



the ant

the action northeast trust

the ant turns 11

Our apologies for this terribly delayed annual report. End July 2012 saw us being tested by ethnic violence that broke out in our District of Chirang. Villages we worked in for years were up in flames and we were paralysed by the immensity of the tragedy. We are still trying to recover from the aftermath of the violence and pick up the pieces of our work and lives. The next few years will be critical for **the ant** as we struggle to remain humane above the politics of ethnicity, religion and identity.





Size does not matter . . . working together does

I. Our Community Development Work

a. Energising work with Children and Youth

It has been an energizing three years since we started working with children and young people. Over 50 active children's groups and 20 enthusiastic youth groups keep us on our toes. Every week, over 1200 children and adolescents are involved in some planned activities – many of which they carry out by themselves. Supported by DKA, Austria, our Summer Camps and other programmes see the involvement of various stakeholders from the community.

We celebrated the passing of the Right to Education Act in 2010. While not a panacea for all the ills plaguing education in our area, we feel that at least now we have an entry point to start intervening and demanding better education in the government schools. In February 2012, we organized SMC (School Management Committee) Sanmilanis along with other CBOs to bring up the issue and highlight the need for taking provisions under the Right to Education Act seriously. The SMC of one of the middle schools, Laujuripara ME School, in our area started shutting the school gate at exactly 9 a.m. — shutting out both teachers and students who come late!



Muslim children of our Simlabari Village Children's group learning the Bodo Bagarumba Dance at the youth mela

Y-E-S... YOUTH!

When children of our children's groups started growing up and could not be counted with the little kids anymore, we decided to grow with them. And this metamorphosis of our children's groups into youth groups has been an exciting one. We now have over 20 youth groups in various clusters and their representatives are further being organized into area wise "Youth Parliaments". With its various "ministers" in charge of departments like sports, culture, education, health, environment etc. the youth parliament idea has really caught the imagination of our young people. Their enthusiasm for learning and for doing has been infectious. They organize meetings, discuss issues, take part in campaigns and also have a lot of fun in the bargain. Our team is doing their best to equip themselves to keep up with the young people and their enthusiasm. We hope that with some guidance the youth parliaments will deepen the roots of democracy in the youth of our area.



Top: Children of Birhangaon Govt School celebrate children's day with our support. Bottom left: An exhibition of our work in the Koila Moila Cluster. Bottom right: Youth getting trained to lead the Summer Camp for Children – June 2012.

Play on, Girls

Boys play while girls watch! That has been the dictum in our villages for a long, long time. But girls too wanted a slice of the action. Inspired by the movie “Bend it Like Beckham,” a couple of months ago we started promoting football for girls. Playing barefoot, sharing the only two sets of uniforms we procured and knowing the rules only vaguely, their enthusiasm makes up for their lack of technique! In the Youth Mela we conducted recently, five teams of girls played in the “tournament”. While all the 22 players of both teams chased the ball together, the crowd cheered them on enthusiastically.

We plan to organize coaching camps for our girls (and also boys) soon. In fact, in the years to come, we plan to focus more and more on sports and culture as the two help to organize children and youth from government schools in our villages. Like sports, we have started organizing cultural troupes of youth in villages – wherein with a bit of support, they are able to preserve their quickly fading traditional music and dances.



Summary of our work with Children & Youth

CHILDREN'S GROUP FORMED	45 groups with 990 children; planned weekly activities of games, art and craft, drama etc are held by the groups; minimum of 1000 such activities have been held in just one year!		
YOUTH GROUPS FORMED	5 groups; regular meetings & activities	YOUTH PARLIAMENT	1 youth parliament
LEARNING VISITS & EXCHANGE	12 times	TRAININGS	34
		SUMMER CAMPS	6 places
EVENTS CELEBRATED	20 times in each cluster	SCHOOL MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE MEETINGS	22 times
CAREER GUIDANCE CAMPS	4	YOUTH CULTURAL TROUPE	3 – Rowmari, Deosri, Koila Moila
YOUTH SKILLS TRAINING	4	YOUTH MELA	1 mela in Rowmari in which 350 youth from 5 clusters took

b. For Women by Women: Empowerment Not Just a Phrase

Small in number but huge in enthusiasm! That sums up our almost 100 women's Jagruti (Self Help) Groups. We have been organizing our women's Jagruti groups into federations for the past three years and have been supporting and preparing the women to take charge. We have been slowly withdrawing our material support while helping them build up a small fund of their own. We have been training and helping them gain confidence by conducting several small events. And the federations did us proud this year. To celebrate International Women's Day on March 8, 2012, our four women's federations mobilized all resources and support from within their group and from their community. They mobilized resources in cash and kind worth almost 1.5 lakh rupees! Over 1800 women took part in the four programmes that the federations planned and organized – some for two full days – in our different work clusters.

The success has been heady and with their new found confidence, most of these women's federations are ready to play an even larger role in making their societies a safer and better place for women. Arpan Foundation, USA recently stepped in to support our work with women and this has given us a fillip in helping women in our villages to reach another level of empowerment.



Summary of our Work with Women – 2011-2012

No. of Active Jagruti Groups: **97**

Jagruti Federations Formed: **3**

Skills Training to New Groups: **4**

Exposure Visit to MASK, Balipara, Dist Sonitpur: **1** with **25** women

Women's Day Celebrations: **4** places with over **1800** women taking part

Cycle Bank: **2** chapters of the cycle bank now active i.e. Koila Moila and Deosri Clusters. Over **450** cycles given from the revolving capital.



Rowmari women at a federation meeting

c. Livelihoods – When Work is Life

Agriculture: Two left Green Thumbs

For us, the dream of resuscitating farming and making it a viable option for our small farmers has been an uphill task! Farmers in our areas have largely been left to their own device for centuries. Totally dependent on the predictably unpredictable rains, high priced but poor quality seeds, no possibility to get bank loans, low land productivity and the absence of any crop insurance – the crisis has never been felt as acutely as now. The number of farmers giving up farming and moving on to daily wage labour and other work is growing. So much so that it has been a real struggle for us to gather interested farmers in a village to come together to form groups of even 8-10 farmers!

We have realized that our struggle is compounded because of our insistence on promoting organic farming. Already struggling to produce enough to keep afloat, even if they know that organic farming is good and desirable the farmers find the risks too high to make the switch. So, while we have had a great response to our trainings and demos and are sought after by farmers for getting them good quality seeds and implements, we have as yet failed to organize them. We are in the process of relooking our strategy and come up with winning ways of perhaps first getting farmers together and then later talk to them about organic farming! Only collective strength will help small farmers withstand the onslaught of the many crises that is killing agriculture in our villages. The Ford Foundation supports our livelihood-building initiatives in the villages.



7

Summary of our Work with Farmers in 2011-2012:

- Organized over **30 farmers' trainings** on vermi-composting, organic pesticides, mushroom cultivation, off-season vegetables, nursery preparation etc., in which 608 men and women farmers took part
- **12 Demos and field trials** were done in farmers' fields after the trainings
- Made **3 Green Houses** for off-season vegetables and **6 Poly Houses** for plant nursery
- Carried out **Baseline Survey** in 338 farming households
- Organized **30 farmers SHGs**
- Organized **3 farmers' melas** in our work clusters to keep up interest in farming; gave away 9 "Best Farmer" awards – 1010 farmers took part
- Established "**Farmers' Shoppe**", an Organic shop near Bongaigaon for selling pesticide free foods produced by our farmers
- **4 Farmers' Resource Centres** established to support farmers

Shopping for Chemical-Free Foods

We started an outlet near Bongaigaon for selling some foods produced without chemical pesticides by farmers we work with. Called "Farmers' Shoppe", we guarantee our customers that the turmeric, mustard oil, rice, ginger etc. we sell have not been sprayed with chemical pesticides.

We know that the market is there but we need to have stronger farmer linkages and need more farmers to produce such chemical-free foods.

d. Developing Business Entrepreneurs — A Possibility?

Is it possible to make business entrepreneurs of those without an iota of experience in carrying out business? What are the chances that micro-enterprises will scale up to be able to pull poor village families out of poverty? In the absence of a market and in a poor cash economy, how many small businesses can survive and thrive? We have struggled with this question since we started the Entrepreneurship Development Programme way back in 2005. Over the years we have carried out various trainings and stimulation programmes to get our village women & youth to start micro-enterprises. We helped them develop “business plans”, gave them micro loans and tried to follow them up. We saw our own hearts rise and sink with the fortunes of our entrepreneurs. But despite all this, we saw more of our entrepreneurs sink than rise. Of the 350 loans we have given over the years, just a handful can be said to have succeeded and continued their businesses. When we hear of recovery rates of 90% and above that other NGOs have achieved in micro-finance, our ears burn with embarrassment and it breaks our heart to see our own less than 50% recovery rate!

Though we have tried to study the other models and see where we are going wrong and even make corrections and change, the truth is - we are yet to crack it! And this is causing us immense worry about the future of the entrepreneurship and micro-credit programme. The next year will be a make or break year for this programme.

Entrepreneurship Development: Summary of Work Done in 2011-2012

9

Awareness Camps on Entrepreneurship

5

Skill Development Trainings

80

New Loans Given



e. Health of Our Villages

Community Monitoring of Health Services

Where ~~the ant~~ had earlier trained village pharmacists, health workers and community microscopists in order to fill up the huge gaps in health care, in the past four years we had stopped doing that. With the government taking responsibility for improving rural health care, we thought it best to let them do their job and we do ours of keeping an eye on them. With support from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, U.K., we had been involved in a fairly intensive process of monitoring services.



Health activities with children on the World Health Day

Using the Report Card Methodology, we got the community involved in monitoring the government health services, making a “report card” on various parameters and then giving the feedback to the government. We felt that the public should connect directly with government health officials and hence Jan Samvaads (Public Dialogues) were envisaged to be the platform of communication between the health providers and end users. We hoped that the feedback got would help improve health care delivery. Well, we did our part and mobilized the community whereas the community did its part in taking part in the monitoring exercises and by travelling far to come for the Public Dialogues. But to our disappointment, many a times the dialogues would turn into monologues as the government doctors and other health officials would not turn up or would send insignificant juniors for the dialogues. The worst part is, even if they attended, there was rarely any follow up action on the complaints received. In one Public Dialogue in Sidli PHC, over 150 people came from various parts of the sub-division to complain about the poor quality of services, and not a single official from the government turned up!. This after the health officials themselves fixed the date and confirmed their participation! We the Public might as well have been talking to the wall!

In November 2011, we had enough of this dialogue business and decided that we need to enforce accountability. So, we would go for Public Hearing in which there would be a jury and the government would have to answer to charges made. Our team got energized again and we felt that this was the way to go! It took another four months before the Principal Secretary could give us a date and sit with us to look at all the irregularities and complaints we had documented. Many orders were passed, promises were made but not much has changed despite that. We have stopped the dialogues and the hearings.

Though things did not work out as we had hoped, one good thing that has happened as the result of all this report card making and monitoring meetings is that many in the community have come to know about the basic health entitlements. They are aware of the roles of the Asha, the Health Management Committee, the untied funds etc. We feel that we now need to build up

health monitoring skills within our women, youth and even farmers' groups from the villages. For example, our women's federations will be checking on and reporting on the status of their closest health facility at every federation meeting. A pressure group can be built up by and by.

f. Mental Health Treatment

If 260 patients attended our camp in March 2011, this March '12 we saw 501 patients – a two-fold increase. More dramatic is the total number of patients seen in the year – 4987, up from the 1185 we saw last year. That is almost a five-fold increase. If success could be measured only in numbers, then this programme would qualify as being pretty successful! Apart from the numbers, seeing mentally ill patients who were “not in their senses” and dysfunctional, actually get well and be able to go about their daily work is a huge boost for all of us! Gives us a high but also reminds us of the huge responsibility of helping keep the patients well. For unlike most physical illnesses where one can discontinue drugs after one is better, in most mental illnesses, the treatment continues for very long and many a times, life-long . . . How long can an NGO – dependent on time-bound projects and funds – be able to ensure treatment for mentally ill patients? As most new patients keep adding to our load while we cannot stop the treatment of old patients who need to be given treatment for three years (upto for life!), the numbers keep piling up. While happy that we are making a positive difference in the lives of these patients and their families, the responsibility of indefinitely continuing the service gives us sleepless nights.



Mental Illness Treatment Camp

Ever optimistic, we had thought (and hoped!) the government would see the obvious need for such a critical service and rush in to do their bit to treat the mentally ill patients. But only if wishes were horses . . . We have realized that it will take time for the government to first get sensitized and open its eyes to this need and then respond! But till then, we cannot let our mentally ill patients and their families down. The project from Paul Hamlyn Foundation, UK ends in September 2012 but we hope to be able to raise some money to continue not just the treatment but really see how we can have a robust community mental health programme which not just manages the illness but really helps patients in getting socially and economically well.

Summary of Our Health Work 2011-2012

15 Facility Checks of Government Health Centres	14 Jan Samvaads / Public Dialogues at various levels
2 Asha Trainings	96 Village Health Activities
12 Mental Health camps	4987 Total No of patients Treated

g. Deosri: Of Forest Dwellers and IDPs

If anything pricks the conscience, then it is the abysmal poverty and hopelessness of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in our Deosri Cluster who have still not got rehabilitated after they were displaced 16 years ago. Hunger, no house to live in, lack of work, ill health, poor education, no clothes ... all enmeshed together and so, where do we start? And will anything we do ever make a difference to their lives? We have tried focusing on trying to get people their rights and entitlements but sometimes we wonder if charity would be the best approach in such a situation. How to get people to stand up and demand their rights on an empty stomach? Would material help first fulfill their basic needs of today and then perhaps they can think of developing their tomorrows? But then how many can we help and how much to help?

With core support such as for salaries, office and some programmes in Deosri coming from Caring Friends, Mumbai we have had the luxury of taking our time to experiment and then start initiatives there. Our core programmes there lend from the experience as well as resources of other projects in **the ant's** other work clusters. All in **the ant** are aware of the immense complexity of the Deosri work and it is beautiful to see how everyone in **the ant** team goes out of his way to support the initiatives there. We now run programmes with women, children and also with farmers. One of the proud hallmark of our work there is the integration of the communities – communities who have been even antagonistic towards each other. People there now know that working with **the ant** means first having to work with each other. Whether in our staff, in our committees, or in our programmes, all communities must be represented!

Winter was severely cold in January 2012 in the Bhutan foothills of Deosri where we work. Chilly winds would keep the impoverished families living in makeshift plastic and bamboo huts – many with no walls – shivering through the night. Hoping to bring some relief to the

Internally Displaced and also families living in forest areas, we partnered with Goonj (Delhi) to implement the Cloth for Work programme in Deosri. Families had to collectively do some necessary and productive work for their village. In exchange for the labour they put in, each family got a packet of used clothes for them to wear. In this

programme, we reached out to 1400 families in 22 villages in the Deosri area. We would like to have the Cloth for Work programme again this year too. Given a bit more advance planning, we will be able to do an even better job and be of help to many more families when they need it.

Above right: *Volunteers help in sorting out clothes under the Cloth for Work programme. Left: A child in Deosri with gifted clothes*



II. IDeA: Helping NGOs for Change

It is not enough that we ants do our microscopic village level work and then magically wait for huge social change to happen. But like us, we will need many hundreds of organisations and a strong voluntary sector to really start feeling the difference. Thus, apart from our own village level work, we have set ourselves a mandate of supporting and building up the voluntary sector in the northeast. Our training institute IDeA or Institute of Development Action was set up in 2007 just for that. Supported by SDTT (the Sir Dorabjee Tata Trust), this year alone our faculty trained over 987 trainees from various organizations in Assam and also from other parts of the northeast.



IDeA training long course – CORE2

Apart from in-house short courses of 3-5 days on various topics, this is the second year since we started Long Courses for select partner NGOs of Assam. These NGOs are selected from amongst many based on various criteria but largely on their sincerity and interest in growing and developing their organizations. Typically, the head of the organization along with a Board member attends the various phases of the course which is spread over 9-10 months. Residential classes are held in 5-6 day long phases and then they are given assignments related to the topic which they have to carry out in their own organization. We systematically take them through a gamut of topics – right from examination of their selves and attitudes to knowledge building on development and related

issues to Skills for Community Work, Project Development and Management to Proposal Writing to Organizational Development and NGO Management. The whole course is very intensive and demanding and our faculty goes to visit every single long-course partner in the field between two phases to support them in their assignments and work. Our senior faculty even goes to the partner NGOs and does a workshop with their Board Members on good NGO Governance.

These organizations will hopefully grow to be more planned, independent, accountable, ethical and effective organizations. Hopefully they will be stronger for performing the community work that is so much needed in marginalized societies where they work.

Summary of Work done by IDeA in 2011-2012

Long Course 2 were held COACH 2 (9 NGOs with 18 participants) & CORE 1 (11 NGOs with 22 participants)	In-House Short Courses 6 Courses held 161 people took part Outreach Courses 10 Courses in different parts of Assam + 1 in Mizoram 300 participants in all 10 courses.	Sponsored Courses 161 trainees; mainly NGOs who wanted their entire staff trained Total trainees IDeA reached out to this year 987
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III. Aagor and the Weavers

One of the ant's most visible and well known programmes, the weaving programmes called aagor completes 10 years this year. It has been an exciting but very challenging 10 years. For the past two years, we have seen aagor balance sheets going into the red. So, the whole effort this year has been to return the enterprise to profitability so that we can keep giving work to the weavers. With support from Ford Foundation, we tried to revitalize the weaving programme by making available liquid cash through an infusion of working capital. But the going has not been easy. The infusion of revolving capital helped ease the pressure of paying large bank interests leaving us a bit free to concentrate on market linkages and also take some risks as there was more money to use. We could also reduce dependence on the monopoly of a single big buyer and strengthen direct sales in melas and exhibitions. Though reduced, we are yet to wipe out our losses completely and go into profit again. We could return the bank loan and also invest some of its own money in reaching out to markets directly.

Aagor sold Rs. 67.5 lakhs of goods last year. Given the slump in the craft market and unwillingness of the market to pay the actual rate of the products, most likely it will not reach the Rs.1 crore turn over we had hoped to achieve by 2013.

Summary of Work of Aagor in 2011-2012

Sales this year: **Rs. 67,45,735.00**

No. of home based weavers in the villages given work: **112 weavers in 16 villages were given regular work; Rs. 19,53,726.00 was distributed as wages to weavers**

No. of in-house weavers given work in the centre: **46** during the year

Exhibitors taken part in: **Took part in 9 melas / craft exhibitions and sold goods worth Rs. 20,11,745**



IV. TACT: *The Ants Craft Trust*

In another six months, the ants store will be completing five years. The main highlight of this year has been the change in location. We moved shop. But luckily our new place is bang opposite to our earlier store and so, no loss of customers! If anything at all, the new store with a new look, increased space and better display has been a good move.

the ant's café continues to do well, winning awards after awards and is much sought after as a breakfast joint. But how we wish the same could be said about our craft retailing too! Our retail sales have not picked up and we are not sure if we have figured out why! We are trying to take help from experts in the retail field to come up with a plausible explanation and also solution on how to increase sales of our northeast craft – the reason why we started the store in the first place! Yet, between the Retail space, the café and the wholesales generated by TACT, we have broken into an operational profit and we have returned some of our loans!



Building a Multipurpose Centre

After many years of postponing, we had to finally tear down our earliest bamboo and tin structure this year. This was our very first “building” and every year we would prop up the rotting beams with a few bamboos and keep using it. But there was every danger of it collapsing on our heads this monsoon. We have started constructing a two-storied pucca building in its place – which will house a training centre for training women,



children, farmers and others from the community. It will double up as a patient waiting hall for our mental patients and the project offices will be cubicles for the doctors during the mental camp days!. Dormitory accommodation will also be available for the community as well as the staff during meetings. We have raised some money for it and will manage completing the ground floor by the end of the year. But we are desperately short of the amount we need for the first floor. We need help and welcome any support, any donations towards this.



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STOP PRESS!

Even as this report goes to press, **the ant** is facing one of its biggest challenges. Ethnic violence has broken out in our District and many have been displaced following this. We have been trying to respond to the situation. Never having done relief work before or having dealt directly with a situation of communal or ethnic violence, we at **the ant** are also searching for the most appropriate response to help the victims. We do hope and wish that peace and normalcy returns soon.

Heartfelt thanks:

OUR FUNDERS

Ford Foundation, New Delhi for supporting us and being behind us for 8 long years. We are truly grateful and honoured.

Paul Hamlyn Foundation, New Delhi for supporting our health work.

DKA, Austria for being the most enthusiastic partner in our energetic work with children and youth.

SDTT (Sir Dorabjee Tata Trust), Mumbai for making it possible for us to reach out to all those NGOs. We thank you on their behalf too.

Arpan Foundation, thank you for stepping in so generously when we had no support for our work with women.

... and **Caring Friends**! What would we be without your care and backing? You are our strength.

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