

## **Knowledge empowers people**

Knowledge and information are essential for people to respond efficiently and successfully to the opportunities and challenges that the climate change throws at them. But to be useful, knowledge and information must be effectively and timely communicated to the people.

In order to provide the rural people with useful and timely information related to farming practices, the Gorakhpur Environmental Action Group (GEAG), in partnership with Change Alliance, has set up Village Resource Centres (VRC) in clusters of villages. These VRCs are steadily becoming single-window delivery mechanisms for information, agricultural inputs, agricultural and weather advisories. The VRCs are playing a significant role in the capacity building of the community to enhance its awareness and knowledge levels.

### **Village Resource Centre**

The Village Resource Centre is a unique centre that is established and managed by the community at the village level to cater to the agriculture related information and resource needs of the small and marginal farmers, as well as women farmers. The centre also acts as a platform for knowledge sharing among the farming communities. The VRC is instrumental in dealing with the climate change patterns as a part of information dissemination and knowledge sharing, it also provides easy and cheaper access to climate-resilient varieties of crop seeds, bio-fertilizers, bio-pesticides, agricultural equipments like irrigation pipe, winnowing fan, spray machine, etc. These inputs and resources are easily availed by the farming community as per their needs and requirements. In a nutshell, the VRC acts as an alternate agricultural extension system for the village people.

### **Salient features of VRC**

VRC is an effective platform which benefits the small and marginal farmers and women farmers at large. In order to provide some sort of strengthening to the VRC, GEAG has donated few agricultural resources which in turn, will be managed, maintained and multiplied by the VRC committee and community members. Some of the salient features of the VRC are as below:

1. VRC is an information dissemination (especially related to natural disasters like floods) input/resource distribution centre.
2. VRC is established in clusters of five villages (i.e., one VRC for five neighbouring villages)
3. Completely run and managed by the community members. A 15-member VRC committee (three members from each of five villages) is formed who then select a President, Secretary and Coordinator to look after the day-to-day functioning of the VRC. Women's participation is ensured in the VRC committee.
4. The VRC committee manages the availability of agricultural inputs at the centre, maintenance of the agricultural tools/equipments, etc.
5. The inputs and equipments available at the VRC can be used by any person of the village upon payment of scheduled fees.

6. Small and marginal farmers and women farmers are given preference for utilizing these resources.
7. The rental fees for the agricultural equipment have been fixed at a very low and affordable price as compared to the market prices.
8. The VRC also holds a seed bank and grain bank which allows people of the village to buy seeds and grains in times of any disaster such as floods.
9. In order to maintain transparency in the financial accounts of the VRC, the VRC is linked to a nationalised bank in which the income earned from the VRC is deposited. The bank account is managed by the President, Secretary and Coordinator of the VRC.
10. The VRC has a bye-law which is abided by the VRC committee members. It covers the disbursement procedure of the inputs/resources, prices, creation of demand analysis of the resources, etc.

### **Village Resource Centre – A gender friendly initiative**

There are several features of the VRC that make it gender friendly, such as:

**Easy accessibility:** Since the VRC exists at the village level, it has substantially increased its accessibility to all people, especially to women. It was not the same earlier. Women had to depend upon the markets which are a few kms away for getting the inputs which used to be a difficult process. Several constraints used to come in their way for going to markets, such as, they had to be dependent on the male members of the family to accompany them, the market time had to be managed, somebody had to be assigned to look after their children when they are away, time consumption used to be huge, sometimes even upto 6-7 hours, etc. With the VRC at their doorstep, the women walk in any time of the day to fulfil their requirements. It saves lot of their time and they need not be dependent on anybody to get the required inputs. Moreover, the VRC coordinator gives due preference to the women for taking the inputs and equipments for usage.

**Effective information centre:** As mentioned earlier, there are as such no government mechanisms which provide women farmers with relevant and timely information regarding farming practices. The VRC serves as the only and effective medium of information dissemination and sharing. The Farmer Field School (FFS) which is run once in a month at the VRC is an excellent platform for the people, especially women wherein they come and gain information related to agricultural practices, disaster mitigation techniques, disease and pest management, etc. The FFS is easily accessible to women and they learn new methods, techniques and practices to improve upon their farming system.

*“VRC has brought about a change in my life. I get all the agricultural related information from here. I never knew about organic manure and fertilizers and was using only urea and DAP for my crops. I never realised how much damage was happening to my crops. Through VRC and FFS, I learnt the methods of preparing organic manure and fertilizers such as vermicompost, vermi-wash, CPP, matka khaad, etc. These are simple and easy to prepare and very cost effective. My crops are much healthier now”.*

- **Ms. Vidvawati. villaae Rakhukhor. block Campieraani. district Gorakhpur**

**Climate resilient information and inputs:** With the rapid changes taking place in the climatic conditions and rainfall becoming erratic, it has not been easy for the farming community to deal with these changes and sustain their livelihoods. VRC seems to have been playing an excellent role here through its SMS-based information system. GEAG has established weather stations in the villages along with rain gauges which measures the amount of rainfall. The data generated from the established weather stations is communicated through SMS applications for information to the farmers. This early warning system alerts the farmers to be prepared to deal with the climate change patterns in a better way. The weather station is also a good mechanism which cross-checks the IMD data.

*"In earlier days, we used to predict rains as there was a fixed rainfall pattern. Now it is totally unpredictable due to which we suffer losses. We are living on risks. In such a situation, the SMS-based early warning system has come like a boon for us. Recently, we got the forecast that there will be heavy rains from 12-16 September 2012 which was sent by GEAG weather station. It actually rained heavily during those days but since, we had prepared ourselves, we were luckily saved. We also inform everybody in the village and even in the neighbouring villages about these warning systems so that farmers are alert. We completely rely on these SMS information and not on the weather information published in the newspapers".*

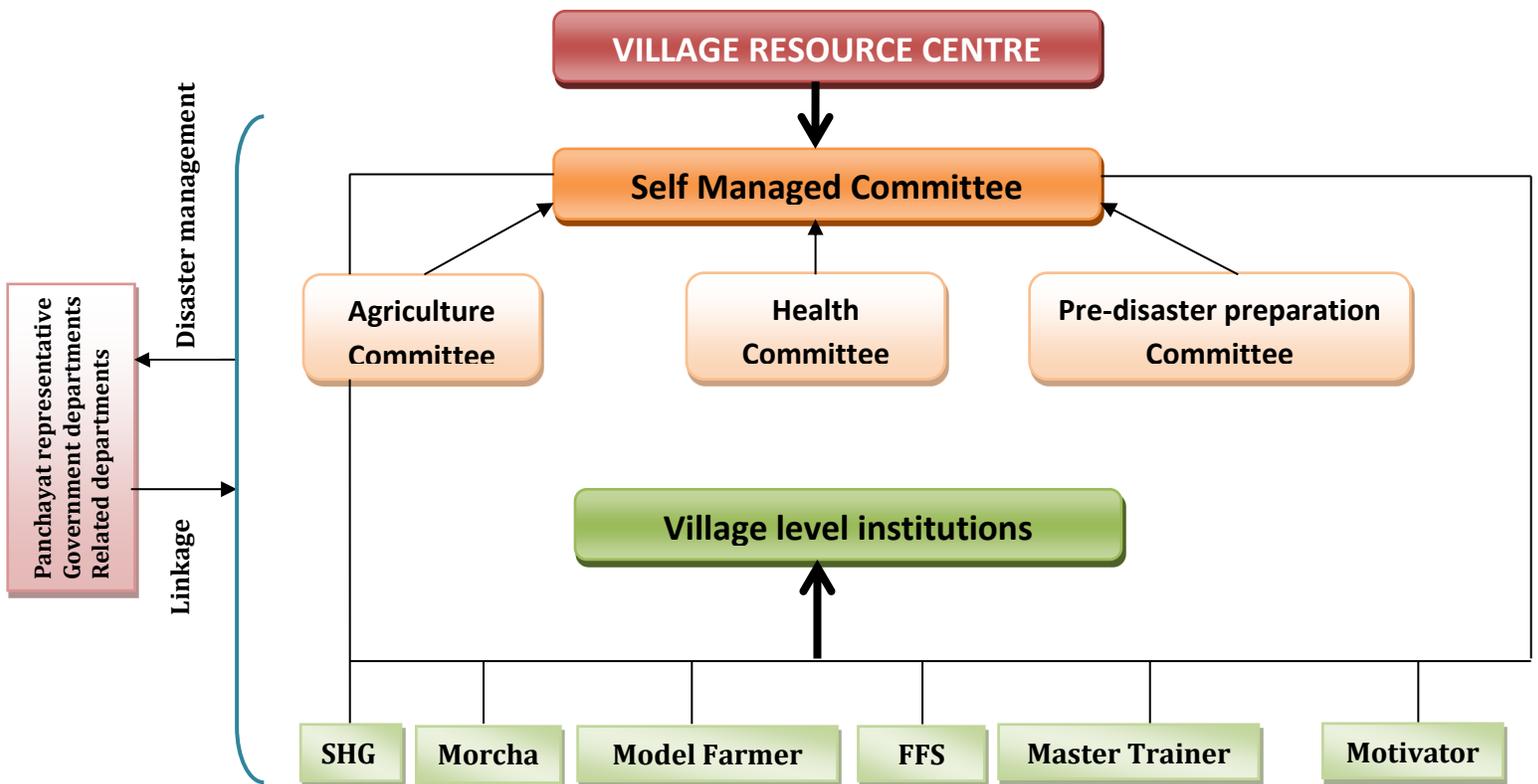
- **Mr. Brij Nandan Yadav, village Rakhukhor, block Campierganj, district Gorakhpur**

Apart from early warning systems of disseminating information, the VRC mobilises availability of climate-resilient crop seeds for the farmers. Such inputs help the farmers to get a good yield which ensures their food security in times of disasters. With the linkages developed with International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), this year, Shushk Samrat, an early paddy variety was made available to the farmers through the VRC. Farmers are more than happy with the performance of this variety. Shushk Samrat requires less amount of water and stands in erratic rainfall and drought conditions. It being an early variety, the crop gets ready for harvesting in 105 days. Farmers said that in a normal paddy crop, even 10 times of watering are not enough to sustain the crop whereas Shushk Samrat requires 1-2 times of watering and if the crop is fortunate enough to get some showers of rain, no irrigation is required for the crop. This variety has served as a boon to the resource poor farmers as it does well in low input management and moisture stress conditions.

### **Linkage and coordination – village level institutions**

Broadly, the three key issues – agriculture, community health and pre-disaster preparation are very closely linked to development and they get directly influenced in times of any kind of disaster. To address this, under the VRC, these three committees are established which work in coordination with one another and together form the VRC. The VRC along with its three committees together interacts and works with other village level institutions established at the village level such as Self Help Group, Laghu Seemant Krishak Morcha, Farmer Field School, Model Farmer, Master Trainer and Motivator. The three committees of the VRC also play the function of monitoring the other village level institutions and help in their sustenance and sustainability.

In this mechanism of coordination and supporting each other, the VRC committees and the village level institutions work in synergy and provide meaning and strength to one another's functions and responsibilities in dealing with climate change patterns. For instance, the income generation activities done by SHGs are done in coordination with the VRC committees. These committees decide the income generation activities that can be promoted among the SHGs that will fetch maximum benefit with less risk factor and in turn, ensures the availability of required inputs at the VRC. In a nutshell, the functioning of VRC is well coordinated with other institutions at the village level.



### Linkage with government departments

One of the main objectives with which the VRC has been established is to form effective linkages with related government departments so that important information related to various agricultural schemes are made accessible to the farming community. The VRC is a small unit with limited resources which cannot completely fulfil the demands and needs of the small and marginal and woman farmers. Hence, it becomes essentially important that the linkages with related government departments such as agriculture, animal husbandry, fisheries, health, education, etc. is well established and the schemes can be successfully made available to the farmers. On the other hand, the government departments can also use this village level resource centre to disseminate information regarding their schemes and undertake crop demonstrations. In this way, the farmers can benefit by getting access

to government schemes and benefits and in turn, improve their farming systems and livelihoods.

## **Conclusion**

The VRC is an ideal tool to achieve the goal of empowering farmers through dissemination of relevant and timely information. It has been clearly seen through this case that access to information and its effective usage has empowered people, especially women to think and act differently and has reduced wastage of time and resources. It has empowered women farmers by enhancing their knowledge and information levels. The workload of women has reduced as VRC is accessible to them at the village level. VRC has proven to be very effective in climate change adaptation and dealing with disasters like floods, where farmers have been able to adopt alternative agricultural practices and cropping systems to ensure their food security. The VRC model is successfully implemented in the villages and since it is completely owned by the community, the community feels very confident in sustaining its activities even after GEAG withdraws its support.