

## Empowering Grassroots for Climate Action: Bridging the Knowledge Divide

*In this two-part blog series, we revisit our experience in capacity building for civil society organisations (CSOs) working across India's diverse rural landscape, where there is an urgent need to enhance climate adaptation knowledge to address the multi-dimensional challenges of climate change. This first blog delves into the inception of the Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy's (CSTEP's) engagement with Climate Asia (CA) on their Climate Action for Civil Society Organisation Development Programme for CSOs, its relevance to climate action, and knowledge gaps it aims to address.*

According to the Global Climate Risk Index 2021, India continues to be among the top ten countries at risk due to climate change. With over 70% of its population living in rural areas and depending heavily on climate-sensitive sectors, such as agriculture or fisheries, for their livelihoods, the increasing climate variability poses higher risks. Prioritising measures to reduce the impacts of climate change and build community resilience in vulnerable regions becomes necessary for India to maintain its developmental trajectory and honour its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) commitments.

A large number of CSOs operating in India's rural regions play an invaluable role in achieving the national commitments.

These entities have long been at the forefront of executing social development initiatives at different scales. Collaborating closely with marginalised and vulnerable communities, they tap into local skills and indigenous knowledge to translate India's extensive rural development programmes into tangible and impactful outcomes.

As an organisation working at the intersection of climate, community, and capacity development, CA identified 11 CSOs from Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Bihar, and Jharkhand to be part of the inaugural cohort of their programme.

These CSOs recognised that several of their initiatives, although targeting social development, address the adverse effects of climate change either directly or indirectly. But, these climate-related benefits are often overlooked.

CSTEP — a science, technology, and policy think tank — was roped in as the knowledge partner to offer a climate lens, particularly on the adaptation perspective, to the programme. Through discussions with the CA team and subsequent engagements with the cohort, we were able to identify the following gaps and capacity-building needs:

1. CSOs' understanding of the science and impacts of climate change is invariably gained from informal sources and community-led knowledge sharing. While this helps them to perceive the local nuances, the following pitfalls were noted:

- Reliance on outdated information
- Use of misinformation
- Use of wrong or inadequate information, leading to misguided priorities for climate action on the ground.

2. Climate literacy varies across CSOs. Larger organisations with extensive outreach and implementation capabilities understand global, regional, and local climate science and policy. For example, *Samvad*, a participating CSO, publishes a widely circulated quarterly

environmental Hindi magazine named *Paryavaran Samvad*. It has also released books covering diverse topics related to the environment, including organic farming and water conservation. Similarly, *ADITHI* includes a section on climate action in its annual report. Despite having minimal to no formal training in climate-related matters, *ADITHI* aims to mitigate the vulnerability of women and children facing climate disasters through community-led initiatives. Conversely, smaller organisations have limited exposure to these concepts.

3. From a social development perspective, the integration of climate action into these CSOs' projects remains largely undervalued.

4. In the projects that inherently address climate change, there is no systematic evidence generation to inform and support climate strategies.

5. Non-recognition of climate co-benefits limits access to climate funding. In a competitive landscape, CSOs (with valuable local expertise but limited climate knowledge) often lose opportunities to multinational/state corporate social responsibility wings that stay updated on these matters.

6. There is a noticeable gap between the existence of climate knowledge and its effective incorporation into project proposals. CSOs also require support in recognising, understanding, and utilising climate science vocabulary, particularly in English.

These findings helped us to identify five junctures where our capacity-building sessions (termed climate modules) could empower CSOs for climate action. Delivered through in-person workshops and webinars from September to December 2023, these sessions were curated to overcome the above challenges while ensuring broad engagement.

Through this engagement and informal discussions, we could fortify our knowledge on the implementation of best practices and challenges faced by CSOs across their rural geographies. Fascinating narratives on adapting cropping patterns to seasonal changes, sustainable sourcing of forest produce, empowering marginalised communities with alternative farming techniques, the role of women and youth in climate action, and more were discussed. We are inspired by their resilience and commitment to the soil, which we hope to take forward in developing more nuanced adaptation policies with our future work.

*In the second article, we will look at the design and development of climate modules, as well as interactions and learnings from the experience.*

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