

# Closing the Exclusion Gap: Strengthening Social Welfare in Rural Ganjam Odisha



## Background and Context

Ganjam is one of the most densely populated districts in Odisha, known for high rates of out-migration, including seasonal and distress migration to cities outside the state. Purusottampur, Kabisuryanagar and Khallikote are the three blocks with the highest Dalit (Scheduled Caste - SC) population.

People from marginalized communities—including Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), single women, widows, unmarried women, migrant workers, and informal workers—face numerous challenges in accessing various government social protection schemes.

Several factors contribute to the exclusion of eligible families and individuals from entitlements such as food security programs (NFSA/SFSA), pension schemes (NSAP/MBPY), livelihood schemes (MGNREGA), labor welfare programs (OBOCWB), health insurance, and educational scholarships. The key issues include:

- Lack of Awareness: Many individuals are unaware of available schemes, the application process, required documents, and key government contact points.
- Application Fatigue: Repeated failed attempts to access social security benefits have led many to abandon the process, sometimes resorting to middlemen for assistance in exchange for money.
- Procedural Complexity: The digital divide has made it difficult for rural populations to transition from paper-based applications to computer-dependent online processes.
- Vested Interests & Poor Governance: Insufficient financial allocations, lack of transparency, favoritism, nepotism, and demands for bribes hinder access at the local level (Gram Panchayat and Block level).
- Discrimination: Poor Dalit families face systemic exclusion and discrimination in accessing social protection schemes due to institutional barriers, societal bias, and local power dynamics, preventing them from receiving entitled benefits and support.
- Weak Grievance Redressal Mechanisms: Many complaints remain unresolved, and pending cases add to the frustration of beneficiaries.

Our findings indicate that the challenges of exclusion and delays are largely a result of these combined factors in many cases.



## Key Gaps and Opportunities

During Covid-19 relief operations in these three blocks, we observed that many individuals were excluded from receiving ration and pension benefits from both central and state government schemes. To address this gap, we targeted these families for support through the distribution of essential ration items. As we engaged with them, they shared their vulnerabilities, the challenges they faced in accessing social security schemes, and the systemic barriers preventing them from receiving entitlements. Our findings revealed that a significant number of vulnerable and marginalized households—including Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), elderly individuals, single women, migrants, and ultra-poor families—were left out of government social protection schemes due to lack of awareness, absence of documentation, complex application processes, and corruption.

Additionally, local elected officials, government representatives, and frontline service providers lacked adequate systems, resources, and capacity to properly facilitate the application process. Beneficiaries in remote villages faced further exclusion, as they were unable to visit Gram Panchayat offices, Jana Seva Kendras, and Mo Seva Kendras—common service centers meant to assist them.

Recognizing these challenges, we were motivated to support vulnerable and excluded families while collaborating with local governments and frontline workers. Our efforts focused on identifying eligible beneficiaries, facilitating the application process, creating awareness among the people, addressing grievances and advocating for inclusion, to ensure equitable access to social security benefits.

By working closely with community members and institutional stakeholders, we aimed to bridge the gap, strengthen local governance, and promote transparency, making social protection schemes more accessible to the people who need them most.

## Relevance to Broader Policy

The intervention aligns with national priorities under schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY), Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), and the National Food Security Act (NFSA). It focuses on the inclusion of vulnerable groups—migrants, women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and informal workers—who are critical to achieving universal social protection.

This initiative addresses key challenges in the implementation of welfare schemes, including leakages, exclusion errors, and weak accountability, which remain significant concerns in ongoing governance and public administration reforms. By generating grassroots data and field insights on social protection delivery and community needs, the intervention contributes to policy dialogues on inclusive development, benefit portability, and the effectiveness of direct benefit transfers (DBT).

By empowering Gram Panchayats and citizen groups, the initiative strengthens local self-governance in monitoring service delivery and grievance redressal. It supports the 73rd Constitutional Amendment and the decentralization agenda, ensuring that governance mechanisms become more transparent, responsive, and accessible to marginalized communities.



## Summary of the Programme Intervention

The intervention by Youth for Social Development (YSD), with support from the Azim Premji Foundation (APF), in Ganjam, Odisha, focuses on improving access to social protection for marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, Adivasis, single women, elderly individuals, persons with disabilities, informal workers, and migrants. It aims to assist individuals in obtaining documentation, applying for welfare schemes, and resolving grievances.

The initiative identifies gaps in access to key welfare programs, including Public Distribution System (PDS), Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), pension schemes, health insurance, labor welfare programs, and housing benefits. To address these challenges, YSD mobilizes and empowers communities through awareness campaigns, capacity-building efforts, and social accountability tools.

Additionally, the intervention works to strengthen local governance by engaging with Gram Panchayats, elected officials, and frontline service providers to enhance service delivery, transparency, and accountability. It also advocates for systemic improvements using field data and community feedback to influence policy and implementation at the district and state levels.

### Objectives of the Program

- To improve access to and quality of public service delivery and rights and entitlements through citizen engagement using social accountability tools
- To increase citizen participation in local planning, budgeting, voice in decision making and thereby strengthen local democratic process (prepare VDP, incorporate in GPDP and gram sabha)

- To identify and foster capacity of the village leaders so that they empowered at the individual and collective level to effectively participate in matters of village development

### Key Strategies/Models used for Implementation

We believe that efforts to benefit excluded families and individuals are most effective and meaningful when they address root causes. Rather than waiting for policy reforms and government interventions at the state and central levels, and anticipating the upcoming local government elections, we chose to work directly with people on the ground. Through this approach, we have come to understand that addressing the complexities of exclusion and access to social protection benefits requires a multifaceted strategy. Youth for Social Development (YSD) collaborates with both duty bearers and rights holders to improve the lives of underprivileged communities in Odisha.

One of YSD's core strategies is the formation and facilitation of Citizen Collectives. This model empowers community members to take active roles in ensuring social protection coverage by engaging in information-sharing, training, and capacity-building initiatives. It also enables them to collaborate with local government authorities to advocate for their rights and strengthen social welfare systems.

**Formation of Citizen Collectives :** Local community members, including women and marginalized groups, are organized into structured citizen collectives. These groups, known as Mahila Adhikar Mancha for women and Nagarika Adhikar Mancha for men, bring individuals together with a shared purpose—advocating for social protection, addressing local issues, and championing broader societal concerns.



**Identification of Left-Out Beneficiaries :** Citizen collectives meet regularly to conduct door-to-door surveys and community consultations to identify individuals excluded from welfare schemes such as pensions, ration cards, job cards, and labor cards. Through information-sharing sessions and training, members are equipped to recognize gaps and support those in need.

**Support for Applications and Documentation:** Once beneficiaries are identified, the collectives assist them in preparing necessary documents, filling application forms, and submitting requests to relevant government departments. They also facilitate online applications through Common Service Centers, including Jana Seva Kendra and Mo Seva Kendra, ensuring digital accessibility for rural communities.

**Liaison with Government Officials:** Citizen collectives serve as a bridge between community members and government authorities, escalating unresolved issues and advocating for accountability in the system. They engage with officials to improve service delivery and ensure fair access to entitlements.

**Regular Monitoring and Follow-Up:** Collectives track application statuses, follow up with government departments, and report delays or denials, ensuring beneficiaries receive their entitled benefits in a timely manner. Their continued engagement strengthens transparency and responsiveness in the administration of welfare schemes.

### **Implementation Process**

Youth for Social Development (YSD) conducted a comprehensive needs assessment to identify vulnerable populations and gaps in access to social protection schemes. Through community profiling and social mapping, high-need areas and excluded individuals were identified.

Community members including women and men, elderly and persons with disabilities were mobilized and organized into Citizen Collectives. To build their capacity, training sessions were held to educate members on various government schemes, application procedures, grievance redresses and citizen rights. These collectives carried out door-to-door visits and organized community meetings to identify eligible individuals who had not yet enrolled in relevant schemes. The collected data was compiled and carefully verified for accuracy.

Citizen Collectives supported beneficiaries by assisting them in preparing necessary documents, completing application forms and submitting them to the appropriate government offices and Common Service Centre (CSC). They also ensured regular follow-ups with these departments to facilitate timely processing of applications. YSD field team and the collectives coordinated closely with block- and district-level officials to address and resolve administrative bottlenecks. Progress was monitored through MIS tools, and unresolved cases were systematically documented and escalated for further action.

### **Partnerships or Collaborations Involved**

We collaborated with Gram Panchayats, Block Development Offices, and the District Administration to streamline applications, reduce delays, and resolve service delivery hurdles. These measures strengthened local governance, transparency, and accountability. YSD also engaged with government departments—SSEPD, Food Supplies & Consumer Welfare, and MGNREGA—to improve coordination and responsiveness. By bridging communication gaps between authorities and beneficiaries, our team simplified procedures, raised scheme awareness, and advocated policy reforms. This integrated approach ensured more inclusive, efficient social protection systems, ultimately empowering marginalized communities.



## Overall Impact at a Community or Systemic level

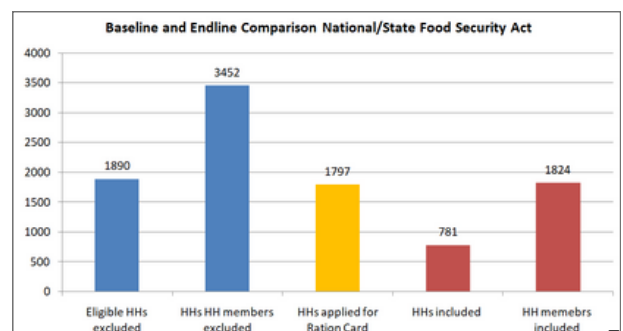
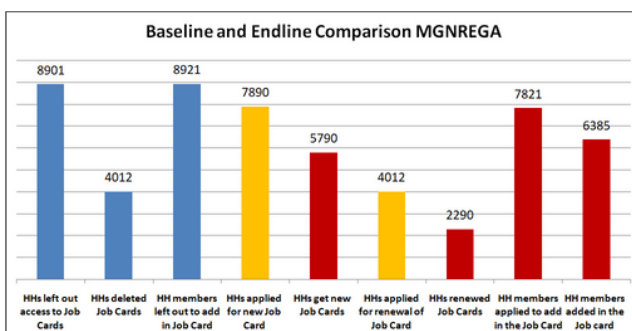
Nearly 12,000 previously excluded households and individuals have now been included in various social protection schemes, significantly reducing immediate hunger and poverty among these families. Additionally, more than 30,000 people have become directly or indirectly aware of social security schemes, gaining a better understanding of benefits, application processes, required documents, and grievance redressal mechanisms.

Citizen groups have played a crucial role in identifying vulnerabilities, facilitating access to government schemes, strengthening negotiation power with officials, and advocating for inclusion at various levels. As a result, people have become more aware and empowered to demand their rights, monitor the implementation of welfare programs, and hold service providers and government authorities accountable.

On the other hand, local governments, especially elected officials, have become more responsive by sharing information, participating in public hearings, and engaging with citizens in Gram Sabhas and other platforms. They have also contributed to collecting citizen feedback and addressing grievances, leading to greater transparency and improved service delivery. Common service centers have become more active and efficient, expediting processes. Overall, this intervention has enhanced awareness among rights holders while also making duty bearers more responsible and accountable to the people.

### Key Measurable Results (Quantitative and Qualitative Indicators):

- 781 households included in national food security schemes (NFSA/SFSA).
- 1,824 family members added to existing ration cards.
- 5,790 families received new job cards under livelihood schemes (MGNREGA).
- 2,290 job cards renewed under MGNREGA.
- 3,685 family members added to existing job cards under MGNREGA.
- 2,352 individuals included under pension schemes (elderly, PwDs, single women).
- 159 informal workers included under the Nirman Sramika Welfare Scheme.
- 67 households included under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) housing scheme.
- 212 grievance applications filed by citizen groups on both common and individual issues related to social protection.
- 167 applications successfully addressed by government departments.
- 41 individuals filed Right to Information (RTI) applications on various social protection issues.
- 13,471 beneficiaries received comprehensive information on specific social protection schemes.
- 5,373 people participated in Gram Sabha and raised concerns about exclusion in social protection schemes.
- 36 interface meetings (public hearings) organized by Gram Panchayats on social protection schemes.



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# Key Insights and Takeaways

## Challenges and Mitigation Strategy

One of the major challenges encountered was the lack of proper documentation among the most vulnerable families and individuals. Many lacked essential documents such as Aadhaar cards, which serve as a gateway to multiple welfare benefits, as well as bank accounts, which are necessary for direct benefit transfers. Our team took proactive steps to assist families in collecting and processing the required documents, ensuring they could access social protection schemes without bureaucratic obstacles.

Another significant hurdle was the government's limitations on sanctioning various social protection schemes. While many eligible individuals applied for benefits, they were often left out due to administrative constraints. To tackle this, we collaborated with state and national networks, including the Right to Food campaign, advocating for policy improvements and better implementation to ensure that excluded families received their entitlements.

Additionally, low cooperation from elected officials and elite groups posed difficulties in securing inclusion for marginalized communities. In many cases, local power dynamics and vested interests created barriers, particularly when financial incentives for officials were reduced. To address this issue, we actively engaged with block and district officials, leveraging their support to mediate and resolve cases of exclusion, thereby enhancing access to social protection programs for disadvantaged groups.

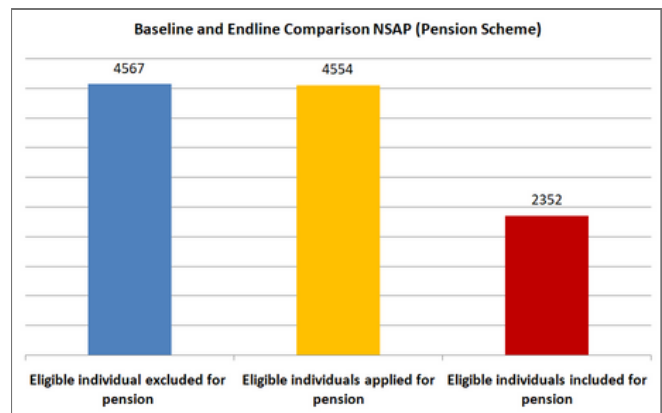
## Best Practices and Successful Models

One of the most impactful models that emerged from this initiative is the Community Empowerment Model, specifically through the formation of Citizen Collectives. These groups—Mahila Adhikar Mancha for women and Nagarika Adhikar Mancha for men—have successfully mobilized marginalized communities, allowing them to engage actively in securing social protection. By conducting door-to-door surveys, awareness campaigns, and community consultations, they have identified excluded individuals and helped them access entitlements such as pensions, ration cards, job cards, and labor welfare schemes.

Through training and capacity-building efforts, members have learned to navigate complex bureaucratic systems, ensuring long-term sustainability and inclusion.

A key success of the Citizen Collectives is their direct engagement with local authorities. These groups have bridged communication gaps between beneficiaries and government officials, ensuring transparent service delivery, grievance redressal, and accountability. By organizing public hearings, Gram Sabha discussions, and citizen-led monitoring, they have strengthened governance mechanisms while advocating for systemic improvements at both district and state levels. Their role in facilitating applications, following up on pending cases, and negotiating with government officials has made social protection schemes more accessible to vulnerable families.

Beyond immediate benefits, the sustainability of the model is rooted in its community-led approach. Instead of relying solely on external interventions, these collectives empower individuals to demand their rights, challenge exclusion, and monitor the implementation of welfare schemes independently. Their continued engagement ensures that social protection remains accessible and responsive, reinforcing local self-governance and active civic participation. This replicable and scalable model holds immense potential for expanding social protection efforts across other districts and states.





### **Recommendations for Scaling and Replication**

The cost-benefit analysis of this project demonstrates that the investment required is minimal, while the benefits generated for marginalized communities are substantial. With a per capita cost of less than \$1, the initiative has high scalability and replication potential, making it feasible for expansion into other regions facing similar challenges in social protection access. Given its community-driven approach and sustainable impact, the model can be effectively adopted by local governments, civil society organizations, and development agencies looking to enhance social security coverage for vulnerable populations.

A key factor that makes this intervention scalable is the empowerment of Citizen Collective members. By equipping community leaders with knowledge, tools, and advocacy skills, the model ensures that social protection efforts are self-sustaining beyond the initial project period. These empowered citizen groups can continue to identify left-out beneficiaries, facilitate applications, engage with authorities, and monitor service delivery, thereby ensuring long-term impact without significant additional investment. Strengthening training programs, peer learning networks, and collaboration with administrative bodies will further enhance the adaptability and effectiveness of this approach in diverse social and geographical contexts.

To facilitate successful replication, strategic partnerships with local governance institutions, NGOs, and policy advocacy groups will be essential. Governments can integrate this model into existing welfare programs, leveraging Citizen Collectives as community monitors and facilitators. Additionally, the use of digital platforms for awareness campaigns, grievance redressal mechanisms, and beneficiary tracking can further streamline the process.

By reinforcing accountability structures and institutional support, this initiative has the potential to transform the way social protection schemes are implemented, making them more inclusive, transparent, and accessible across multiple regions.

### **Policy-level Insights or Recommendations**

To improve social protection coverage, policymakers must expedite the sanction of pensions and ration benefits for vulnerable families. Bureaucratic delays prevent eligible groups, such as elderly individuals, PwDs, single women, and migrants, from accessing welfare. Automatic enrollment and proactive outreach programs can help identify and assist left-out beneficiaries, ensuring timely access to entitlements without unnecessary hurdles.

Many rural communities struggle with complex online application systems that require internet access and technical knowledge they often lack. Government portals should be user-friendly, with simplified language, guided steps, and multilingual options. Strengthening Common Service Centers (CSC), Jana Seva Kendras, and Mo Seva Kendras through adequate staffing and training would expedite applications, reducing delays and ensuring beneficiaries receive timely support.

Frontline workers, including Gram Panchayat officials and social welfare officers, often lack the training and resources to effectively support vulnerable individuals. Regular capacity-building programs would equip them with the skills needed for documentation assistance, application facilitation, and guidance on welfare access. Strengthening community-based outreach ensures better identification of left-out beneficiaries, promoting long-term sustainability in social protection efforts.



## Restoring Dignity through Work: Jhunu Behera's Journey from Hardship to Hope

Jhunu Behera, a 55-year-old resident of Ranjhali village under Ranjhali Gram Panchayat, belongs to a family that struggles at the margins of poverty. Living in extreme hardship, Jhunu and his family relied on daily wage labour to survive. With no fixed income, their lives depended on whether Jhunu could find work each day. When he couldn't, the family's survival became uncertain. The household consists of five members—Jhunu himself, his youngest son, his eldest son-in-law, his mother, and his granddaughter. As the head of the family, Jhunu did everything he could to support them. But the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns shattered the little stability they had. With all income sources abruptly cut off, the family faced a deep financial crisis.

Though they were covered under the National Food Security Act and received subsidized rice through their ration card, the supply was barely sufficient for 10–12 days in a month. For the remaining days, they depended solely on Jhunu's earnings. The lockdown not only halted his work but also left the family without enough food or resources. Recognizing the dire situation in many villages, Youth Social Development (YSD), a voluntary organization, began field visits across Ganjam district to understand the scale of the crisis. During one of these visits, they met Jhunu and learned about his family's struggles. It became clear that immediate intervention was necessary.

Realizing that the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) could provide a sustainable solution, YSD approached officials at the block and panchayat levels. They advocated for immediate job provisions for the poorest households. Vulnerable individuals, including Jhunu, were identified and assisted in preparing the necessary documents to enroll in the scheme. Thanks to this coordinated effort, Jhunu was provided employment under MGNREGA just 1.5 kilometers from his home. He worked for 15 days, which helped him earn a steady income and stabilize his family's financial situation. Today, Jhunu and his family are once again able to have two meals a day and live with renewed hope and dignity.

His story stands as a testament to how timely intervention, community engagement, and effective implementation of government schemes can transform lives.

Support



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