

FROM BENEFICIARIES TO CO-DESIGNERS: LESSONS FOR EXTENSION



In this blog, Krithika Sundaram, based on her fieldwork in Gujarat's tribal belt, argues that lasting rural change occurs when communities become co-designers rather than merely beneficiaries.

CONTEXT

Across India, rural and tribal landscapes are changing not just physically through irrigation, agricultural lands, and restored water bodies, but also socio-economically. People are asserting aspirations, planning collectively, and choosing what truly works for them. Too often, we underestimate the community's determination, their will to learn, and their deep sense of resilience. They are knowledge-rich, rooted in centuries of traditional wisdom, and ready to embrace new technologies when these align with their needs and values. They are clear about priorities and determined to co-design solutions that last.

HOW CO-DESIGNING TURNS "PROJECTS" INTO COMMUNITY-RUN SYSTEMS

In the tribal belt of Chhotaudepur taluka in Gujarat, villagers gather with colourful maps, hand-drawn fields, blue pencil streams, and dotted lines indicating the locations of check dams. They argue gently about the placement of hand pumps and water tanks. This isn't a briefing. It is a negotiation. The villagers speak in the language of seasons and risk. "What if there is heavy rainfall this season? Can we try drip irrigation here?" They are not waiting for a solution to arrive; they are actually shaping one.



Villagers take part in a PRA for the baseline survey to understand local climate conditions for a climate-resilient program

Looking closely, what you will see is a collective strategy wherein the community asserts its aspirations and plans together on what works for them.

For generations, villages have governed water bodies and grazing lands through collective norms. The idea of the commons is not an imported development concept. It is how communities have survived through droughts, floods and market fluctuations.

When we plan with the assumption that rural and tribal communities hold rich traditional wisdom, and we integrate that wisdom with scientific knowledge, projects stop being stand-alone. They embed into systems people already understand and trust. For instance, a check dam is not just a physical structure, but leads to food security and reduced migration. The concept of the commons is centred on governance. It works because people co-own both the plans and outcomes.

For instance, the Shroffs Foundation Trust (SFT) practices codesigning with communities through the preparation of micro plans, which are then integrated with the gram sabha for effective implementation and sustainability. Micro-plan is a participatory, community-led plan where communities are directly involved in the development of their villages and ensure the optimum utilisation of resources. Village-level meetings, PRAs are conducted to identify the issues and needs of the communities, assess the available resources, and design programs based on the solutions offered by the community. Building on this foundation, the micro-plan moves from community diagnosis to formal adoption through the Gram Sabha (Box 1)

Box 1: SFT's practice for Natural Resource Management (NRM) activities

SFT adopt the following principles in promoting NRM:

Co-design the plan: Village micro-plans are developed in collaboration with the community. The community members list priorities for water, soil, crops, livestock, energy, and risk. The draft is then placed before the Gram Sabha for approval. The Gram Sabha-approved micro-plan is endorsed by the village panchayat and fed upward into block and district plans, so that village priorities shape larger budgets and timelines.

Build on data, not assumptions: Each micro-plan features a simple NRM profile, including the availability of resources, soil health, rainfall and temperature trends, drought/flood history, and a basic water budget. This makes choices practical and grounded in the local realities, while aligning with national adaptation efforts and the SDGs.

Fund through leverage, not freebies: Once approved, works are financed by convergence through MGNREGA/line departments, CSR, and modest community contributions (labour, upkeep). Such shared financing creates ownership and accountability.

Implementing with local stewardship: Village institutions (water user groups/*pani samitis*) oversee execution and operation, and maintenance so that the assets are sustainable.

Design structures to maximise system benefits, not as isolated projects: Interventions are selected for their broader impacts, such as groundwater recharge, sediment capture on fields, improved cropping seasons, income increases, and reducing migration. These structures aim to influence outcomes, not just utilise funds, which are the simplest aspect.



Community-led water governance: VWC members at Chhotaudepur, Gujarat.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EXTENSION AND ADVISORY SERVICES (EAS)

In conferences, workshops, and papers, ideas sound transformative. Models look scalable. Slides look convincing. However, in the field, the language, priorities, and even risk calculations are entirely different. What gets celebrated as “innovation” in expert circles often doesn’t translate on the ground. This is not because farmers resist change. It’s because the terms of engagement are one-sided. If EAS has to facilitate lasting changes in rural settings, codesigning solutions should be an essential part of its strategy. To achieve this, EAS should adopt the following strategies.

Shifting the role from advising to negotiating

In rural development, co-designing offers practical solutions for local issues, offering a strong village system. We often approach farmers with advisories and solutions, when what we should actually be doing is negotiating solutions. Negotiation is not charity. Negotiation is respect. It means you sit with farmers and ask:

- What matters most to you right now?
- What can you risk this season?
- What can’t you afford to lose?
- What are you already doing that works and shouldn’t be disrupted?

Real impact begins only when farmers are treated as partners in negotiations and not merely as recipients of innovation.

Start with “fit” and not with innovation

Most “big ideas” die in the field for a simple reason: they don’t fit. The size, intensity, and root of the problem at the village level often differ significantly from how we framed them in a proposal or panel discussion. The language, logic, and priorities are all different.

When you co-design rather than impose, adoption becomes a natural process. Farmers are not “piloting” something merely to satisfy a donor; they are investing because they see its benefits. Sustainability occurs when farmers find value on their own terms.



Enumerators conduct a PRA and household survey to create the village NRM profile for the micro-plan

Incentivise ownership, not compliance

Ownership is the strongest driver of adoption. When farmers or communities co-invest in practices, the behaviours sustain beyond project timelines. That’s when the real shift happens. The impact changes, and the scale changes too. Because ownership is the strongest form of adoption and the first step toward true sustainability. And ownership is the only factor that sustains after the project budget ends.

Strengthen village systems

Codesign succeeds when strong village institutions implement it. In SFT, Community Resource Persons (CRPs), Village Development Committees (VDCs), and Farmer Interest Groups (FIGs) have been game changers in translating advice into action. For example, the paravets selected within the community who provided deworming, vaccination, and basic AI referrals, among other services, on a service-fee model, offered quick and credible advisories, leading to lower mortality and better productivity. Here, adoption did not become a demo, but a norm. Hence, building grassroots institutions is a powerful method for adopting, scaling and lasting transformation.

In practical terms, this would mean:

- **Run community-led need assessments:** Facilitate village meetings to co-create micro-plans and anchor them in Gram Sabha resolutions. This provides a clear, bottom-up blueprint of priorities, ensuring projects are tailored to real needs and not imposed top-down.
- **Let village systems lead:** Empower village institutions such as VDCs, FIGs, SHGs, and CRPs to plan, implement, and monitor. Define roles and hand over operations early so the program is run by the community, not for the community.
- **Make community co-investment mandatory:** Require meaningful community contribution (labour, cash, materials) and simple Operation and Maintenance rules. E.g., *Pani Samitis*, Water User Groups, etc. This raises ownership, improves compliance, and enhances sustainability in the long run.
- **Ensure inclusion by design:** Include women and youth in program design. Train and resource them so that decisions reflect diverse needs and adoption scales sustainably.

CONCLUSION

It is time we stop seeing communities as mere beneficiaries of schemes or passive recipients of aid. They are co-designers of solutions, innovators in their own right. They recognise that one-time handouts and free distributions have little impact on changing realities. Instead, they choose sustainability and work steadily to achieve what they truly need, whether that is better livelihoods, healthier food, or stronger institutions.

Communities are evolving, adapting, and embracing change. What they need is not charity, but a gentle nudge, a hand that respects their dignity and walks alongside them. Actual development must recognise this shift and not impose blueprints from outside; instead, it should insist on partnership, trust, and shared imagination.

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