

Making the Health Co-operative a Reality

Singhbhum Legal Aid & Development Society (SLADS) works with highly disadvantaged tribal communities, especially women, in 75 villages in the remote and inaccessible hilly terrains of Jharkhand, in Eastern India. In addition to the community health care services supported by Skillshare International, SLADS offers legal litigation services and community education.

Skillshare International has been supporting the community health programme of SLADS in 15 villages in Jharkhand's Ghatsila block since 1998. For the past 5 years, 19 trained village health workers (VHW), 16 women and 3 men, have been rendering their services to the community selflessly. To meet rising expectations of stakeholders and overcome the ever-decreasing opportunities to sustain the development work, the team decided to work together responsibly and collectively to pool their resources and build a health co-operative.



Village Health Workers at the training centre.

The VHWs trained for 15 months before introducing the health co-operative to villages. Before the training, they had lacked confidence, nervously claiming *"I won't be able to make my village people understand."* Their presentations and the number of people attending village meetings showed the increased confidence of the VHWs. Skillshare International development worker, Dr Sumit Asthana, who has been working with SLADS as a Community Health Trainer since February 2003 says *"The transition was palpable - one should have been there to see it, hear it, and feel proud of it."*

Today, the women VHWs are the founding members of 'Sanjeevani Swasthya Sahakari Samiti Limited (Life's Elixir-Health Cooperative Society Limited) Kesorpur', with 75 members, and a waiting list of 40. They have maintained their momentum, motivating members to save and pay their monthly contribution of 20 rupees (about 25p). In addition to this, members pay a one-off amount of 100 rupees as share capital, an entry fee of 15 rupees and 1 rupee for the application form. It is hard for people living in poverty to make these payments and so, members have decided to accept instalments. Most importantly, when ill, they use the services of the Community Health Centre 'Samudayik Swasthya Sewa Sadan' from Dr S.K. Majhi who attends the clinic 3 times a week and is currently subsidised by Skillshare. This means that access to the services is in line with the community's needs and it gives business to the Health Cooperative - members pay a subsidised amount determined by the Board, while non-members pay higher fees. Skillshare International has also funded the purchase of medicines.

The highly motivated team of 19 VHWs is the best evidence of the added value of the partnership between SLADS and Skillshare. Gauri is working as the Secretary, and says, *"...we have come this far and will try to progress further."*

Skillshare International development worker, Dr Sumit Asthana says *"The women take pride in inviting people to their cooperative; most memorable was when Behula met Karunakar Mahato, the ex-coordinator of SLADS, and told him to visit their co-operative office and 'see what good work we have accomplished'. Having been associated with this programme for almost 3 years, Karuna was enthralled to see the progress and confidence of the VHWs."*