

India

Bridging the knowledge gap in the Thar Desert: creating a generation of future women leaders

One of a series of ten case studies summarised in HelpAge's guide, *Bringing generations together for change* →

HelpAge network member, Gramin Vikas Vigyan Samiti (GRAVIS) (the Centre of People's Science for Rural Development), is addressing the knowledge gap between younger and older people in India's Thar Desert through its project, Enhancing Women and Girls' Leadership in Climate Change Adaptation in the Thar Desert.

GRAVIS has worked with village older people's associations for more than 20 years, but through this project it is working with younger and older people together to set up intergenerational learning groups. These groups aim to share knowledge between younger and older people on climate and other issues, and to acknowledge women's key role in society by empowering them to take up community leadership positions.

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What problem or issue did the project address?

The Thar Desert, in northwest India, is densely populated and faces unique challenges, not least over access to food, water and incomes. Youth migration to urban areas has contributed to a knowledge gap between older and younger generations, and there are other factors that prevent people of different ages sharing their knowledge and experience (for instance, gender norms prohibit women from talking in the presence of men). Water scarcity and gender norms reinforce inequalities that exclude women and girls from decision making, particularly over natural resource management. Age- and gender-based discrimination leave older women particularly vulnerable to extreme poverty and poor health.

The intergenerational gap between younger and older people in the area has widened as young people have moved to cities and towns to find work. Upon their return, they find that their own experiences leave them increasingly disconnected from their parents and relatives who stayed in the area.



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What does the project aim to do?

Using an intergenerational approach, the project engages younger and older people in the local community to work together to raise awareness more widely about gender, development and climate change issues. It aims to provide older women and girls with opportunities to take up leadership positions locally, and to have their voices heard in drought mitigation, natural resource management and climate change adaptation measures. Its main aim is to promote gender equality and greater access to natural resources, including water and sanitation, for younger and older people, but particularly women.

How does the project work?

The project began by identifying existing self-help groups and village older people's associations, and inviting younger women and girls to get involved with these to form separate intergenerational learning groups. Membership was to comprise older women, younger girls and women and girls with disabilities. As existing groups and village committees include members from all castes and age groups, the intergenerational learning groups also include people from all castes, religions and social groups. Group members first learn about issues of gender equality, drought mitigation and natural resource management (through training provided by GRAVIS), and then go on to raise awareness of these issues within their wider community through 'awareness camps' and village discussions. They talk about why it is important to create a society where women and men have equal opportunities – for education and work, but also for financial, social, economic and political empowerment.

GRAVIS's intergenerational approach builds on existing community structures and resources, and brings together existing groups (such as village development committees and self-help groups) to form the intergenerational learning groups.



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It provides training sessions for group members (the guidelines recommended 10–12 members per group, but the programme opted for 10–15 members, to make sure no one who wanted to take part was excluded). It also uses existing self-help groups – for example, farming groups, and women's groups for making and selling crafts. Discussions cover subjects such as gender equality (to help girls and women feel more confident to voice their opinions in group meetings), and climate change adaptation (to help people find solutions to mitigate the effects of climate change). These discussions have proved very useful, as older group members (who were mostly women) provided insights on how to conserve traditional resources, while younger members talked about current debates in natural resource management.

The intergenerational learning groups work with other local structures (village development committees) too to organise discussions and training sessions to advocate for a stronger role for women and girls in climate action and natural resource management. These sessions involve people from all sections of the community, including women and men of all age groups, as well as local authorities (for instance, the village head, the village development officer (*Gram Sevak*) and village governing body members (*Panchayat*)).

The intergenerational learning group activities have already led to some practical improvements – for instance, setting up drought-resistant rainwater harvesting structures (including drinking water storage tanks), under the leadership of both younger and older women. The groups also organise other initiatives on food and nutrition and fodder security, such as seed banks, crop demonstrations, horticulture units and community pastures. They raise awareness locally by celebrating International Women’s Day, World Elder Abuse Awareness Day, and International Day of Older Persons. At these events, they publicise women’s and girls’ leadership roles and how they are contributing to drought mitigation and other climate-related activities locally. These days are observed at the village level, and are used as opportunities to discuss issues such as ageism (including elder abuse) and help people understand the challenges facing older people – for instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath.



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What changes did the project achieve?

By adopting an intergenerational approach, the project has helped women and girls to increase their voice, confidence and participation in activities for drought mitigation, natural resource management and climate change adaptation locally. It gives participants the chance to share their views and voice their opinions. As the Programme Coordinator explained:

“The young women and girls bring in the most current debate and information on climate change... that is analysed alongside the community practices of climate change mitigation based on the perspectives and experiences of older members of the group. These dialogues, training and other activities with the community prepare the ground for much greater roles to be played by women and girls, not only in natural resource management but potentially addressing the larger issue of gender discrimination.”

This intergenerational intervention has created an inclusive environment where all members of a community can work with local leaders and institutions to improve drought mitigation and climate change adaptation measures. The intergenerational learning groups have been instrumental in getting women to play key roles in the construction and renovation of traditional rainwater harvesting structures, as well as food and nutrition initiatives. Older women have become more visible and their contributions more recognised within their communities.

What worked well?

The project succeeded in putting women and girls at the centre of its activities at every stage. It ensured that they were able to take part in project-related meetings and training sessions, and community meetings where decisions were made about the location of sites for rainwater harvesting structures (for example). Their participation in the intergenerational learning groups encouraged younger and older women to play a full part in all village-level meetings for natural resource management activities. As one woman said in a focus group discussion:

“We all listen to each other’s point of view and after discussing it, we always take a majority decision. Discussion and dialogue give different perspectives and encourages us to do things easily. Older women are now more involved in meetings and events. Due to the increasing participation of women, people are encouraging girls to get education.”

What could have been done differently?

The project mostly focused on addressing water scarcity, but on reflection – given the limited livelihood options and low literacy rates in the Thar Desert – it would have been useful to include activities on adult education, skills-building in rainfed farming, and livestock management (particularly animal health and nutrition). As another woman who took part in the project said:

“Education and livestock development can be targeted in the interventions, so that the new generation can be independent.”



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What can we learn from this project?

The intergenerational learning groups are the key instrument for learning and sharing knowledge, with the ultimate aim of promoting gender equality and women’s and girls’ leadership in local drought mitigation and natural resource management activities. The events that were organised by the groups, and the discussions they had, helped to instil an attitude of cooperation and collaboration. Their activities contributed to a transfer of knowledge to the next generation, and have resulted in the creation of a new generation of women taking up leadership roles in their communities.

There are now more than 60 intergenerational learning groups – an expansion that was planned by the project. But such rapid expansion requires careful attention to sustainability and cost-effectiveness of the model from the outset.

This case study was developed with the support of the Centre of People’s Science for Rural Development (GRAVIS) in India. It is one in a series of ten case studies, produced in connection with HelpAge’s guide, *Bringing generations together for change* →, published in collaboration with Restless Development and in support of the Global Campaign to Combat Ageism

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