Ashley Benedict

Education

Lok Kala Sagar Sansthan

Jaisalmer, Rajasthan

Ashley is a lifelong learner who is always seeking new places and people to connect with. She strives to find the spaces where authenticity and honesty intersect in our individual and communal lives. Her strength is in her dedication and ability to maintain empathy for anyone she meets.

MY PROJECT

The Merasi community from Jaisalmer in the northwestern parts of Rajasthan is a community of musicians dating back hundreds of years and designated an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO. Unfortunately, Merasi children are often kept from quality education due to their caste. To remedy this, Lok Kala Sagar Sansthan, a community-initiated and led NGO, established the Merasi School Tutorial Programme back in 2007 in an effort to improve education for boys and girls within the Merasi community. My project was a continuation of their ongoing effort to improve the quality of education their students receive in the hope that better education will lead to a brighter future for the Merasi community.

MY ROLE

The main focus during my Fellowship was on improving and creating a standardized, activity-based Math curriculum for the school. Each day, I would sit in one of the three classrooms and trial different lesson plans and activities related to topics in Math (e.g., place value, addition and subtraction, multiplication, and division) and observe their efficacy. Upon trialling each lesson plan, I would take notes about what worked and what didn’t work and change things accordingly using teacher feedback and classroom observation. For example, I learned very early on that most students and teachers are visual learners, which led to me creating a curriculum that includes many visual aspects to aid the teachers’ abilities to look at a lesson plan and intuitively see what needs to be taught (without much intervention). As more lesson plans were tested, edited, and compiled, I began designing a comprehensive “book” for each class to be used as a physical and digital resource for teachers, where each month’s topic and lesson plans are laid out in simple and easy-to-navigate pages. This curriculum is intended to be used for years to come.

Tested 85 lesson plans inside the classroom.

Created and designed 500+ pages of math curriculum for 3 different class levels.

Trained 3 teachers on each lesson plan and activity.

MATH WITH THE MERASI

The biggest sign of my success in my work is the growth and progress I have seen within each teacher at Merasi School. At first, I was very much expected to do most of the teaching inside the classroom, despite an evident language gap between the students and me, because the teachers were not used to trying new methods of teaching and thus lacked some confidence in trying out the ideas and activities I brought to the table. Now, after months of working together and trying new ideas and activities every day, the teachers are not only more confident in their teaching abilities in the subject of Math, but they are approaching each subject with a new sense of curiosity and willingness to think outside the box.
Divya is interested in the intersection between livelihood and the socio-legal empowerment of women. Her adaptability enabled her to easily integrate into the host community. During the AIF Fellowship, she made new friends among her Fellows, the Fellowship Team, and her host organization.

MY PROJECT

As a Banyan Impact Fellow, I was placed with SAFA India, Hyderabad, to create a Micro-Enterprise Incubation Centre for home-based businesses run by women in the community. Informal businesses play a critical role in creating a circular economy, but the growth and sustainability of these businesses are the biggest challenges due to the lack of crucial resources such as finance, mentorship programmes, utilization of government policies, entrepreneurial skills, market-fit products, and market and credit linkages. This project is to formalize and scale up the businesses run by beneficiaries of SAFA through their different projects.

MY ROLE

Through my efforts, I played a critical role in developing the sustainable plan, processes, and resources necessary to establish the incubation unit for home-based entrepreneurs. This involved identifying and selecting promising social entrepreneurs, providing them with mentorship and training, and helping them grow their ventures by connecting them with market and credit linkages. By empowering these women with the necessary skills, knowledge, and resources, the aim is to improve their socioeconomic conditions and promote entrepreneurship within the minority community. Through the creation of market channels and the development of hyper-local brands, these women are enabled to thrive in their home-based businesses, contributing to a circular economy and enhancing their overall quality of life.

Conducted 6 “Free to be me” sessions on different topics, including the Perspective of the Hijab, the Cult of Domesticity, and Women in Public Places.

Showcased products of 100 women-owned businesses at Dhanak Bazaar.

Created a plan for market linkages for 10 women entrepreneurs, connecting them with potential buyers and retailers.

During the fellowship, I have been truly honoured to be a part of the transformative journey of the many women that SAFA works with. One such story is that of Fatima from Talab Katta, Hyderabad. With support from SAFA India’s Incubation Programme, she turned her passion for handcrafted jewellery into a thriving hyper-local brand. Now, she empowers other women in her community through employment opportunities. Fatima’s journey exemplifies the transformative power of our programme in empowering women entrepreneurs and creating a positive community impact.
Dnyaneshwar Surwase
Public Health
Seba Jagat
Kalahandi, Odisha

Dnyaneshwar is interested in researching gender and caste marginalization in the context of Public Health, culture, and the media. He believes in fluidity and thrives on creating empathy-driven safe spaces. During the AIF Fellowship, he was lucky to have found such people in his cohort, the Fellowship Team, and the host organization.

MY PROJECT
Kalahandi district, located in western Odisha, has a 46% population of scheduled tribes and scheduled castes. Seba Jagat has been implementing two major health projects with the support of the National Health Mission of Odisha under its public-private partnership initiative.

Project 1: Management of the Health and Wellness Centre in Kalahandi and Kandhamal districts to strengthen the potential of primary health infrastructure and services Deliver the best health services to marginalized communities.

Project 2: Implementing and Facilitating Rashtriya Kishor Swathya Karyakram in the Balangir and Koraput districts of Odisha to improve nutrition, sexual and reproductive health, enhance mental health, prevent injuries and violence, and address NCDs among adolescents.

WE FOUND STORIES OF SURVIVAL PILED ON EACH THRESHOLD: STRENGTHENING PUBLIC HEALTH IN KALAHANDI

MY ROLE
My fellowship project was focused on strengthening the potential of the public health system by providing equitable, qualitative primary health care services to underserved communities. My role was to report, document, and give presentations on the current utilization of the infrastructure and services. This was to enhance the community health partnership and help manage the local Primary Health Centre in the remote tribal area through networking and convergence. The primary tasks were data analysis, monthly and quarterly reports and presentations, case studies, and facilitating community meetings to create awareness about health. Along with that, I was engaged in building awareness and capacity among staff for the sustainable development of the organization. It was crucial to design and deliver impactful reporting, documentation, and awareness trainings, for which I used various tools and research. I was also engaged in communication, networking, and convergence. In this context, I attended and facilitated various outreach initiatives such as immunization, village health, nutrition, sanitation, and Gaon Kalyan Samiti meetings. To explore new experiences and learnings, I was involved in various projects, including the Odisha Millets Mission, Women and Forest, and others.

Created 18 Progress reports.
Made 12 Presentations.
Conducted 10+ Sessions on capacity building and awareness.

While facilitating and attending various sessions and meetings on health, I met Pratima, who works as a block supervisor at Gudvella Block for the Adolescent Health Programme. She had participated in sessions on understanding gender, creating a safe space, and writing case studies. She says, “I have benefited a lot from the sessions earlier; I didn’t know that much about gender. I only knew about women, men, and transgender people, but after your session, I understood that there are other genders besides them. Gender plays a crucial role in adolescents’ health, and we have to work a lot. Now, whenever I go to the field and interact with adolescents, I create awareness and a safe space. To date, I have sent many adolescents to the Shradha Clinic for counseling and health services”. Thus, the capacity building of staff helped to ensure the sustainable development of the organization, which empowered them to work proactively for the community.
Erin is a highly relational professional with over 8+ years of experience living and learning cross-culturally. Always looking for opportunities to use her creativity in aesthetics, storytelling, and curriculum development to come alongside projects in the development or social sector, she has delighted in doing so as a Fellow alongside Ecowrap’s Muskaan.

Ecowrap’s Muskaan is a women’s empowerment project that helps rural women secure sustainable livelihoods through opportunities in up-cycling source-segregated waste materials. Women are provided with the training, resources, and waste collected by Ecowrap from local hotels, restaurants, bars, and cafes to create new products to sell to a wider market. Inspired by the ingenuity of rural women, Ecowrap launched the project to bring waste back into the value chain and help create visibility of impact within the waste management sector. Through the project, rural women, who have fewer livelihood opportunities, are securing sustainable incomes for themselves and changing the face of upcycling in India.

**MY ROLE**

As the daughter of a former garbage man and lifelong upcycler, leading this project has provided an opportunity to return to my roots. Having previously studied world art and how art can be used to reach a community’s goals, I quickly identified the need to determine which genres could be used to expand the range of products we could create. Early on, I identified two art forms: “cane” weaving plastic water bottles and hand embossing cold beverage cans. These artforms have allowed us to change the obvious function of waste material to create something entirely new to expand Muskaan’s market to encompass not just those who are environmentally conscious but also those with a sharp eye for aesthetics. I built a livelihoods model that is flexible enough for the women who partner with us to continue to fulfil their household responsibilities and education while earning at least 10,000 INR/month. Over the past nine months, I have designed product lines, established a brand identity, created marketing materials, and built a strategy for selling the products through multiple platforms. However, I have most loved helping women grow in confidence, master a craft, advocate for themselves, and begin training and empowering more women.

- Developed 2 sustainable upcycled art forms.
- Trained 7 women.
- Designed 12+ upcycled products.

**WOMEN CHANGING THE FACE OF UP-CYCLING IN INDIA**

**I am so encouraged to have been a part of this project, which has positively impacted the lives of rural women. Here are a few remarks from our creative partners:**

“I have freedom at work now that I didn’t have before.” - Urmila Devi

“As we have a propensity for creating things that we inherited from our mother, we feel that it is better to produce something out of waste than to simply dump it. We believe that this employment brings us satisfaction, a sense of freedom, and confidence; it is not just about the money. I want to advance our cause, and I feel like telling people on a bigger stage.” - Mamta

“It feels good to be able to create something from waste. The project has altered our lives since this work gives us confidence. It also gives me financial support to be able to study. I wish to be involved with Muskaan for a very long time.” - Nikita
Hamsini leads with curiosity, courage to take on new challenges, and experimentation. Through her Fellowship journey, she turned her failures into lessons and embraced uncertainty by letting go of expectations. Her leadership is now based on trust, compassion, and collaboration.

MY PROJECT

For my Fellowship project, I was placed with the Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society for the Palash Project. Palash began during the peak of the COVID pandemic, when self-help group (SHG) women were employed to create masks and personal protective equipment. The vision for Palash is to create an autonomous entity owned by the SHG members that will serve as a registered affiliated brand that will provide equitable market value to the products of rural women and directly provide them with increased incomes through profit margins devoid of middle entities. As of 2022, a total of 64 products are currently sold through Palash, such as rice, pulses, spices, soaps, essential oils, jewellery, and apparel.

MY ROLE

As a Fellow, I primarily served in a strategic role while preparing the team to execute on the vision by bridging the gap between strategy and operations through my field visits. The core of my role involved designing the governance and human resources structures that will be used as the foundation to register the entity and begin operations.

During my field visits and discussions with various stakeholders, it became apparent that there was a need to institutionalize Palash and, from a sustainability standpoint, begin hiring the necessary resources in order to set up the farmer-producer Company. Additionally, there was a gap in understanding who the target customer is for Palash and how the brand should be positioned. My role involved designing a governance and human resources structure for the new enterprise into an organizational proposal along with the job descriptions of all proposed positions. In addition, I also surveyed 300 customers (urban, rural, and semi-urban) at India’s Largest Government-Sponsored Consumer Fairs to identify the right target consumer and identify key attributes to position the brand.

- Designed a Governance Structure for the new enterprise.
- Designed a Human Resources Structure for the new enterprise.
- Submitted an Organizational Proposal.

THE POWER OF RAISING YOUR VOICE

One of my biggest personal accomplishments has been building a relationship with the women in the self-help group and understanding their day-to-day lives, challenges, fears, and hopes. Being able to connect with them has given me a greater understanding of my why and what I would like to do moving forward.

Professionally, I am very proud of submitting high-quality deliverables that can be used beyond my time as a Fellow, despite the consistent challenges I faced at the host organization. More importantly, my work sparked a conversation around potential areas of growth within the organization, how different people across leadership can come together to execute a vision, and the mindfulness required while hiring and placing leaders to lead a project. Staying the course and watching the transformation of a challenge into an opportunity for growth for both the organization and myself has been the most satisfying part of the experience.
Joshilyn Binkley
Livelihoods
Sub-K Impact Solutions
Hyderabad, Telangana

Joshilyn is optimistic about the future when she thinks about the tremendous potential that exists to improve our communities and is passionate about leading transformation in the institutions she is able to impact. The greatest gift of her Fellowship is the relationships she has built with those who inspire her.

MY PROJECT
I worked on the strategic initiatives team with the microfinance organization, Sub-K Impact Solutions. They operate across India, providing inclusive financial services to women who are often left behind by traditional banks. They provide women who have limited access to financial services with microloans, and over the past couple of years, they have been transitioning to a digital model for applications, repayment, and group centre meetings. Especially when an organization is in a time of transition, measuring impact and evaluating programmes is critical to ensuring efforts are having their intended effect. My project’s goal was to support the monitoring and impact evaluation efforts as well as drive improvements to my organization’s technology and procedures.

THE FUTURE OF INCLUSIVE FINANCE

MY ROLE
I helped deepen impact evaluation and data analysis, improve programmes, and plan and prioritize for the future of the organization. My relationship with my HO started with field visits, and throughout the months I visited various field sites in Haryana, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Uttarakhand. I was then able to provide recommendations to various teams across the organization based on my observations and conversations with staff and the women receiving microloans. This included building an option for everyone to join their virtual group centre meeting directly through their repayment app and providing staff with greater access to relevant, real-time data. These experiences also informed two surveys I designed that have been used to measure impact and plan programme improvements: one of loan officers and another of loan recipients. The independence of my work gave me the opportunity to bring forward ideas and take responsibility for the execution of my plans. Experiences like travelling alone for field visits and presenting my work to various audiences put me out of my comfort zone but gave me the chance to have new experiences, learn from the challenges, and ultimately watch myself succeed.

- Field visits to branch offices in five states.
- Four Action Reports with strategic initiative recommendations.
- Two Pan-India Surveys of field staff and loan recipients.

During a field visit in rural Maharashtra, I met a woman who has been taking small business loans through Sub-K for nearly a decade. She now operates a small shop next to her home, where she teaches tailoring and hairdressing skills to other young women in her community. She shared that the business loans she has availed of through Sub-K have allowed her to make improvements to her shop and expand the work she does.
Kaviya works in the communications and development space. Her strength is content management. She is keenly interested in the tech industry and aims to hone her skills with the experience gained from her Fellowship. Over the course of the Fellowship, she has developed a deep bond with her co-Fellows, colleagues, and the team.

The Project goal was to support Youth4Jobs social impact work through proactive communications and storytelling around the sustainable livelihood of “Persons with Disabilities” post-training. The main focus was on strategizing social media outreach, implementing it accordingly, and increasing the enrolment of youth with disabilities in the training programme. Case studies, job postings, and other awareness information were to be showcased on all social media to encourage other youth with disabilities to enrol in the training programme and secure good placements. The outreach materials were also circulated to corporations to influence their hiring decisions.

**MY ROLE**

For my Fellowship project, I worked with the Communications and Development Team at the Youth4Jobs Foundation. My role included updating and creating content for the new website, maintaining it, and producing quality newsletters, annual reports, and outreach materials. I also managed social media and actively posted relatable content; I created a success story booklet; and I managed an exciting event: The Global Ability Photography Challenge. I was involved in multiple areas of work, and my main goal was to create positive change through communications and storytelling.

- Created 100 success case studies, which are soon to be published as a booklet with 20 female-based case studies.
- Interviewed 5 winners of the Global Ability Photography Challenge and published their stories alongside their photos at the State Art Gallery, Hyderabad.
- Handled a post-event press coverage and helped publish an article on the Global Ability Photography Challenge in "The Hindu".
- Assisted the team in posting 20+ job postings and awareness posters on the organization's social media handles.

**MY FIRST FULL-TIME REAL-WORLD EXPERIENCE**

I was fully involved in the hosting of the Global Ability Photography Challenge by Youth4Jobs in December 2022. The photo challenge was exclusively conducted for people with disabilities in an attempt to mainstream their contribution into the general art space. From shortlisting the photos from 130 entries in association with the Indian Photo Festival to announcing the winners and arranging their travel plans to Hyderabad, successfully hosting the event was an amazing experience. I worked for a full month (Nov–Dec) to organize the event and prepare all materials (email templates, emcee script, event materials, accommodation, welcome letters, interviews of the winners, event flow, etc.) and was also actively involved with the press, which covered our event.
Katie is interested in initiatives promoting Public Health in the development space. Her curiosity and open mind have enabled her to find success in a cross-cultural environment. She is most appreciative of the connections that she made during her AIF Fellowship with her cohort and her host community.

The Naz Foundation (India) Trust is a New Delhi-based non-profit organization that focuses on HIV/AIDS prevention, LGBTQI+ rights, and women's economic empowerment. Naz (India) oversees the Naz Care home for abandoned children living with HIV, the LGBTQI+ programme, and Aath Kadam for the economic empowerment of marginalized women. This past year has been a time of great transition for Naz (India), as they prepare to launch Delhi’s first LGBTQI+ drop-in centre and scale up their programming at the same time. The LGBTQI+ initiative includes counseling services, the Naz Dost helpline, training and awareness programmes, support groups, workshops, Queerwalks, and Queertalks. With this transition, communications support has become necessary. The development of communication materials and frameworks, programming and grant proposals, and an update of the donor database were important steps for the continuation and expansion of current programming.

MY ROLE
As a fellow placed at The Naz Foundation (India) Trust, I was able to participate in a project that encompassed all aspects of ongoing programmes. My primary responsibility was to assist the communications department in developing new frameworks and materials for ongoing projects. This included the creation of marketing materials, donor outreach, special reports, social media content and newsletters, and updates to the donor database. Although I had the opportunity to interact with and learn from Naz India's programme as a whole, the LGBTQI+ team was my primary focus. During my fellowship, I developed programme and training proposals and outlines. In addition, I assisted in the facilitation and support of monthly support group meetings, seminars, and trainings. Supporting Naz India’s communications enabled me to gain a deeper appreciation for the significance of community outreach and donor engagement. In order to generate communication materials that accurately reflect the realities of ongoing initiatives and community needs, it has been essential for me to spend time immersing myself in ongoing programming and establishing connections with beneficiaries.

Engaged in 18 support group sessions.
Developed donor database.
Developed 15 programming/workshop proposals.

COMMUNICATIONS CONNECTION TO INCLUSION, PUBLIC HEALTH, AND LIVELIHOODS.

The first day I worked at The Naz Foundation (India) Trust, I walked by a conference room on the first floor where a group of about fifteen girls were having an English session. The women pictured here all took part in Naz India’s Aath Kadam initiative. This particular group was aiming for professions in logistics; therefore, they were taking classes in computer skills, English, and personal development. I took pictures, conducted interviews, and wrote case studies during their time in the programme as it progressed over the course of three months. I was fortunate to get to know these ladies and witness firsthand how they grew not only professionally but in self-assurance and outlook as well. The opportunity that Naz India provided the women allowed them to broaden their horizons professionally, gain self-assurance, and value economic autonomy.
Megan believes in an equitable world built on questioning, perspective-shifting, and open-mindedness. She focuses her impact on the intersection of holistic development and intercultural relationships. Through her adaptability, perseverance, and inclusivity, Megan has found power in her confidence and individuality throughout her Banyan Impact Fellowship journey.

**MY PROJECT**

Playquity (Play + Equity) is building gender equity through play by inverting gender roles. Founded in 2019, the programme has been implemented with ten partners in seven states and engaged 300+ beneficiaries to date. Presently, Playquity provides girls and women the opportunity to engage in Ultimate Frisbee as a means to develop leadership and life-skills on and off the field. Since the programme is relatively new, the main goal of my fellowship was to standardize and systematize the programme’s operations across the field locations and the Operations Team.

**MY ROLE**

As a founding member of the Operations Team, my scope required me to instill best practices and standard operating procedures for the team to follow. In the initial days of my project, I gathered feedback about how the organization was operating and what changes they would like to see during my time working with them. After creating daily, weekly, monthly, and annual operational milestones and goals, we were able to focus our efforts on execution and long-term strategy for the programme. Through the year, I introduced systems and standard operating procedures; implemented the outreach and development strategy; contributed to the curriculum and monitoring and evaluation metrics; managed six international volunteers; launched four new partnerships; and developed a training programme curriculum. As an education-focused project, I focused my attention on creating capacity within the team and empowering individuals to collaborate in the process. During my field visits, I was able to meet with key stakeholders, including funders, beneficiaries, partners, and our coaches. By experiencing the on-the-ground operations and reality of the Playquity programme, I incorporated their voices and perspectives into my project deliverables.

- Launched and implemented five Community Partnerships in three states: MOU Agreements and concept notes.
- Responsible for operations for 300+ beneficiaries.

**MORE THAN A DISC: PLAY + EQUITY = PLAYQUITY**

During a field visit to the North East, I visited three established Playquity partners and assisted in the launch of our programme in three new communities. Meeting with the partners gave me a firsthand glance into the programming and day-to-day field operations in the communities in which we work. Each community comes with its own unique complexities, challenges, and cultural contexts, and I had the opportunity to learn from the individuals who make Playquity come alive.

On one particular day, my two female colleagues and I met with a new partner whose leadership team only had men on it. This meeting was a milestone for our team, as it was the first time that we implemented a Playquity programme with an all-men partnership team. The older men were in a room taking directions from the younger women. These small cultural shifts and changes in power dynamics are exactly what Playquity aims to achieve.
Nabhas is passionate about climate change, research, and sustainable development. He believes and hopes to witness the radical transformation of society by the oppressed as opposed to reform directed by those in power. He feels the best gift of the Fellowship journey is his new-found love for the mountains.

**MY PROJECT**

The aim of the Project SAFAL (Sustainable Agriculture, Forest, and Land) project at Jagori is to enable a climate-conscious community by generating actionable insights in the domains of agro-ecology, climate justice, and sustainable development that could be implemented at the village and block levels. The project provides material and knowledge-based support to farmers in their gradual transition towards a sustainable livelihood in the face of climate change and also engages with the wider community on environmental education. Jagori works primarily with women to establish their identity as farmers and address the gender imbalances in the sector.

**MY ROLE**

As part of the fellowship, I had to pilot the SAFAL project and plan its activities over three blocks in the Himachal Pradesh district of Kangra. Jagori operates through almost 60 farmer groups, with close to 800 farmers spread over the three blocks. We organize monthly meetings at group, village, and cluster levels where we engage with the farmers on various issues and approaches associated with sustainable agriculture and farming in general. During the fellowship period, I also had the opportunity to organize and take part in various events that take forward the vision of the organisation, such as Kisan Sammelan, traditional food festivals, Van Mahotsav, and other programmes in accordance with the International Year of Millets. I was also able to contribute to the project through quantitative and qualitative research, bringing together a centralized database for the 3 blocks and producing case studies from the field.

*“We have been attempting organic methods for a year now, ever since we were in contact with Jagori. We did it step by step. Like one kanal (a unit of area) here and one kanal there. We transitioned slowly. By now, around 5 kanals of land are fully under organic farming. Even with the remaining land, we are minimising the usage of chemicals and pesticide sprays,” says a farmer I had a conversation with in Kangra. Such responses enable us to witness the impact of the project in real time and give us the boost we need to push ahead.*

- Created a centralized database of nearly 800 farmers associated with the project.
- Organized 26 meetings and events.
- Produced 6 case studies and a research report.
Phalguni Joshi, a social entrepreneur, has taken up performing gap analysis in the workings of the Farmer Produce Organizations. She is determined, passionate, and resilient, and as such, she has been instrumental in tackling and fixing the loopholes at a departmental level.

MY PROJECT

During my fellowship period, I was entrusted to support a Jharkhand State government initiative titled JOHAR (Jharkhand Opportunities for Harnessing Rural Growth). JOHAR is a joint initiative of the Government of Jharkhand and the World Bank to support a transformative approach to enhance rural household incomes by developing diversified agriculture and allied sector livelihoods while also addressing the critical challenges in the region such as lack of access to irrigation, poor market access, an underdeveloped financial sector, persistent gender gaps in agriculture, etc.

The project activities contribute to meeting the National Policy for Farmers 2007 goals, such as increasing farmers' net income, conserving natural resources for sustained agriculture growth, developing agriculture support services, managing risk, and enhancing opportunities for farm and non-farm skills and employment.

MY ROLE

My role as a fellow was to support the Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society in designing the second phase of JOHAR, called JOHAR 2.0. JOHAR was designed to enhance rural household incomes. The beneficiaries of the project were women farmers. The project provides support to farmers in agriculture, livestock, fisheries, NTFP, irrigation facilities, etc. Since the project officially comes to an end in June 2023, the focus is to continue providing this support and work on establishing a structure for sustainability. To help build the second phase, I performed a Gap analysis of the project to identify the current state and desired state of the project. The analysis helped to identify the existing gap between the current and desired state of the project by analyzing the collected data and coming up with solutions that can help in the self-sustainability of the Farmer Produce Companies established by JOHAR and the Producer Groups.

Understood the USPs of FPCs and advised them accordingly.

Promoted a message amongst the PG members to trust the FPCs and treat the FPCs as their own business.

Promoted a message to keep different regulatory policies for the effective functioning of Farmer Produce Companies (FPC).

ADVENTURE IS WORTHWHILE

Almost three months into the project, I was already visiting every district, block, and village in Jharkhand to carry out a gap analysis of the project. The beneficiaries were hesitant at first to share their experience with JOHAR and openly discuss their needs and expectations from the project. With a few initial ice-breaking sessions, we got to know each other well, and soon they started sharing how they wanted the project to support them better. We discussed that they wanted a more effective approach to production management and a better price for their product from the FPC. I could see and feel that they respected the team members of Farmer Produce Company (FPC) and JOHAR like their own when one of the women from the Producer Groups (PG) in Urmi (a small village in the Gulma district of Jharkhand) said, “Didi JOHAR ke karan hamara ghar chalta hai aur issi se humne hamari gudiya ki shaadi bhi karwayi. Hum JOHAR ke abhari hai” (English translation: Sister, our house runs because of JOHAR, and thanks to it, I even got our daughter married. I am very grateful to JOHAR.)
Samhita is a Biotechnology and Genomics Graduate, who is interested in writing, advocacy, and the development of inclusive healthcare interventions. Through the Fellowship, she has reclaimed her passion for building a more inclusive planet by protecting the voices of marginalized communities through sustainable data-driven research.

MY PROJECT

The VisAbility Project (vis, in Latin, meaning force, strength, and power) aims to shed light on a historically neglected community: people with disabilities (PwDs) living in rural India. It utilizes field-based qualitative and quantitative research in order to analyze the current status of PwDs and identify potential risk factors for disabilities. Of the millions of PwDs residing in India today, an overwhelming 70% are located in rural areas. A majority of these individuals remain undocumented and "invisible" within census endeavours. With insufficient data, Indian disability policies are essentially operating in the dark. Implementing effective interventions is an impossible task when the status and needs of the beneficiaries remain unknown. The purpose of this project is to fill in some of these gaps in knowledge through comprehensive, data-driven research. The insights gained from this project will play a pivotal role in the development of inclusive interventions.

MY ROLE

As an AIF Fellow working specifically in the area of research with Satya Special School, I have had the opportunity to engage with and learn from people with disabilities (PwD) residing in Puducherry. Through comprehensive survey design and data collection, I have obtained relevant statistics from the parents of PwDs in order to understand the primary social, environmental, and genetic risk factors for disability occurrence. The purpose of this research was to identify at-risk individuals and direct them to disability-specific interventions and resources.

My research has focused primarily on assessing the need for genetic literacy in rural India, developing a multidimensional understanding of issues in the disability community, and mining insights to improve the accessibility of healthcare and genetic counseling resources for PwDs and their families.

Conducted a Research Study with 400+ PwD families.
Partnered with a local healthcare body for conducting Genetic Counseling.
Prepared a Genetic Awareness Manual and 5 Special Education Manuals.
Conducted 3 Disability & Genetic Awareness Workshops for PwD communities.

On the outskirts of Puducherry, as well as in several other parts of rural India, people with disabilities (PwD) are viewed through an unforgiving lens: as social outcasts who carry the “Curse of God”. There have been countless stories of communities isolating and shunning young children with disabilities due to a fear of the associated stigma and a lack of understanding. Combating stigma, which is ingrained so deeply into culture, society, and hierarchy, can be an exceedingly difficult task. My Fellowship Project has allowed me to explore existing narratives, the need for genetic literacy, and the role of inaccessibility in perpetuating information inequities among marginalized communities. I have learned that authentic data collection and grass-roots knowledge are vital for meaningful intervention development and policy-making.
Sanaa Munjal
Public Health
Tech Mahindra Foundation

Delhi - NCR

Sanaa, your next-door ‘enthu-cutlet,’ is on a mission to make the world more empathetic and bring about change, one cup of chai at a time. The Fellowship pushed her to delve deeper into her passions, function outside the box, and gave her unwavering confidence to be her authentic self.

MY PROJECT

Mind@Ease by the Tech Mahindra Foundation (TMF) was launched in 2020 as it was deemed important to focus on the mental health and well-being of its beneficiaries and the public at large. The beneficiaries catered to are from underprivileged communities across the 11 locations where TMF is running several hundred projects across its three verticals of education, employability, and disability. The Mind@Ease initiative is an aggregator platform that can be accessed by anyone and has organizations listed that are working Pan-India to provide support with mental health and well-being issues and career counseling, among other areas. Under the initiative, trainings and sessions are conducted along with a peer support system called Champions Of Mental Health being run in the employability centres, where students are trained to provide counseling support and act as a bridge to the right professional resources. The vision is to provide equitable access and spread awareness about mental health.

MY ROLE

Being a fresher in the development sector, this fellowship took me places, helped me learn the ground realities, and gave me a worm’s eye view of the mental health space. Over the last few months, I have supported the organization in helping shape and build up the Mind@Ease initiative, contributing to the successful relaunch of the revamped version of the website, facilitating awareness sessions, psychological first aid trainings, and kickstarting the Champions Of Mental Health initiative by leading youth engagement sessions, mentoring, and basic training to provide counseling support, along with researching the climate of mental health in the communities. I also supported the organization with research, report writing, presentation-making, partner consultation, and engagement. Visiting diverse projects and understanding the work across Delhi NCR, along with the Hyderabad and Bangalore-based projects, helped me gain a deeper understanding of the work by meeting with our beneficiaries. I certified myself to use the Social, Emotional, and Ethical Learning principles and upskilled myself in designing curriculum, where I worked on a module around emotional intelligence.

OH, THE PLACES YOU’LL GO!
CULTIVATING COMPASSION, EMPOWERING MINDS

During my time at the Tech Mahindra Foundation, we have tried to work at the intersection of mental health and disability, as it is integral to working across thematic areas and for all our beneficiaries. Under Mind@Ease, I travelled to Hyderabad to attend the in-person Psychological First Aid training for trainers across different projects. It also included facilitators from our projects with the cross-cutting theme of disability, some of whom were speech and hearing impaired. Bright Side Foundation, our partner organization that conducted the training, had always delivered the same in English, Hindi, and the regional language, in this case, Telugu. What was unique and heartwarming was that it was also being delivered in Indian Sign Language (ISL) through the interpreters for the very first time. Through this, I realized how work in the development sector cannot take place in silos and how inclusivity and accessibility become crucial.

Supported the training of 55+ facilitators through sessions and workshops.
Training 5 Champions (students from SMART centers) and indirectly impacting classrooms of 25+ students each.
Assisted with the revamp of the website garnering 240+ users within 50 days of the relaunch.
Sidharth Manoj Hendre

Kriti Social Initiatives

Hyderabad, Telangana

Sidharth is interested in reading and writing about reforms in the education sector and strongly believes in access to quality education for all. During the AIF Fellowship, he got to meet like-minded people across India and the U.S., which made his Fellowship journey intellectually enriching.

MY PROJECT

My project revolves around digital literacy and youth development for students from government and low-income private schools in Shaikpet Mandal in Hyderabad. We set up/revived the computer labs in these government schools where students could get sustainable access to computer literacy. We also conducted workshops on Social Emotional Learning and Comprehensive Sexual Education by partnering with other NGOs. Conducted a one-month-long summer camp in two government schools by reaching out to approx. 150 students. The focus was on making their summer break fun and utilizing the time to reinforce some of the subjects like Math, English, and Science in order to bridge the learning loss that occurred during the COVID-19 lockdown.

EQUITABLE ACCESS TO DIGITAL LITERACY AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

MY ROLE

I have been working on aspects of youth development with my host organization. Leading and supervising two projects for my host organization, namely, Project ‘Kaushal-Pratibha’, which is a computer literacy programme for students from government and low-income private schools, and the other project where we are conducting workshops on Social Emotional Learning and Comprehensive Sexual Education with the same students by partnering with other NGOs.

For the computer literacy programme, I have created a monitoring and evaluation framework to capture daily, weekly, and monthly reports. I work closely with the computer trainers to curate lesson plans and do their teacher training on effective teaching and learning methodologies. I also contributed to creating a framework, designing the curriculum, managing the resources, and fostering volunteer engagement for the summer camp that we conducted in two government schools while reaching out to 150+ students.

- Designed curriculum and implemented the computer literacy programme in three government high schools and an independent center by reaching out to 1500+ students.
- Curated a framework for Monitoring and Evaluation.
- Created a framework and designed the curriculum for the summer camp.

Conducting a summer camp in the month of May during the summer break has been one of the most fulfilling experiences of my fellowship journey. Each and every element of the summer camp was thoughtfully curated, keeping the students at the centre of all the activities. We tried to include sports, art & craft, dance, drama, robotics, and SEL, the elements that are particularly ignored in government schools. With this, we also made an attempt to reinforce some of the traditional subjects of Math, English, and Science, which were taught through experiential learning, in order to keep children engaged and interested throughout the learning process. It was an absolute delight to see these students coming every day to the school, even during the summer break, and participating in all the activities with so much enthusiasm.

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Silpaa Gunabalan
Public Health
Forus Health Pvt. Ltd.

Silpaa is an aspiring physician who is passionate about advocating for health equity. Her work with Forus Health helped her understand the importance of preventative care in low-resource communities. She thrives in collaborative environments and believes in community-driven initiatives to bring about change.

MY PROJECT
Forus Health is a medical technology company whose goal is to eradicate preventable blindness. While the organization is based in Bangalore, they work throughout the country and the world. Forus Health works to accomplish its goal through innovative technology that creates sustainable access to eye care. They develop and manufacture affordable medical devices, including fundus cameras, and manage a cloud-based telemedicine platform to increase access to ophthalmologists. My project focuses on their newest solution of directly offering affordable comprehensive eye exams.

PRESERVING VISION FOR A CLEARER TOMORROW

MY ROLE
The project in which I was involved focuses on increasing the number of comprehensive eye exams performed by Forus Health. For the first month with my organization, I learned about all of their operations. Once I understood how my project fit into the organization’s goals, my responsibilities focused on developing strategic initiatives to help them perform 5 million eye exams over the next 5 years. I conducted market research for eye exams, identified potential stakeholders and partners, and presented possible strategies to my supervisor to understand their feasibility. Additionally, I analyzed data to determine the people and devices required to reach the screening goals. Finally, I predicted the investment and the potential profit of implementing the initiatives.

- Developed 6 strategic initiatives to scale up the organization’s eye exam programme.
- Facilitated future partnerships with 2 eye care-focused NGOs.
- Gathered qualitative data with 10 industry experts to inform my research.
- Analyzed 4 data sets to identify the feasibility of proposed initiatives.

While rewarding, my fellowship experience was filled with various challenges. With a background in biology and public health, I was unfamiliar with business. For the first month of the fellowship, I did not know what my organization meant by “scaling up”—the entire premise of my project. I needed to learn about the basics of developing strategic initiatives for a business. Once I developed more of a business perspective, I explored different strategies to scale up eye screenings and utilized available data to support these ideas. While many of my attempts were unsuccessful, I am proud of the risks I took and how I adapted to unfamiliar situations.
Sivakami is an early-career researcher and development professional who wants to work at the intersection of gender, health, and development. A firm believer in the value of collective learning, her work attempts to incorporate gender and rights analysis into social interventions.

MY PROJECT

The India Health Action Trust works with the Government of India and state governments to achieve its public health goals and address multiple kinds of health and social inequities. Project MANCH, initiated in April 2021 and based out of Shahdol, seeks to improve Maternal and Newborn Child Healthcare outcomes in tribal areas of Madhya Pradesh. The project works in three intervention blocks and strengthens community processes and the capacity of service providers. It works on improving the coverage of antenatal care, institutional delivery, and postnatal care (at the facility and at home by the frontline workers).

MY ROLE

Within project MANCH, my role was to complete a qualitative research study among recently delivered mothers and frontline workers in the intervention blocks of Shahdol to understand the influencing factors that determine a pregnant woman’s access to antenatal care, postnatal care, and institution-based birth. I was responsible for preparing interview schedules, literature reviews, fieldwork, analysis, and documentation of the results. The analysis informed a series of recommendations that could be incorporated into Project MANCH’s framework to achieve its overarching goals.

As part of one of the recommendations, I completed a pilot intervention on reactivating and revamping the Village Health, Sanitation, and Nutritional Committee (VHSNC) in a poorly performing village in Jaisinghnagar block. This intervention enabled health governance at the village level. The VHSNC intervention is now being scaled up by the IHAT team across all three blocks in Shahdol.

- Completed a qualitative research study among recently delivered mothers and frontline workers in 7 villages from 3 blocks of Shahdol district.
- Completed 32 personal in-depth interviews.
- Strategized 10 recommendations to be incorporated into the project MANCH framework.

(RE)CENTRING COMMUNITIES TO IMPROVE HEALTH EQUITY

As an early-career researcher, co-creating a sensitive and inclusive space with my research participants was my greatest accomplishment. Keeping reflexivity and emotions central to my research processes enabled me to present narratives that made power dynamics within the health system and social systems visible.
Urvashi is passionate about community-led development and the power of collaboration to scale impact. With a career that’s been a blend of corporate and social sector experiences, she is grateful for the opportunity to explore inclusive approaches to development and connect with diverse individuals with similar passions through the Fellowship.

MY PROJECT

My fellowship project was a livelihoods-focused community initiative that involved training women on best practices in dairy to help increase their income. One of the main challenges that my host organization had identified over the last few years was the low ownership levels among many of the women they had been working with. During my fellowship, I spent a significant amount of time speaking with them in an effort to understand what motivates high ownership, the kind of support they require to thrive, and the factors that affect their participation.

MY ROLE

My role in the project was essentially to oversee strategy and manage the programme. In addition to chalk ing out the training schedules/topics to be covered and conducting stakeholder meetings, managing the project also involved setting up a monitoring and evaluation mechanism to assess and track outcomes. Managing the dairy-focused livelihoods project primarily meant planning the trainings, setting up a monitoring framework, and managing stakeholders. While the training covered a range of topics from cattle care to vermicompost and financial literacy, we realized, soon after we began the process of monitoring, that most women were having trouble retaining the information (especially the technical information). Since most couldn’t read or write either, pamphlets weren’t a feasible solution. So, I put together a video and disseminated it through WhatsApp groups. Another aspect of my fellowship project was conducting qualitative surveys to assess the factors that drove motivation and ownership levels among the women and understand what would help them thrive.

Facilitated training sessions for 90 SHG women across 3 villages
Conducted 5 qualitative surveys to understand factors affecting engagement and ownership levels
Developed and distributed IEC material on cattle nutrition, reaching over 2300+ views on YouTube

CULTIVATING SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS THROUGH DAIRY

Since I worked closely with rural women on my fellowship project, I had a chance to understand some of the very real challenges that many of them faced in accessing welfare entitlements as well. This has been a topic of interest for me ever since my last gig at my previous organization, Haqdarshak. I took the opportunity to leverage the knowledge I had gained about government schemes and make them aware of their entitlements at trainings, at animal health camps, and even in casual conversation.