlier, some of the households would keep a few reserves of certain variety of seeds for their own consumption. But due to lack of proper storage facilities at home, most of these seeds would be destroyed by rodents. The project helped set up an organized way of storing and maintaining these seeds. These seeds are of a variety of vegetables, rice, pulses, and millet. The community has proactively come together to donate and reserve the seeds at the seed bank, and they also return to the bank (more than taken) post-harvest or from surplus kitchen garden produce.

> " Earlier we would eat rice, dal and potato as the staple. But now, diverse vegetables and fruits have found a permanent place in our meals. In 2022 before the kitchen garden venture, my hemoglobin was 10.7, today it is 11.9.' (Representative of Women's Group, Satna)

> "These seeds are given to anyone from the community, without any bias, preference or discrimination." (Representative of Women's Group, Sitamarhi)

The poultry farming promoted under the project is seen to have some key challenges. Many reported that they don't have any chicken left now. The chicken was typically kept loose, and oftentimes, the chickens/chick would either run away or be eaten by wild animals, or die. **Provision for the construction of a cage would solve this problem**. Some women have also reported consuming the chicken when relatives came over or during festivities. The lack of technical know-how in managing Backyard Poultry Farming (BYP) and the entrepreneurial mindset of running this activity were issues that compromised the sustainability of this intervention. **SHG linkages and convergence with the Department of Animal Husbandry and CBOs working on this issue would benefit this activity.** All women respondents of this evaluation have unequivocally expressed their need for more advanced and practical training around organic farming, poultry farming, and other potential income-generating activities.

> "I am unable to understand the cycle of eggs being hatched and why the chicken does not provide warmth to the eggs on occasion. I need support in turning this activity into a more consistent form of income generation." (Representative of Women's Group, Satna)

4.6.3. Sustainability of behaviour change – Dietary Diversity, Anganwadi visit

According to most of the respondents of the evaluation, the kitchen garden activity stands out as the most successful and effective intervention of the program that benefits the households and community. Earlier vegetables were used to be bought from the market. Now, there is ample and diverse produce from the kitchen garden. The extra is distributed among others in the community. Seeds are preserved and stored in the community seed bank, established under the project, for future use. With sufficient produce from the kitchen garden, money is saved against buying vegetables, and the saved money is used for other household essentials, like milk and chicken. The kitchen garden has brought in nutritional addition to the daily diet, with the production of leafy vegetables like spinach, cabbage, broccoli, and cauliflower. Papaya is consumed regularly in the form of fruit and vegetables. The kitchen garden intervention has promoted self-reliance and resilience among households, which is expected to contribute to long-term food security and sustainability, particularly in the target areas/communities that are prone to food insecurity.

4.6.4. Trickle-down Effect – uptake amongst the community

Throughout the program, there has been a strong emphasis on the **empowerment** of the target community. The contextual understanding, internal capacity, and competence of the various project stakeholders have expanded substantially during the course of the project. The program has seen evidence of intended and unintended empowerment dividends through some of the key interventions. The formation of the Committees at the community level has fostered a sense of ownership among the group members. The

project has invested considerably in sensitizing the Committees on various socially relevant issues, e.g., untouchability, child marriage, and gender discrimination. This has led to these Committees playing a major role in facilitating social cohesion and support networks within communities. The Committees and the gatherings are alluded to as safe spaces for sharing. These networks are seen to facilitate knowledge-sharing, resource pooling, offering mutual assistance/peer support, and influencing external stakeholders for addressing challenges, strategizing for solutions, and undertaking community action by mobilizing internal resources with the trust and goodwill gained over time. This approach of community empowerment is helping to bring about changes in relationships and power dynamics between men and women, boys and girls, diverse social groups, and between young people and adults.

4.6.5. Integration with government initiatives or policies

The holistic approach to addressing malnutrition and ensuring food security has been effective in bringing about convergence among various stakeholders. Access to varied services has improved, as the community is informed and capacitated to generate demand on issues that concern their community and demand their rights on food security and beyond. The convergence model involving ICDS, Health Department, Department of Education, Gram Panchayat, PDS, and nurturing the community influencers in generating demand is an effective model for comprehensive and sustainable development. VSS has played an important role as a facilitator of this convergence and established the linkage between the community and the stakeholders. Members of youth groups taking initiatives to ensure linkages for community members aid the project's sustainability. Similarly, the quality of service delivery (Anganwadi/MDM) in the community is guaranteed by the community monitoring efforts. It was extremely beneficial for sustainability in these aspects.

The Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with stakeholders stated that the CBOs enjoy community trust, are aware of their challenges and needs, and have a strong presence in the target community. The facilitative work of VSS is appreciated by the stakeholders. All stakeholders have reported to have leveraged VSS's access to and relationship with the community in their outreach and community mobilization efforts. The project has ensured that the target communities are within the priority radar of these government departments for sustained service delivery. Government officials who were interviewed under the project expressed their interest in working with the CBO (VSS) in the target communities to further promote and amplify the uptake of practices such as millet farming and organic farming by keeping women at the center of these activities. This is promising from the standpoint of continuing progressive development in these communities.

Having said that, there is ample scope for further strengthening convergence between government departments and service delivery agencies and between the community and the service providers. The project was not designed to boost women's and youth's economic empowerment. But that certainly emerged as a community need. Convergence with the departments that promote livelihoods can be strengthened for the community to reap the benefits of the existing schemes towards sustainable development.

4.6.6. Cross-sectional/overarching

The collective engagement has helped women, children, and youth become more confident. They are now able to speak freely with each other and with any person, at home or outside. Today, they are not intimidated by any figure of authority. This has also brought about a shift in dynamics at home, especially for women, in their interaction with their in-laws and spouses. Women are able to speak without fear, they are confident in their knowledge and understanding and are able to articulate with logic and clarity. They are also encouraged by their spouses to continue to be involved in this capacity and serve the community. They feel that their household members are more respectful towards them.

> "Being a part of the Mahila Samuh has given me women the strength of a collective. As women, who have never been a part of any other group prior to this initiative, we feel that it is easier to work as a collective than an individual. It is easier to get spousal support and encouragement from family members. We have found a space to discuss our concerns and aspirations." (Member of Women's Group, Satna

These are important indicators of long-term social norms change and steps towards wider social cohesion and gender equality. Food security, health, and well-being are closely related to the livelihoods of an individual and household. The project has targeted communities that are essentially marginalized and underserved (representing tribal and other marginalized populations) and located in remote rural and forest areas. The access, options and skills related to livelihoods are limited for the people in the target communities of the project. Agriculture is the main livelihood, and the tribal communities are dependent on forest produce as well. Migration among men and youth is high, resulting from a lack of livelihood options in the communities. While the project did not have a direct focus on connecting the communities with livelihoods or on building skills, the project audience has vehemently proposed the need for interventions around income-generating activities for youth, women, and men. **The evaluation analysis strongly proposes that the project facilitates convergence with appropriate government schemes like SRLM and MNREGA to ensure the sustained and holistic development of the target communities.**

"Women must be at the center of every developmental intervention, be it education, health, livelihoods, or sustainable agriculture. Every department has schemes specifically designed for women. Hence, keeping women at the center and working with them as a direct target group could effectively facilitate an easier convergence of schemes from across departments. This will not just lead to women's empowerment, but her development will trickle benefits within the household and the community." (CEO – Jan Panchayat, Majhgawa Block, Satna)

4.7. Cross-cutting themes

4.7.1. Gender, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

Lessons from multiple initiatives under the program have suggested that the traditional model of targeted service delivery for various disadvantaged groups will not be adequate to improve health, nutrition, and empowerment outcomes for all social groups. The barriers experienced by the girls and women in the target geography cut across the intersectionality of caste, ethnicity, location, and age, along with regional identity. These greatly influence and impact their access to not just health-related services but gender-based social practices that directly impact health outcomes for women and girls of all social groups (though the degree varies by multiple factors). This section, therefore, focuses on the gender differentiators of exclusion.

To begin with, the project has designed and implemented interventions that prioritized the nutritional and health needs of women and adolescent girls. The project has promoted gender equality and women's

empowerment by mainstreaming women's participation through collective, strengthening capacity, and community action efforts. During the project, considerable shifts towards gender equality were recorded. It includes enhancement of women's and girls' social capital, increased bargaining power within the communities, gaining a voice, and improved awareness about health, hygiene, and menstrual health. Girls have become aware of the importance of education. The involvement of the women and other community stakeholders has helped endorse this. Girls want to continue their education and gain vocational skills. There has been an increase in institutional deliveries, and age-old taboos related to childbirth and breastfeeding are no longer prevalent.

"The status of women and girls, especially in the community where VSS has intervened, is better in comparison to the other villages of the block." (CDPO, Dept. of Women and Child Department)

Despite the advancements made during the project, wide gender gaps persist in the target areas. There are opportunities for the project to bridge the gender gaps in the intervention geography by adopting gender intentionality in its design and measurement approaches.

The project had immense potential in capturing insights through Gender Gap Analysis and integrating gender indicators in Monitoring and Evaluation to capture shifts at the system's levels, i.e. social norms, power dynamics, reduction in gender-based violence, and policy influencing. Women's participation in this project led to some amount of engagement with income-generating activities, e.g. poultry farming, kitchen gardening, etc. However, women's economic empowerment could not be measured holistically through the parameters of increased agency, decision-making, financial inclusion, bargaining power, and social capital. During this evaluation exercise, in-depth interaction with women's groups, adolescent girls' groups, youth groups, and key stakeholders across the target communities of the project have brought out some key gender gaps and barriers. These gaps are present in the table below; the program can further strategize to address these gaps through gender-intentional programming in the future:

Existing Gender Gaps

Prohibitive Gender Roles leading to school drop of Children:

- School dropout among children was reported to be high in the target villages. While boys got engaged in various economic activities contributing to the family income, girls got involved in household chores such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for siblings or sick family members. Child marriage was prevalent. However, the cases were not reported. These instances interfered with children's ability to attend school regularly, and also propelled the onset of gender division of labour from the stage of adolescence that restricted the development of girls and women.

Prohibitive Gender Roles Impacting Women's Wellbeing:

- The level of education is very low among women in tribal communities. Women bear a disproportionate burden of household chores, including cooking, cleaning, childcare, and caring for elderly or sick family members. They take on the primary caregiving roles for children, elderly relatives, and family members with disabilities or chronic illnesses. Almost all women juggle multiple roles, including paid employment, unpaid work on agricultural farms, fetching forest produce, and domestic responsibilities. The burden of work and continuous engagement in multiple activities throughout the day, at home and outside, leaves women exhausted and impacts their overall development, empowerment, and well-being.

- Earlier, there were known to be many cases of anemia in the community that went unattended. Women did not go for regular check-ups to any health expert or get their haemoglobin tested. Given the fact that women are burdened with multiple tasks throughout the day, most families settled for two meals a day. It is reported that while the mother is away, there is no one to take care of the child. Oftentimes, elder siblings (girls primarily) take on the role, which reinforces the traditional and expected gender roles within the households.

Prohibitive Social Norms lead to Gender Exclusion and Discrimination:

- There are existing prohibitive gender norms related to menstruation. There are taboos related to consumption of certain types of food like, curd, pickles, milk, non-veg items, etc. Menstruation is still surrounded by stigma, and open discussions about it are discouraged and considered inappropriate. This has resulted in a culture of silence, making it difficult for women and adolescent girls to seek information about menstrual hygiene or reproductive health. Conversations between mother and daughter about menstrual hygiene and practices are not common. Most girls grow up unaware of their bodily changes and what to expect at the outset of menstruation. This leaves them with acute discomfort and confusion when they enter puberty. The use of sanitary napkins is not common among older women in the community. Hence, the practice of using sanitary napkins is not socially handed down to adolescent girls. Once menstruation sets in, girls are discouraged from mingling with boys. It is looked down upon and creates conflict in the house. This creates a distance between girls and boys starting from the adolescent phase. Gender roles also tend to become more stringent for girls who enter adolescence.

Gender-based Violence:

- Violence (domestic violence) against women is high. There is a huge problem of alcoholism among men in the target communities in MP. However, hardly any cases are reported. Women in tribal communities do not shy away from talking about the issue with other women in the community, especially in the women's Committees formed under the program. But they refrain from reporting on the ground that the issue is a private affair. The attitude towards domestic violence is a socialized behaviour in the target community. It is common and rampant, yet the community (especially women) prefers to deal with it in their own way. There is a lack of awareness and information on helpline services and complaint mechanisms related to such violence.

- Comparing the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities in the target geographies, the prohibitive gender norms for women in the SC are starker despite the fact they are comparatively economically better off. Women are discouraged from engaging in economic work and are expected to conform to gender roles in undertaking domestic and care responsibilities. Mobility is restricted, and there is lack family support when it comes sharing of household and care work. Women lack ownership of assets and decision-making at home.

- Most couples in tribal communities have more than two children. There is minimal awareness, sensitization, and conversations on family planning. In an interview with a woman representative of VSS Women's group in Panna, it came to notice that women of the household, after giving birth to two children, go for surgery to stop conceiving. Through the conversation, it emerged that there are instances where women have undergone complete hysterectomy (abdominal surgery with stitches) to stop future childbirth. There was no mention or reference of inserting diaphragm or use of other contraception to avoid pregnancy. Men do not undergo any procedure or take any measures (using condoms) to prevent conception.

Gender Gap in Access to Government Schemes

- There are Self-help groups (SHGs) formed in the target communities, but these are not very active and are not seen to engage in enterprise-related or income-generation activities. The "Tejaswini Yojna" was a scheme launched by the Government of Madhya Pradesh in India, in 2018. This initiative is aimed at providing skill development training to women and girls in the state to enhance their employability and economic empowerment, specifically through the SHG model. Previously, the scheme was under the Department of Women and Child Development (WCD); now, it has been transferred under the SRLM. As per the KII with a key government stakeholder at WCD in Panna Block, funds and the activities of the scheme are all controlled and managed by men. Even though there are schemes that are purely extended for the upliftment and benefit of women, the control of funds and operations lies typically with the men, typically the husbands.

Unintended reinforcement of prohibitive Gender Roles:

- The kitchen garden is mostly tended by the women of the household, and there is ample work to do on this land, starting from weeding, watering, plucking, providing organic manure and pesticides, etc. With the existing load of work for women in the household and outside (going to the forest to collect dry wood, mohua, tendu, etc.), tending to a large kitchen garden could potentially add to women's burden of work. However, there are instances where the children of the household, especially the girls, support kitchen garden-related work.

Gender Gap in Health Care Access and Health-Seeking Behaviour

- Most of the target villages are located in remote interiors. The health care centers are situated 10 km away from their location. At least a couple of the women respondents have quoted that for the delivery of a child, the community still uses/inclines towards availing the services of the mid-wifey located within the village. There is established and existing trust and the proximity makes for convenient access. *"Of the eight grandchildren, 3 of Janki's grandchildren were born in the hospital, and five were delivered at* home." (Woman representative of

VSS Women's Group, Panna). The respondents have stated that there is an issue of hygiene in the hospital. The stench is unbearable, and the lavatory has serious hygiene issues.

- The community, especially women and children, also consults the 'Bangali' doctor (local quack) for any health-related issues, including menstrual cramps and contraceptives. These quacks prescribe traditional herbal medicine, with which the community is well acquainted. These local quacks are known to practice traditional healing therapy through an intergenerational handed-down practice of herbal medicine. They enjoy the community's trust and are easily accessible, given their proximity.

4.7.2.Technology

Technology has been a game changer for many development projects. Integration of or leveraging technology has been key for greater and more profound programmatic impact, especially in developmental interventions. The evaluators also assessed the VSS program for its current leverage and integration of technology and found sporadic use of technology, especially for program monitoring and data collection. As explained in the Efficiency section of the report, the case of using manual methods for BMI and growth monitoring highlights the need to utilize the available digital tools and technology better. In cases such as growth monitoring and BMI calculation, the program would immensely benefit from leveraging the power of technology.

4.7.3.Knowledge Management

Knowledge management plays a pivotal role in projects like this, where there is a strong emphasis on evidence-based advocacy, promoting the adoption of best practices at the systemic level, and fostering deeper engagement with policymakers. Recognizing this, the project placed significant importance on knowledge management, leading to the documentation and publication of case studies in Bihar and MP. Additionally, the project conducted multiple studies, including growth monitoring and BMI monitoring. Results from these studies were widely disseminated during events at district and state-level meetings, ensuring widespread awareness and understanding.

Furthermore, VSS actively contributed to knowledge sharing and dissemination by presenting papers at various seminars and conferences. For instance, VSS presented a comprehensive paper on the right to food and constitutional values at a seminar organized by the National Law University, Bangalore, emphasizing the project's commitment to promoting food security as a fundamental right. Additionally, VSS showcased learnings from nutrition garden interventions and community-based management of malnutrition through a poster presentation at the 'Delivering for Nutrition in South Asia: Equity and Inclusion' conference in Kathmandu, Nepal. These contributions enhanced the project's visibility and facilitated cross-learning and collaboration with stakeholders beyond the project's immediate scope. Overall, the **project's robust knowledge management efforts have played a crucial role in informing policy discourse, driving systemic change, and advancing the project's goals of promoting nutrition and food security.**

5. Summary and Recommendations

The VSS project has significantly enhanced awareness and access to food and nutritional security, notably improving understanding among households, adolescents, and children. It has promoted dietary diversity, self-confidence, and participation in local governance, particularly among marginalized communities. Additionally, it has strengthened Anganwadi Centers, improved the quality of mid-day meals, and established community monitoring systems to enhance accountability. While successful in driving systemic changes in Madhya Pradesh, efforts in Bihar require realignment for consistent success. Overall, VSS project has laid a robust foundation for sustained development and improved well-being in targeted regions. However, as laid out in the findings sections, the project has a few opportunities to address the present

gaps and further strengthen its outcomes. The evaluators have listed below a few recommendations for the VSS Project:

- **Strengthening of Program Monitoring Efforts** - It is recommended to enhance concurrent monitoring mechanisms beyond half-yearly reports to ensure timely identification and resolution of program challenges. Additionally, it suggested embracing the adoption of digital tools and technologies for program monitoring, including the introduction of a project-level dashboard with live reporting on program metrics and the development of an app-based tool for BMI and Growth Monitoring. Finally, it is recommended to digitize outreach data to streamline data management processes on a real time basis. The Program Management should also explore AI based tools to improve the program monitoring mechanism using existent sectoral tools and practices.

- **Refining the Results Management Framework:** It is recommended to set Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) at both Output and Outcome levels to effectively measure program impact. Additionally, it is critical to promote equitable access and inclusion by having project output indicator targets set for marginalized groups, such as widows, disabled individuals, and the landless. Finally, results matrix must also be developed in accordance with the varied stakeholders of the project, with children and youth having the access to monitor program results through participatory tools and mechanisms.

- **Suggestive changes in the financial and Human Resource Management:**

- Align budget heads with current prices and adjust for inflation in future budgeting to ensure adequate resource allocation for program activities.
- Invest adequately in developing a strong monitoring, evaluation and learning system to improve the accountability of the project
    - Consider allocating MIS staff at the district level or training youth as MIS staff at the district for greater coverage and capturing of results
    - Recruit more female staff at the state and district levels to ensure greater inclusiveness in the program and for making the right investment to ensure apt coverage

- **Strengthening Policy-Level Engagement and Advocacy Efforts in Bihar:** VSS has a significant focus on policy-level engagement and advocacy efforts at the systemic level. The evaluation results suggested the need to strengthen its efforts in Bihar particularly. The suggestive measure is the formulation of an advocacy group comprising VSS, Centre DIRECT, Abhiyan, and other rights-based organizations working in food, nutrition, and gender domains to amplify advocacy efforts and promote policy change.

- **Elevate Gender Transformation Efforts:** The project operates in areas where patriarchy, social and gender norms are deep-rooted challenges and prohibitive for women's empowerment. Women's agency, bargaining power, mobility, and economic empowerment continue to be at the lower ebb in these areas. To address this, it is recommended to elevate gender transformative efforts within the project. Some of the suggestive actions are:

- Conduct Gender Intra-Household Dialogues to elevate women's voices within households and decision-making.
- Develop a Male Engagement Strategy to garner their support and participation in the re-distribution of gender roles within the household.
- Include women and girls in the stakeholder dialogues that the projects engage in and ensure greater dialogue with women and girls at all levels.
- Intensify programming efforts to promote gender equity and intra-household food distribution.

- **Position women at the centre of the intervention:** It is reported by most government departments and stakeholders that women are the most resilient as they adapt to changes with the right attitude and progressive mindset. They work well in collectives; hence, their circle of influence extends to the households and the community at large, leading to positive social and economic outcomes. In the target communities, migration is least among women, hence, they can be the anchor point for most interventions. Since most government schemes target women as key beneficiaries, therefore it is recommended that working with women is an absolute must as it will facilitate effective convergence with different government departments that benefit both women and children.

- **Enhance Strategic Focus on Sports for Empowerment:** Sports can be a great tool for empowerment, especially for children (particularly girls). tdh has experience of using the Sports for Empowerment (S4E) framework, which targets the psychosocial development of children and girls. There lies the opportunity of cross-learning from other programs of tdh and enhance strategic focus on Sports for Empowerment. Thus, it is recommended that this program use the S4E framework to further strengthen the program.

- **Strengthen strategic engagements with KVK and Animal Husbandry departments** at the district level to address pest and disease issues in Kitchen Garden and Backyard Poultry. Pest, Disease, and Management issues were reported widely in both states. It would be imperative to address this as it has the potential to undo the impact created through this project.

- **Focus on Girls' Education and Vocational Training:** Girl Education and Skill or Vocational training for girls were found to be severely hampered, especially in MP. Schools and training centres are located far away, and girls are deprived of such facilities. The project will benefit from an enhanced focus on girls' education and vocational training to address the lack of active involvement of the adolescent group in these areas.

- **Integrate Economic Activities with the Women and Youth groups**: Respond to the high demand for economic linkages among youth and women by integrating livelihood activities with women's and youth groups, which will also help address attrition. The suggestive approaches are adopting a value-chain approach for farm-based activities. For example, in Umaria, the project can work to develop a value chain for Millets (Kodo and Kutki). Similarly, the evaluation recommends that a value chain of goats can be developed in Bihar. This aspect of value chain development and formulation of a business plan is a key recommendation to take the target beneficiaries to the next level.

- **Promote Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Farming**: It is recommended to extend interventions beyond record-keeping to actively encourage community engagement in producing and conserving diverse agricultural resources. It can be achieved through intensifying awareness programs on environmental conservation and sustainable farming practices to deepen community understanding of biodiversity. Communities could be provided with technical training on organic farming to be used beyond the kitchen garden in their agricultural farms. It is imperative that communities are being brought into the discourse of green livelihood practices that have a clear positive impact on families and on the environment as well.

- **Measure the benefits of the water structure repair work:** The intervention in water structure repair in select villages needs to be evaluated to see how it has impacted the community, e.g., impact on irrigable land and kitchen garden, income of farmers, ease of access of water, reduction in discrimination of people from diversion communities in accessing water, etc. It is also important to

engage with the PRI to ensure that the non-functional water supply mechanisms are improved through interventions to benefit communities at the last mile, and are replicated in all target villages.

- **Replicate Good Practices and Drive Adoption of Health Insurance Programs**:
  - It is recommended to replicate successful practices, such as community kitchen gardens, seed banking, and repair of water structures, across other project geographies.
  - It is recommended to drive the adoption of government health insurance programs, such as Ayushman Bharat, to enhance community well-being and resilience.

- **Develop and implement an exit strategy to be rolled out during the program:** The program is in the process of fully achieving the goals and objectives of the intervention. With the remaining time, the program must focus on smooth transition, equipping the community to sustain the activities and bring in government investment to ensure sustainability. The program must invest in capturing learning/best practices to inform future programming, focusing on scale and impact beyond the program's target geographies.

- **Develop Youth Cooperatives:** The program may also explore the possibility of developing youth-based organisations and create them as formal structures that can operate as demand generating bodies for the wellbeing of the GPs that the program covers. These groups can focus on carrying forward the various program activities to ensure sustainability even after the life cycle of the project. This Child and Youth Participation Strategy will also plug into the above-mentioned Exit Strategy for the program. For all NGOs, their redundancy and the community's ownership are the final strategies for all their programs. It is recommended that this has to be well articulated in the program and worked towards in the remaining time period of the project.

- **Flexibility in Budget Realignment and Program Design at the Partner Level in Addressing Community Need:** The program, with its integrated approach, must respond to the multi-dimensional needs of the community with agility and timeliness. The assessment undertaken across different regions and communities highlight that every target community has distinct and unique needs, that can only be fulfilled with context-specific program interventions that offer customised solutions. For example, the women respondents in Dadin Block of Satna expressed their desire to pursue goat keeping, instead of backyard poultry farming. However, the villages in Panna wanted to explore the possibilities of mushroom cultivation at a collective enterprise level. Support around constructing cage for chicks and chickens, water structure repair work, and support/capacity development on livelihoods/enterprise development activities stood out as the emerging needs in almost all communities supported under this project. The evaluators recommend that a long-term and deep-impact project such as this should offer flexibility in program design and budget realignment at the ground level to address the emerging needs of the community. The donor can play a crucial role in expediting the process and facilitating a scope for a rolling budget that allows regular reviews and adjustments, considering the community's best interest and shifting priorities.

- **User case of Integrated Programmatic Approach to Addressing Malnutrition and Food Security among children and women:** The SEWOH_VSS_II project is a classic example of an integrated program. It combined multiple interventions that complement each other, that led to an amplified impact on the ground. The program not only achieved reducing malnutrition among children and women, but also challenged the underlying determinants of malnutrition and food insecurity in the target communities. Malnutrition is a complex issue. The integrated program approach identified and addressed gaps on both supply and demand sides. The program was also able to shift the levers of

powers dynamics and prohibitive social norms for women and adolescent girls, through a community participation and empowerment approach. The program successfully established synergies among various stakeholders that aligned the priorities of different stakeholders (government, civil society organisation and community) towards a common purpose. This approach enabled the successful integration of health care service, ICDS program, and the PDS for better health and nutrition outcomes for the target communities. However, ensuring meaningful community engagement and participation in integrated programs can be challenging. The program has been able to establish trust in the target communities. The program has also overcome structural and cultural barriers empowering the communities to take ownership. In the remaining months of the project, it is recommended that the project works with leadership, already nurtured under the program, in taking every aspect of the work forward.

In an integrated programming, it is often difficult to decode the impact of each intervention against the overall outcome of the program. However, it is essential that the project identifies the most effective and relevant activities, and analyses their independent influence on the overall objective. Hence, it is strongly recommended that the project does evaluation of the key interventions like: the nutritional garden, the backyard poultry, the water structure repair, the seedbank, the capacity strengthening initiatives, the bio-diversity register, etc. with the information already gathered by the program MIS. This will help prioritize activities for the remaining months of the project.

6. Annexure – I

A case study on Youth groups – a breeding ground for community leaders

Chandan Baiga in Umaria, Rakesh Kumar in Jehanabad, and Ganesh Singh from Panna share a common thread in their journeys. All three have emerged as community leaders after being actively involved in youth groups under the VSS program in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. Chandan currently serves as the Sarpanch of Amdi village in Umaria, Rakesh is a ward councillor in Jehanabad, and Nafisa has taken up the role of Counselor at Rewa Nagar Parishad. Remarkably, this trend is not an exception, rather the norm within the

youth groups fostered by the VSS program. Youths hailing from marginalized segments of society have embraced leadership roles within their communities with the encouragement of the project.

Reflecting on their transformative experiences, each of these leaders attributes their newfound awareness and leadership roles to the invaluable support and information received through the VSS program. Chandan reflects, "I was socially active before, but the training and support during the project transformed me. I discarded unhealthy habits such as chewing pan masala, improved my time management, and became more conscious of my life goals." Rakesh, too, had a similar experience, leading to personality development, regular participation in community monitoring of government schemes, and gaining access to public spaces such as community halls and government offices. Notably, quite a few of the youth group members from Phase I in Madhya Pradesh have transitioned into the role of community volunteers in Phase II of the program. Beyond the financial incentives, their motivation for the job is also to support their communities in realizing their entitlements and benefits. The development of a cadre of community leaders is a true testament to the project's impact.

The project's training and information have exerted a dual impact on these youths: *firstly*, by fostering self-awareness and nurturing their personalities and responsibilities towards their community, and *secondly*, by equipping them with the knowledge and insights needed to navigate government systems and processes. Consequently, they have assumed pivotal leadership positions within their respective communities, marking a testament to the program's transformative influence.

The positive trend is not limited to individual leadership journeys. While engaging with Prince and Munna Kumar, participants of a youth group in Jehanabad, Bihar, they revealed that the group serves as a platform for young individuals from marginalized communities to address ongoing issues within their community and collectively find solutions to overcome challenges. The trend was also evident in Sitamarhi, wherein the youth group actively led efforts to construct Harijan Samudayik Bhavan - a dedicated community place for marginalized groups. Earlier, the allotted land was occupied by dominant communities in the villages. The youth group actively brought up the issue during the PLA meeting and persevered with the cause for more than a year, resulting in the freeing up of occupied land and subsequent construction of the building through the Gram Panchayat funds.

The VSS program has emerged as a powerful force in fostering leadership and community empowerment. Through individual stories like those of Chandan Baiga, Rakesh Kumar, and Ganesh Singh and collective efforts of youth groups in various regions, the program has demonstrated its ability to bring about positive change, creating a cadre of community leaders committed to the well-being of their communities. The case study serves as a testament to the program's effectiveness in inspiring social transformation and building resilient, empowered communities.

[i] Global Hunger Index https://www.globalhungerindex.org/trends.html#:~:text=The%202023%20global%20GHI%20score,2022%2C%20reaching%20about%20735%20million.

[ii] https://cgspace.cgiar.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/62e3f98a-6815-4e0e-9280-4ac2929b90d6/content