

From Vulnerability to Resilience

Project Report April 2025 - March 2026

Empowerment of Chilika fisher-folk and landless communities in Odisha through environment protection and access to alternative livelihood by establishing functional and sustainable community participatory institutions.



Submitted by
Action Village India

Partner Organisation
**Regional Centre for
Development Cooperation**

OVERVIEW

This report presents the progress made in the last 12 months (second phase) of the RCDC Chilika Project. Chilika Lake, the world's second largest coastal lagoon, and also an internationally recognised Ramsar site, faces severe ecological disruption due to climate change and human intervention. The project region lacks livelihood opportunities, causing widespread poverty, inequality, and distress migration. Its proneness to severe cyclones coupled with erratic rainfall and unpredictable temperatures exacerbates the vulnerability of poor communities. Moreover, human interference with the lake's ecosystem, reduced fish stocks, undermining the livelihoods of over 200,000 fishers and landless communities. Caste-based exclusion from natural resources, weak infrastructure, recurring climate shocks and external commercial pressures in tourism and aquaculture further marginalise local populations. As resources shrink and competition rises, migration and social tensions have intensified.

Despite delayed funds, many villages that benefited during the previous year continued activities and gained further momentum during the year. Livestock rearing, nutrition gardens, support for alternative livelihoods, dry fish and small businesses, village-level planning, strengthening of community institutions and SHGs, plantation activities and Padma Udaya producer company-created opportunities to earn income via micro-enterprises and value-added products. Notably, there has been significant progress in enabling vulnerable families to access government welfare schemes and growing community resilience via initiatives like the labour bank.

OBJECTIVES

- **Strengthening Livelihoods:** Improve household income through secure access to land, fishing rights in Chilika Lake, and diversified livelihood opportunities. Emphasis on value addition, branding, marketing, entrepreneurship and business management via community institutions.
- **Ecological Conservation:** Protect local natural resources and reduce environmental degradation through community-led plantation efforts and ecological awareness.
- **Reduced Migration:** Curb distress migration by creating local employment via self-help groups (SHGs), a Shrama Bank (Labour Bank), and Producer Organisation

PROJECT PARTICIPANTS



Map highlighting Puri district in Odisha, India, with a smaller inset showing Odisha's location within India.

2,327 women directly supported this year's initiatives. A further **2,050 women's incomes continued to benefit** from skills acquired through previous initiatives. Also, an additional **54 new target villages** were added to the project, in addition to the existing 39 villages. These villages were assisted in the formation of Self-Help Groups, the enrolment of members for the company, the establishment of *Chilika Krushi o Krushak Bikash Samiti* in each village, and the orientation of villagers on this year's project activities. This brings the **total village count to 93**, with a total of **187 SHGs** created.

KEY INTERVENTIONS & IMPACT



Plantation Programme

- **5,000 Casuarina (Jhau) saplings** were planted in 2 villages
- RCDC Chilika participated in the government's *Ek Ped Maa ke Nam* - "One Tree in Mother's name" campaign and **planted 1520 trees** at schools, *Anganwadi* centres and in the community.



Village Development Committees

- **315 village meetings** were conducted to discuss key village issues & solutions, access to government welfare schemes

- Formation and strengthening of *Chilika Krushi Krushak Samiti* through the company
- **59 new shareholders** for the company
- Until government welfare schemes can be availed, a private loan is being used to fund company activities



Company activities

- **58 SHGs** were supported to grow their income generation efforts in an organised manner
- Training on entrepreneurship, financial literacy and business management
- Preparation of packaging materials for value addition
- Procurement of 4 automatic machines to reduce high labour costs
- Establishment of 3 sales outlets to strengthen product visibility and market linkage
- Preparation of crab fattening fields in households



Village Cleanliness Campaign (with support from Goonj Bhubaneswar)



- Cleanliness drives held in **7 villages** with **550 women** participating.
- **550 kits distributed to clean** drains, ponds, tube wells, and community paths
- Some areas saw temporary seating platforms and fencing for future nutrition gardens.
- Improved cleanliness of drinking water sources and ponds
- Beneficiaries received essential materials (800 school kits, 200 game boxes and community orchard kits)
- Cleanliness activities are now practised regularly

Healthy Women, Healthy Family Programme



- With government support, health check-ups and awareness sessions were conducted in different villages
- **1777 women** learnt how to stay healthy and protect their families



KEY INTERVENTIONS & IMPACT

Nutrition Gardens

- Although this activity was not continued this year (due to financial constraints), seeds and saplings that were distributed in previous years helped 950 mothers continue nutrition gardening using saved seeds and newly purchased vegetable saplings.
- This helped them consume fresh vegetables and earn INR 700 - 1000 per month by selling surplus produce.



KEY INTERVENTIONS & IMPACT

Livelihood support: Goat rearing, dry fish and other small businesses

- Promotion of dry fish vending and other small enterprises to create pathways for future scaling
- **Year-end profit of 10% across small scale enterprises**, boosted by branding and local marketing of the producer company produce.
- **Direct livelihood support for 74 women**, intended to self-sustainably scale via a 'Each one help one' model. Under this activity, 74 members from 35 Women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have received direct livelihood support to initiate or strengthen small-scale enterprises. This includes support for 24 members in goat rearing, 20 members in small businesses, and 30 members in dry fish vending, along with other locally viable income-generating activities.
- Creation of a labour bank has reduced dependence on exploitative borrowing and helped manage income shocks
- Enabling the stakeholders of the company to operate independently, via training in accounting, risk, compliance, business development planning and good business practices. **13 training programmes** benefited **553 participants**
- **Out of 1,700 previously supported, 1,100 women continued to earn INR 900 - 3000 per month through livelihood activities.**

Each One, Help One Model: Under this model, beneficiaries will contribute 50% of their annual profit to support another community member. Through this shared contribution approach, every two beneficiaries will help support a third beneficiary, creating a self-sustaining cycle that gradually expands livelihood opportunities within the community.



KEY INTERVENTIONS & IMPACT

Women coming together in village meetings for the formation and strengthening of *Chilika Krushi Krushak Samiti* through the producer company



These images show the plantation of Casaurina saplings and trees for the government “One Tree in Mother’s Name” programme.

The plantation programme aims to create village-level green forests for climate regulation. Additionally, it could also provide an alternative livelihood as locals reap economic benefits from forest resources.

By planting a community forest, locals are encouraged to protect forest resources on previously unutilised land.

These trees would provide nutritious fruits for school children, and locals would gain access to fuelwood from the plantation area. The plantation would offer some protection against cyclones and improve soil conservation.





These images on the left show the village cleanliness campaign in partnership with Goonj Bhubhaneswar and the construction of the temporary seating platform



This campaign aimed to build unity and cooperation amongst women. Clean water sources help reduce medical expenses by preventing waterborne diseases. The bench helped to create a resting place within the community.

MILESTONES REACHED THIS YEAR



- More than 500 members are successfully enrolled in the producer company, with over 75% actively engaged in food processing and allied activities
 - Structural rules and regulations of the company have been clearly drafted, formally approved and a system of accountability established
 - All necessary licences have been obtained from the appropriate authorities to maintain the required standards in production, processing and marketing
- 23 new villages were reached during this year, where focused efforts were made in formation and strengthening of SHGs. With continuous support, these SHGs became functional and participated in group processes. The programme now covers 55 villages in total, creating a strong grassroots base for the future.

CHALLENGES AND LEARNING

Understanding the challenges faced and planning better for the future is a key part of the process. Challenges included:

- Limited awareness of government schemes
- Delay in approvals
- Geographical constraints in coastal areas
- Inconsistent community participation

These are being mitigated by:

- Building knowledge on government schemes
- Continuous engagement
- Strong coordination with stakeholders
- Flexible planning for better responses



INSPIRING STORIES



Turning adversity into prosperity - Community Forestry in Padanpur village

Padanpur village is located under Manika Gram Panchayat in Krushnaprasad Block of Puri district. The village consists of 37 households with a total population of 119.

All residents belong to the Scheduled Caste community.

Most of the men work as wage labourers, while the women primarily depend on Chilika Lake for their livelihood by catching fish, prawns, and crabs. Some women are also engaged in oat farming.

There is a two-acre field situated within the outer perimeter of the village. In 2020, RCDC supported the two SHGs by providing 2,000 Casuarina plants for plantation on this land. However, due to the absence of an irrigation system, the women decided to install a tube well to supply water to the plantation. Unfortunately, the tube well was stolen, which led to the drying up of several plants due to lack of water.

To address this issue, the women collectively decided to dig a pond under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). This initiative ensured a sustainable water source, and gradually, the plants began to grow well. Over time, the plantation developed into a community forest.

Since the forest was located about 7 km from the village, monitoring became difficult, and some trees were stolen by local people. Eventually, the two SHGs decided to sell the forest for approx. ₹1000. The amount was equally distributed among the 24 members of the two SHGs.

After receiving the money, the women utilized it in various ways. Some repaid their personal loans, while others invested in small businesses such as grocery shops, goat farming, poultry farming, and other income-generating activities.

Having benefited from this initiative, the women of Padanpur village expressed their sincere gratitude to all the staff of the RCDC Chilika for their support and guidance.

Turning failure into success - Bharati's poultry farm

Near the banks of Chilika lake, Gorapur village, located in the Pirijipur Panchayat of Krushnaprasad Block, is home to approximately 50 households. Historically, the community relied on fishing in Chilika Lake.



However, climate change and declining fish stocks have made this traditional livelihood unreliable. While the women were primarily homemakers or small-scale producers of puffed rice, there was a growing need to find a more stable way to support their families.

Project progress was interrupted by an external factor: the construction of a "Mission Shakti" building next to the poultry shed. The resulting cement dust created an unhealthy environment for the birds, making it impossible to continue collective farming at that location. This forced the group to shut down their central operations.

Recognizing the risk, RCDC staff intervened through community meetings. They encouraged the women to transition from a single large farm to individual backyard poultry.

Bharati Behera, who lives with her husband and 3 sons, took the lead by setting up a net enclosure in her own backyard with her family members. After successfully raising and selling her first small batch for a profit of approx. £17, she immediately reinvested the money to purchase 10 more birds.

Bharati now manages her own poultry business with the goal of earning a steady £10 per month from selling eggs and meat. This income is specifically used to cover her household's daily expenses. Like many others in the village, she credits RCDC for providing the guidance necessary to turn a major setback into a sustainable, independent business.



The Labour Bank in Kajibhoisahi

The village Kajibhoisahi is located within the Panaspada Gram Panchayat of Krushnaprasad Block in the Puri district. The village consists of 120 households, primarily belonging to the Dalit community. Their main source of livelihood is daily wage labour. While they also catch fish and shrimp in Chilika Lake, many are forced to migrate to other states as "Dadan" (migrant laborers) to make ends meet.

The villagers face significant economic hardship. Due to the depletion of fish in Chilika, they can no longer rely on fishing for a steady income. Furthermore, a lack of local employment opportunities forces them to travel up to 36 km (to Puri) in search of work. Even then, business owners often hire outside laborers, leaving local workers unemployed and disappointed. To survive these periods of unemployment, many are forced to take loans from local shops, which often leads to social humiliation when they cannot repay them.

To address these recurring issues, RCDC took a new initiative called "Shrama Bank." The primary objective of this bank is to enable daily wage labourers and their families to live with dignity and self-respect. In its initial stage, the Shrama Bank was formed with 30 founding members.

Under this initiative, "Jointly Responsible Groups" were formed, each consisting of five members. A total of six such groups were established. To kickstart operations, RCDC provided financial aid of approx. ₹415 to the labour bank.

In the initial phase, three members from each micro-group are eligible to withdraw between ₹5 - ₹20 whenever they are in need. Once the labourers receive their wages, they repay the borrowed amount along with a nominal 2% service charge.

Mrs. Rajani Bhoi shared her experience, "During times when my husband cannot find work or doesn't receive his wages, I am able to withdraw some money from this bank. This has been like a blessing for us. The Shrama Bank provides us with the necessary financial support and convenience that was previously unavailable."