

# Annual Report

2018 -2019



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## From the Desk of the Secretary



I am pleased to share the Annual Report of SMOKUS for the year 2018-2019. Detailed information about SMOKUS's efforts, project, achievements, and lessons learnt and activities for the year were included in the Annual Report. This report is a valuable tool in evaluating our actions, reviewing our efforts and learning about what our organization is committed to and how we had implemented our project in the past year. We are incredibly grateful to our managing committee members, who have worked tirelessly on all of our activities and goals and making them a reality.

Empowered by their confidence and efforts, we look ahead to the future and move forward to create an overall better community environment. We are very fortunate to have such dedicated managing committee members, volunteers, and staff as our team that provide their own unique experiences and visions to help our organization grow. Their efforts have allowed us to strengthen our internal organization and promoted a better understanding of issues in our community.

On behalf of the managing committee and staff of SMOKUS, we wish to express our most sincere appreciation for our funding partners, TDH-Suisse, The Government of India, The Government of West Bengal for their commitment and support to our mission and vision. Our gratitude is also extended to our community people, individual, local, national NGOs for their helpful contributions as well. However, my greatest thanks and appreciation must go to my entire staff and those in the project area and the community with whom we work every day. SMOKUS is committed to an all around more developed community that works towards sustained socio-economic development and an improved quality of life. We work as an agent of social change by implementing community-based projects that are present in rural and marginalized areas. Our projects consist of a combination of developmental strategies that aim to improve living conditions of children, increase community participation and encourage women's accessibility to decision making skills and other opportunities.

In the coming year, SMOKUS hopes to improve on all of our projects and achieve our goals using new and fresh strategies. We look forward to very promising prospects in the following year and hope that, with the support of our funding partners, community people, and staff team and managing committee members; we will again have a very successful year filled with new accomplishments and goals that are just as great as the last.

**Jaba Bhattacharjee**

Secretary  
SMOKUS

## **SMOKUS – An Overview**

The Shripur Mahila-O-Khadi Unnayan Samity (SMOKUS) established as a women's organization in 1990. Its management body comprises of all female members and the program team had a balance of both women and man. SMOKUS got the registration from the Society Registration Act in 1994.

Since inception, its focus has been on women empowerment and child protection. In 1994, Mother and Child health program activities started in few villages, spread across in three Gram Panchayats of two blocks in the Uttar Dinajpur district.

Since 2003, the work focus has been children and women's right based. Prevention and protest against women trafficking, child labour, women & child domestic violence and livelihood activity of women was taken in an organized way in several areas.

Thereafter, to strengthen the community based initiatives, leadership training for the youth, non formal schools, and distribution of seeds to the farmers, adolescents & women health checkups by the operating village clinics were the added activities.

The process to strengthen women was due to their representation in the Gram Unnayan Samity, raising their voice and discussing their issues. SMOKUS believe that women's empowerment in the decision making process, fulfilment of their rights, control over resources, preventions & protection against violence and abuse brings dignity and justice in life.

Since 2011 SMOKUS focused on Child Rights & Child Participation.

### **Major Issues in the area:**

A glance on the present scenario reveals that it which is one of the most backward districts of the state of West Bengal. The District has Extreme Poverty, lack of development, low literacy rate (especially female literacy rate), drop outs, gender discrimination, religious-cultural difference due to minority agglomeration, presence of 227 km of international border, trafficking, immunity related issues, malnutrition of mother and child, huge number of child labour, unawareness of the community on health related issues – are few examples of the problems, the District of Uttar Dinajpur suffering from. Simultaneously, the districts of Uttar Dinajpur, both witness large-scale migration, into and out of the state.

Uttar Dinajpur has a very large concentration of underprivileged social groups such as the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes as well as Muslims within its rural population. Landlessness tends to be high among the Muslim and SC groups, who therefore constitute a sizeable proportion of the agricultural workforce within the district. Most ST farmers possess some land, but had originally settled in wasteland tracts where cultivable land was of marginal quality and was located in drier upland areas or on the edge of forests, etc. Since the ST concentrations tend to be high in single-cropped regions, they have to combine subsistence farming with wage-work for at least a part of the year

## SMOKUS works hard to combat these issues which can be identified below:

- Gender Discrimination
- Dropout in schools
- Child Marriage
- Child Labor and exploitations
- Migration of children
- Child Trafficking
- Low and unstable family income

## Major Activities

The Organization is associated with State & India Government, National, International organizations as a partner and get individual support for implementing projects in different sectors. Our major projects in the financial year 2018-19 are described in subsequent paragraphs.

### *Support for Education of children*

**Identification of drop-out & at-risk children:** SHGs, VVCs and the community in general have helped in identifying beneficiaries for integration in mainstream schooling system, candidates for enlistment in the education support. The limited number of seats in the education support centre has posed in challenge in accommodating beneficiaries beyond the set limit of 90 seats when actually more learners deserved attention.

**Enrolment of identified children to respective classes and follow up with schools:** Due to budget constraints, SMOKUS has to be extremely selective in choosing and providing financial support to beneficiaries. Concerned school authorities were approached to see the viability of extending reduced fees to such students.



### **Education support to identified drop-out & at-risk children:**

Limitations in space, manpower, and supplies considerably inhibit Rupantor intervention in the provision of education support to the drop-outs children & high number of children at-risk. Learners presently enrolled in class VIII & IX however have already been identified for inclusion in the next batch of beneficiaries for the following year. School supplies have been distributed to these learners and provision of study materials has likewise been done. The present number of enrolees in the

study support centre has been provided with whatever available supplies as well.

**Supportive Education Centre:** 180 children beneficiaries who had very little chance of pursuing education, have been provided with education support involving regular all-subjects coaching and

learning materials; class IX students of the lot have passed and have been promoted to Class X while the class X students of the same lot have qualified in their pre-board exams and will now sit in the board exam at the end of the school year.

### ***Running Child Clubs & Youth Group:***

In five Child Club (age group of children: 8 yrs – 14 yrs) and ten Youth Groups (age group of children: 15 yrs – 25 yrs) continuous efforts are being taken to make the children aware on their Rights, and about the relevant issues on Child Migration, Child Trafficking, and Child Rights. In addition, various unique forms of participative activities has been adopted to impart the knowledge and information to the children along with the formally recognized teaching methods of question-answer, discussion etc. Such activities includes, different types of folk games, songs, poetry recitation, dance, drawing, drama, develop wall magazine etc., which are innovatively used or made connected with the respective subject or topic by the animators and facilitators as a most effective supportive activities to their learning process. Interactive session has been organized for the improvement of self esteem and leadership quality of the children. The children and youth have now confidently expressing their opinions regarding their rights or on any other social issues before the adults. On the other hand, few examples of showing respect to the views of children and



accepting the same seriously in the meetings by the community has also been found. Children have initiated a special awareness drive on Child Rights at local formal schools through presentation of drama on safe migration & anti-trafficking. Children & youth have been effectively instrumental in advocacy campaigns concerning such issues as plastic garbage-free villages, cleanliness drive by providing garbage bins after collecting contribution from the community, and tree plantation. While the children had done the activities themselves, they had also promoted awareness on these issues in community cultural programmes (drama) and rallies.

### ***Formation & capacity building of Bal Panchayat at Gram Panchayat***

The establishment of one Bal Panchayat has been instrumental in improving children's involvement in participatory governance in that the members were able to identify issues which affect children either directly or indirectly. Training of Bal Panchayat had been intensive and members as a result were able to identify the problems & issues with the supervision of adult. They are presenting the said issues to the authority.

### ***Capacity Building for Village Vigilance Committee Members:***

VVC meetings have been instrumental in keeping a tab on the number of migrant workers, their whereabouts, and the overall safety of movement. Identification of other community issues such as child-marriage and other child rights violations has been integral to VVCs. In this regard, VVCs have been actively involved in monitoring, formulating action plans with the support of other community stakeholders, and maintaining close coordination with law enforcement agencies in cases involving

the prevention of child-marriage and solving migrant-worker problems. Thus, VVC formation has considerably changed community outlook. Planting and harvesting seasons have a considerable effect on VVCs in that meetings need to be scheduled in the early evenings and Rupantor staff have to adjust accordingly. The VVC members have distributed the Safe Migration Help Card to migrant people. So far there has been 683 total numbers of Safe Migration Help Cards distributed to migrant workers.

### ***Capacity Building for Community Members on Child Protection & Participation***

The objectives of the programme is - to orient the community Members on various aspects of child protection including issues like child education, child migration, child marriage, child labour, child trafficking etc; to let the community know regarding the existing Laws and Acts that protect children from any sorts of violation of rights; to make the community member conversant with gender aspect as a cross cutting of implementation.

### ***Capacity Building for Community Members on Panchayati Raj Institution and associated Government Schemes***



The objectives of the programme were - to orient the community Members on overview and various functions of Gram Panchyats; to let the community know regarding the existing Laws and Acts that propel Panchayat to act as a local self governance unit; to make the participants conversant with gender aspect as a cross cutting of implementation; to sensitise the participants on the availability of Government Schemes that have designed for the rural poor marginalised community people to eradicate extreme poverty; to aware

rural community people regarding their rights and entitlements that have been bestowed by the Constitution

### ***Village Information Centre***

While printed materials have been sufficient in the two Village Information Centres should take advantage of the ubiquitous presence of technology and as such should be digitally empowered and enhanced to handle online connectivity. District authorities and especially the IT department should be approached to provide infrastructure and free broadband connectivity.

For this period, a total of 554 footfalls have been registered. Dwindling VIC footfalls will automatically increase when the local community will begin to see it as truly an equipped resource centre not just for information but also facilitation of travel through online bookings, job related searches, marketing hub for agricultural products and sourcing, and stations for online queries and complaints booking. In VIC Computer training has provided to children & youth.

## *Strengthening Self Help Groups*

Through regular meetings, SHGs are now able to conduct meetings properly, write relevant resolutions, set and implement livelihood activities, budget planning and sourcing, loan repayment, etc. Regular meetings have also been used as platforms to discuss issues that affect children.

SHGs have also undergone training in piggery, goat raising, and vegetable farming. As a result, SHGs became eligible for loans to carry out their livelihood projects and meet their loan repayments on time. While the number of required target of SHG interaction with govt. authorities, banks, and PRIs has been achieved, regular consultation and reinforcement of linkages can be pursued.

Members of SHGs were able to identify and internalise the causes and effects of social issues ranging from child marriage, child unsafe migration, instances of school drop-outs, child labour, protection from violence, expression and speech, safe environment, immunisation and access to health facilities and livelihood. Distance and mobility, opposition from dominant males in the family and community, household responsibilities, and time constraints have been the common challenges in holding the activity. Strategy to overcome a major challenge on lost productivity is by holding the activity on a day when no economic loss is incurred.



Members of SHGs were able to grasp the concepts of PRI and participation, gram sansad (village-level planning/meeting) and gram sansad sabha, and MGNREGS. The SHG members were able to present their issues and proposals for action at the panchayat level.

## **Changes in the lives of beneficiaries**

While there has been overall substantial improvement of the quality of life of beneficiaries in terms of economic self-sufficiency of SHGs, empowerment of children in terms of advocacy skills and access to education support and formal education, regular upgrades are necessary to keep in pace with the continual changes of social circumstances. In terms of the programme's three main objectives, the following changes have been apparent: **Improved access to education:** 180 children beneficiaries who had very little chance of pursuing education, have been provided with education support involving regular all-subjects coaching and learning materials; class IX students of the lot have passed and have been promoted to Class X while the class X students of the same lot have qualified in their pre-board exams and will now sit in the board exam at the end of the school year.

**Increased participation:** Children groups particularly the Bal Panchayat have effectively submitted petitions to Panchayat and district level authorities on different issues that they themselves have identified.

**Increased household income and effective participation in village level planning process:** Besides the fact that livelihood programmes have been initiated by 50 SHG beneficiaries and their household incomes have considerably increased, SHGs have likewise effectively participated in the village level development process. Additional incomes earned have been used by these families to support the education needs of their children.

## Networking

- Youth Challengers against Environment Pollution & Climate Change
- PBJJSM (Paschim Banga Jiban Jibika Suraksha Mancha)
- Destination Unknown Children on the Move Campaign



## Acknowledgement

SMOKUS would like to acknowledge the generous help, monetary or otherwise of the following government agencies, organisations, individual donors, and patrons, without whom we would not have achieved this year's programmers.

1. Government of India
2. West Bengal Social Welfare Board
3. TDH Suisse
4. District Magistrate, Uttar Dinajpur
5. Dr. Ashok Sarkar, Kolkata
6. Dr. Shashi Panja, MIC W.B.
7. PACS, Kol & Delhi
8. Mr.Marc Joly, Switzerland
9. Mr. Christophe Roduit, Switzerland
10. Mrs. Severine Ramis, Switzerland
11. Mr. Rajen Khosla, Delhi
12. Pradhan, Rosakhowa I & II GP, Karandighi Block
13. Pradhan, Malgaon & Radhikapur GP, Kaliyaganj Block
14. Pradhan, Gulandhar & Kapsasia GP, Itahar Block
15. Rampur, Bahin & Bindol GP, Raiganj Block
16. Lok Kalyan Parishad, Kolkata
17. S.P, Uttar Dinajpur
18. Action Aid India KRO
19. Zilla Sobhadhipati, Uttar Dinajpur
21. Mr.Ashish Ghosh, Kolkata
22. Sobhapatris of Raiganj, Kaliyaganj, Itahar & Karandighi
23. The BDOs and Joint BDOs of Raiganj, Kaliyaganj, Itahar & Karandighi
24. OCs and ICs of Raiganj, Kaliyaganj, Itahar & Karandighi Blocks
25. DCPO, Uttar Dinajpur
26. Mr. Amal Acherjee, M.L.A, Govt. of W.B.
27. Dr. Jayanta Bhattacharjee
29. Prof.Ajit Roy Siliguri
31. DSWO & DPO, Uttar Dinajpur
30. Press Club , Uttar Dinajpur
32. Nehru Yuba Kendra, Uttar Dinajpur
33. Sudesna Mukherjee, Kolkata
34. NREGA Cell, Uttar Dinajpur
35. CMOH, Uttar Dinajpur
37. Mr. Asim Roy, Chairperson of CWC
38. Dr. Ramkrishna Das
39. Dr. Ashoke Mandol
40. NABARD, Kolkata
41. DDM, NABARD, Uttar Dinajpur
43. Caritas India, Kolkata
45. Participatory Research In Asia (PRIA)
46. MAMATA New Delhi

And all SMOKUS staff and the scores of women and children in the villages where we work; without them, there would be no reason for SMOKUS to continue doing what it has set out to do.

Thank you all!