



The Best Practices Resource Book *Vol 2*

THE CHANGEMAKERS

Preface

Each year, the Knowledge Management (KM) Unit of the Meghalaya Basin Management Agency (MBMA) works to capture valuable insights from the grassroots for ensuring that good practices and untold stories reach a broader audience. By documenting local successes and challenges, KM seeks to uncover what often remains unseen: the innovative efforts of individuals and groups that strengthen the well-being of their communities in unique ways. Through its work, KM creates a shared knowledge base that highlights both emerging and established practices, providing a deeper understanding of what is possible within Meghalaya's rural landscapes.

The State's rural livelihoods promotion and farmer empowerment projects, including MBMA's IFAD-supported Meghalaya Livelihoods and Access to Markets Project (Megha-LAMP), have made a meaningful impact on communities in Meghalaya. While these initiatives have introduced interventions to support activities and improve incomes, the real driving force behind their success has been the communities themselves. Most interventions are community-collaborated, with local individuals and groups actively shaping and sustaining these efforts. Their proactiveness has transformed these initiatives into self-sustaining movements, driven by a shared sense of ownership.

KM's role is to spotlight these practices and give them visibility. This year's result—the *Best Practices Resource Book Volume 2: The Changemakers*—captures stories of individuals and groups, particularly women champions, whose contributions have meaningfully strengthened their communities.

In the following pages, you will find stories of resilience, practical solutions, and local leadership. From Blossom Nongrum's commitment to organic farming and knowledge sharing to Dorina N. Marak's leadership of the Rongkhugre B Integrated Village Cooperative Society Ltd. (IVCS) and Ravi Kumar Choudhary's efforts in modernizing the operations of the Pillingkata B IVCS Ltd.—these examples showcase what can be achieved when local initiatives are supported by well-tailored development programmes.

These individuals embody community-driven development, sustainable livelihoods, and improved access to opportunities. Their stories illustrate how traditional knowledge can complement modern practices, how women's leadership can uplift entire villages, and how cooperative societies can drive economic growth.

This resource book is also more than just a collection of success stories—it aims to serve as a roadmap for communities, policymakers, and development practitioners. The best practices outlined here offer good examples of rural development, women's empowerment, and building resilient local economies.

As you read through these accounts, we hope you will be inspired by the resourcefulness and determination of these changemakers. Their experiences remind us that sustainable development is not just about policies or projects but about motivating individuals to become agents of change in their own communities.

May this resource book be both a celebration of what has been achieved and a catalyst for future innovations in rural development across Meghalaya and beyond.

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BLOSSOM NONGRUM

Advocate for Organic Farming and Community Empowerment

In the rapidly evolving modern agricultural landscape, where populations are soaring and more people are flocking to urban areas in search of work, the number of farmers is dwindling. As cities expand, valuable farmland is often sacrificed to make way for new developmental infrastructure. Yet, amid this shift, farming remains crucial—it is the backbone that ensures survival. Despite the allure of other professions, there are still individuals who feel a deep connection to the land and choose to continue farming.

Blossom Nongrum, a producer, supplier, seller, and big proponent of organic farming, is one such example.

Blossom is not just a farmer by profession but a farmer at heart. Her journey into farming began in her childhood, motivated by her mother. Growing up in a low-income household in Niriang village in Thadlaskein C&RD Block, West Jaintia Hills District, Blossom could not attend school, but she found her education working in the fields.

The early years were filled with hard work and the simple joys of seeing their efforts bear fruit. Farming was more than a livelihood; it was a way of life that sustained them. When Blossom got married, she carried this knowledge with her, starting her own family and continuing to farm with her husband. They leased land and worked tirelessly, driven by the same spirit that had guided her since childhood.

The early years of life as a farmer were challenging. Pests and natural calamities often threatened to destroy her hard work, yet her determination never faltered. She decided to learn more about modern farming and adopt its practices and solutions. She actively began participating in various training and workshops conducted by state government departments and projects. With time, she acquired new and improved skills and information.

Blossom's traditional farming practices have earned recognition from various entities, including Horticulture, Agriculture, Krishi Vigyan Kendra, ICAR, and others. In 2018, her work was celebrated at the Mahila Kisan Divas, where she and other women farmers were recognized for their invaluable contributions to agriculture in the region.



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Whenever I attend training, I cannot take notes because I never learned how to write. Instead, I would listen closely, understand the concepts, and memorize them. To make sure I do not forget, I immediately applied my learnings when I got home. This helped me retain everything from the training.”

She has also received awards at the district, state, and national levels. As an agri-trainer, Blossom conducts training for hundreds of farmers across the state on sustainable traditional and organic practices.

In 2019, Blossom began working as a master trainer for Megha-LAMP, as well as for departments like Sericulture and Horticulture. In this role, she trains other farmers in making organic fertilizers and pesticides and imparts skills in sericulture. Trainees from the Khasi, Jaintia, and Ri Bhoi regions attended her sessions.

Beyond the training, Blossom invites farmers eager to learn about organic farming for private sessions. She particularly urges women to participate, believing strongly in its potential to improve their livelihoods. In her own words, Blossom's goal is clear: to ensure self-sustenance, promote organic farming, and enhance agricultural sustainability. She strives to increase the efficiency of agricultural production while encouraging the younger generation to see farming as an equally important foundation for a better quality of life.

Today, Blossom owns a beautiful 7-acre plot of land in Niriang, where she has created a thriving integrated farm. Instead of opting for monoculture, she chose integrated cropping and planted a variety of crops to sustain her family and the land. Recently, she was introduced to the concept of buckwheat farming. True to her nature, Blossom eagerly embraced the challenge and planted buckwheat on her farm. She has since sent the seeds to the Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) for processing.

Farming has profoundly impacted the socio-economic status of Blossom, transforming her life and the lives of those around her. Through her dedicated efforts, she has created employment opportunities for others in her community, providing them with steady work and income. Her journey is an inspiration to others, especially women, to embrace farming as a path to independence and prosperity.





DORINA N. MARAK

Inspiring Women to Embrace
Leadership



The Rongkhugre B Integrated Village Cooperative Society Ltd. (IVCS) in Rongkhugre, West Khasi Hills district, is where women have assumed pivotal roles in decision-making to guide their community towards sustainable development with a visionary and proactive approach. Since its inception, this IVCS has flourished under their direction, showcasing the power of women empowerment in an enabling environment. Their commitment has led to key achievements, such as improved water supply, enhanced agricultural practices, and boosted economic activities. Among these remarkable women is Dorina N. Marak, the IVCS chairperson, who balances her responsibilities as a Lower Primary School teacher and a mother while serving as a leader in the community.

Despite her busy schedule, Dorina engages in various IVCS activities as part of the duties of a chairperson. Before being recommended for the role, Dorina showcased strong leadership abilities through her involvement with Megha-LAMP as a Group Facilitator, where she helped form multiple farmer groups and actively mobilized membership in the IVCS with door-to-door visits.

Initially, the community had appointed a male chairman to lead the IVCS. However, he was unable to oversee the IVCS's development due to other commitments, resulting in stalled progress. In response to this leadership void, members of the IVCS encouraged Dorina to step up and fill the position.

Under her leadership, the IVCS began to flourish. Her hands-on approach and ability to unite the community around common goals revitalized the cooperative society.

One of the most significant changes observed in the village is the aforementioned improvement in water supply, which has historically struggled with water security, especially during the dry seasons. Through Megha-LAMP's interventions of community-led integrated NRM activities, the community constructed three check dams and ten ring wells to bring water to doorsteps.

Dorina has also taken part in a range of other developmental initiatives, such as the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), where she assisted 232 households in obtaining their entitlements. Upon learning about the impending closure of the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), Dorina visited the block office and discovered that 59 individuals from Rongkhugre were listed as beneficiaries, but ten had either relocated or were deceased. Collaborating with the village Gram Sevak (GS), she ensured that those in need of proper housing received benefits. Her efforts led to 22 households completing their construction. She has also assisted her community with being part of the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM KISAN) programme, submitting 117 forms and benefiting 97 villagers.



Despite the lack of organized business activities in the village, Dorina recognized potential for growth. Many villagers ran individual shops and engaged in the areca nut trade, ginger farming, and broom grass businesses. As a Group Facilitator, she supported them by regularly monitoring their progress and linking them to sources of funding, market connections, and schemes.

In the IVCS, Dorina is closely supported by Hemery M. Sangma, the IVCS secretary, who played an equally important role during membership mobilization, which led to the IVCS currently having 253 shareholders and catering services to 4 villages. She is particularly proud of the loan procedures of the IVCS, which have benefited 56 members. These loans have supported various business and agricultural endeavours, and most members have successfully repaid them, with 15 settling both principal and interest.

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Even if family or community norms discourage women from taking leadership roles, remember that protections exist. The rights of women and children are safeguarded. And to my fellow women, I implore you: embrace leadership, empower yourself, and contribute to the growth of our community. Consider joining the IVCS to reap various benefits and get access to credit, loans, and new markets.”



BETHELIEIT SHYLLA

Efforts in Gaining Community Trust

The lengskhem IVCS Ltd., in Moolang, East Jaintia Hills, is an example of community-driven empowerment. At the heart of this success is Bethelieit Shylla, a dedicated and determined woman who, with a strong sense of ownership, has devoted herself to the betterment and upliftment of her community. A school teacher by profession, her contributions go beyond the classroom.

She took on the role of Secretary of the IVCS in 2022, with the goal of improving the lives of women and the broader community. Despite her demanding schedule, she balances her duties as a mother, teacher, and community leader. Her involvement in the IVCS stems from a deep belief in its modest yet powerful mission: to improve livelihoods and the quality of life in rural areas. Fluent in English and Hindi, Bethelieit bridges cultural and linguistic divides, ensuring the IVCS's reach extends to all 244 households in the village.

The inception of the lengskhem IVCS Ltd. is rooted in collective aspirations. In its early days, members of the community actively participated in naming the organization, choosing "lengskhem" to reflect their shared commitment to progress and mutual support. However, the road to building this community institution was not without challenges.

Bethelieit's journey as the IVCS secretary is a testament to the power of determination. After awareness drives introduced the IVCS model, she took it upon herself to go door-to-door, explaining the benefits and opportunities the IVCS could bring to each household. Her efforts were initially met with resistance; the village headman and other community members were skeptical, even spreading misinformation about the viability of the IVCS model.

But Bethelieit was undeterred.



Through WhatsApp and personal calls, she engaged with the community, dispelling doubts and building trust. Her unwavering commitment gradually won over the skeptics. The turning point came when the village headman publicly endorsed the IVCS during the inaugural event of the lengskhem Farmers' Market, a significant milestone for the institution.

Under Bethelieit's leadership, the IVCS has diversified its activities, offering a range of services that cater to the community's needs. From a grocery store providing essentials at wholesale rates to xerox and printing services, and even a tea stall, the IVCS has become a part of daily life in Moolang. Its weekly farmers' market is especially thriving.



The IVCS is also playing a role in financial inclusion, with one of its members serving as a banking correspondent for Meghalaya Rural Bank. Through this initiative, community members can access essential banking services within their village. The IVCS recently introduced a way to offer support to its members in times of need. When a member falls ill, the community rallies together to offer assistance to the family. They visit the home and hold a worship service, reflecting the Christian faith that bonds the village. During the service, offerings are collected and given to the family.

The impact of the lengskhem IVCS Ltd. has not gone unnoticed. In October 2022, Meghalaya Chief Minister, Shri Conrad K. Sangma, bestowed a letter of appreciation upon the IVCS for its significant contributions to the development of Moolang and its adjoining villages.

“ One of our best initiatives is the branding of ‘lengskhem Turmeric,’ a locally sourced product that not only highlights our region’s agricultural heritage but also supports local farmers. Priced affordably, this product is fast gaining popularity across the area.”

Future plans are extensive. The priority is the expansion of the Farmers' Market by creating more space for additional stalls and introducing facilities such as parking and waste management to accommodate more vendors and improve the overall market experience. Another goal is to set up a guesthouse or hotel in the area, with the aim of creating new jobs and boosting the local economy. The IVCS also envisions expanding its grocery store and other retail services by offering a wider range of products, particularly locally produced goods.

The bakery unit, managed by Bethelieit herself, is another area poised for growth. The unit has already become a go-to for cakes for various occasions. The IVCS also runs a pharmacy and a doctor's clinic, both of which have greatly benefited the village. With these

facilities, residents no longer need to travel to other villages for medical care. To further empower the community, the IVCS facilitates members' participation in vocational training in areas like tailoring.

Regarding the financial services of the IVCS, Bethelieit maintains close relationships with all members. She regularly convenes meetings to discuss strategies for improving and strengthening the cooperative's activities and is in regular contact with Megha-LAMP officials for new opportunities. A standout feature of the IVCS is its introduction of an annual dividend for members, which has further motivated them to continue supporting the mission of the IVCS.



RAVI KUMAR CHOUDHARY

Empowering the farming community of Pillingkata

The Pillingkata B Integrated Village Cooperative Society Ltd. (IVCS) has played a key role in improving the activities of the farming community of Pillingkata Village in Ri Bhoi District, home to a diverse but inclusive community comprising Khasi, Garo, and other non-tribal groups.

This is largely because of the efforts of Ravi Kumar Choudhary, the IVCS chairman and manager, who has devoted the best part of the last three years to enhancing the activities of the IVCS, believing it to be the ideal community institution that can not only alleviate some of the most pressing challenges of the village but also deliver services that can improve the resident farmers' incomes.





Ravi spent considerable time mobilizing membership in the IVCS. He would inform his community that the IVCS can address the expenses challenge of needing to travel nearly 25 kms to reach the nearest bank in Byrnihat, and that services similar to that of a bank, such as thrift, credit, and loans, with low-interest rates, are accessible in the village itself.

During the height of COVID-19 in 2021, when the community struggled to get banking services, and just at the establishment of the IVCS in the village, regular awareness was conducted by Ravi and members of the IVCS, most days until 8 pm, to inform them of the opportunities available in the IVCS. Due to this, the IVCS managed to quickly enroll 104 members in the first year.

By the second year, membership had doubled to 210, with the IVCS covering three contiguous villages - Pillingkata, Umtyrnga, and Pyngker-C.

Since then, residents of these villages have commenced savings and accessing loans. Ravi actively advocated for saving even nominal amounts, explaining the long-term benefits.

As a result, individuals have transitioned from merely storing surplus funds at home to depositing them within IVCS.

Under Ravi's leadership, the IVCS started programmes to provide financial assistance, distribute loans, and find new repayment methods.

Loans have been disbursed to 107 IVCS members amounting to Rs 42,13,000 with no instances of defaulting. Beneficiaries of these loans have successfully established small businesses, such as Darisha Ryndong, who has utilized the loan to establish a small fast-food enterprise.

Ravi is extending support beyond his own IVCS to assist others in the Ri Bhoi area, such as the Umshaken IVCS Ltd., Umsaw Nongbri IVCS Ltd., and Umwang IVCS Ltd., as a resource person when needed. He would help train and support their secretaries, particularly in bookkeeping and data collection, and verify financial transactions and vouchers.

Today, when these IVCS offices encounter issues, they would contact Ravi and request his assistance.

Recently, Ravi was given the role of manager of Pillingkata IVCS Ltd. by the project. His position now involves ensuring that the IVCS maximizes the support provided by the project to develop the supply chain and enhance market accessibility.



We introduced new methods to track our activities to ensure that all operations were organized and efficient. We utilize the Tally software to maintain accounts and demonstrate the benefits of leveraging technology. This was before the project had taken steps to initiate computerizing the IVCS.

Today, Pillingkata B IVCS is one of the very few IVCS able to consistently submit monthly reports to the district Megha-LAMP office in Nongpoh.”

Regarding the village's issues with water, Ravi approached the State Council of Science, Technology and Environment (SCSTE) for support. 26 tanks with capacities of 1000 liters each have been installed in 26 households. The IVCS also procured one tank of 1000 liters on its own, and a concrete tank for rainwater harvesting was constructed on the premises of the local dorbar, which houses the TP Sunrise English School.

Ravi strongly supports empowering the vulnerable sections of the community. Recently, he facilitated assistance for IVCS member Arika Choudhary by helping her apply to the MOSONiE Socio-Economic Foundation, located in Umyrnga Village, for the installation of a solar panel to provide lighting for her grocery shop. He has also supported other women in securing loans to start their own businesses.





FRYDOR SUTEL
LIDLAPSEK HANDBOOK
MODEL: 02(A)

Finger
Millet Malt

SUKLIN DOHLING

Connecting Tradition with Modern Food Processing

Suklin Dohling, from Nongtraw village in East Khasi Hills, starts her day early with a clear goal: to revive millet cultivation in her village. Her journey is shaped by perseverance and a strong connection to her roots.

Through hard work, Suklin set up a small processing unit in Sohra Rim, where she processes this traditional grain into various products, helping to sustain an agricultural tradition that was fading.

Her mornings begin with everyday tasks—preparing breakfast and managing household chores—before heading to "Marbin Food Processing," a unit named after her parents, Martha and Binsen. In this modest setup, Suklin quietly works toward her dreams and ambitions.

Suklin's journey to becoming a food entrepreneur was far from easy. After losing her mother and caring for her ill father, she worked hard to complete her education, eventually earning a bachelor's degree despite many challenges. To support herself, she took up teaching jobs, but the small salaries were barely enough. Undeterred, she looked for better opportunities and worked as an enumerator for a baseline survey under the Megha-LAMP project, later becoming a group facilitator. This led her to a training programme in food processing, which set the stage for her next step.

In 2021, with new skills and determination, Suklin began experimenting in her small unit, using millet as the main ingredient. She made cupcakes, pancakes, and even processed it into flour. Once a staple in Nongtraw, millet had almost disappeared from local diets, replaced by rice as people became less aware of its health benefits.

Suklin saw potential in this nutrient-rich grain and was determined to revive and promote its use. She did not stop at growing millet; she aimed to make it appealing to a wider audience. Inspired by a YouTube video, she began experimenting with millet malt—a process that came with its own challenges. Early attempts were met with criticism—some found the malt bitter, while others said it had an alcoholic smell.

But Suklin was not discouraged. She kept refining her technique until she found the right balance, eventually creating a health drink that quickly gained popularity.



In addition to millet, Suklin's range has grown to include juices, squashes, pickles, jackfruit chips, honey, tapioca powder, arrowroot powder, and wild pepper—all made with great care. Starting with just Rs. 5,000, financial limitations did not hold her back. Her determination has been the key to her progress.

Her efforts have not only provided her with a stable livelihood but also sparked a revival of millet farming in her village. She has even been able to employ two helpers at her unit, whom she pays monthly. Her dedication has encouraged other villagers to return to their roots, growing millet and other traditional crops that were nearly lost.

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Initially, it was very challenging for me when it came to malt making. First, I made a small batch and sent it to my friends and family to taste. When they tasted it, they said that it was bitter, and some said it had an alcoholic smell.

Even with all this feedback, I did not give up. Instead, I kept on trying and changed my method of processing, and now the malt is perfect.”

Life in Nongtraw is challenging. The village's steep terrain and harsh weather—marked by constant rain and thick fog for most of the year—make farming difficult. The heavy rainfall often washes away the topsoil, draining the land of nutrients. Yet, the villagers persist. They trek through rugged paths each day to reach their fields, building small terraces with bamboo and sticks to hold the soil and plant their crops.

Nongtraw is remote, accessible only by a 1,500-step trek from Sohra Rim. This isolation has historically confined the villagers to subsistence farming, as transporting produce to market is a struggle. A ropeway once helped carry goods, but it has long been out of service, leaving villagers to carry their produce on their backs. Seeing this challenge, Suklin began buying produce in bulk from local farmers—millets, tapioca, blackberries, honey, and more—and hired people to transport it to her processing unit. From there, she creates food items that are sold not only in nearby Shillong and Sohra but also in cities like Bangalore, Assam, and Mumbai.

Suklin's story is about bringing back millet cultivation and helping preserve traditional practices. She fondly recalls millet harvest season, when the whole village joins in for threshing, singing traditional songs in rhythm with their work. This sense of community, she believes, is key to reviving their cultural heritage, where snacks and cakes made from millet are now common at festivities, weddings, and birthdays, alongside other traditional foods.

Suklin's efforts have earned her recognition. She has received several awards, including the Mahila Kisan Diwas Award from KVK East Khasi Hills, recognition from the Directorate of RTTI Department of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare Meghalaya, and the Innovative Brand of the Year in Value Addition of Millet at the 3rd Farmers Parliament. She has also showcased her products at various melas and exhibitions, both within and outside the state.



SIKHA KOCH RABHA AND THE RANGSANG PRODUCER GROUP

**Collectivization to build Economic
Independence**







In North Garo Hills lies the village of Torikhakona Rabha. Among its residents is Sikha Koch Rabha, a woman dedicated to her community and its growth.

Sikha, affectionately known as Shikha, serves as the Secretary of the Rangsang Producer Group (PG) in Thorikakona village, under the Bajengdoba Block. Her journey began with a goal to uplift the women of her village, a vision that faced significant challenges in a predominantly patriarchal society.

Despite these obstacles, Shikha, along with three other women, mobilized 15 additional members to form the Producer Group, officially established in March 2021. The formation of the Rangsang PG marked an important step for the women of Thorikakona.

Historically, women in the village were expected to conform to traditional roles, which made the prospect of entering business daunting. Under Shikha's direction, however, the group began to navigate these challenges. Confidence among its members was slowly built and economic independence was becoming an actuality.

The PG initially focused on producing banana chips, a venture that has so far generated approximately Rs. 3 lakhs in profit. Encouraged by this outcome, the group diversified into piggery and weaving, now organizing their efforts into three main activities: banana chips production, piggery, and weaving.

Currently, eight members are involved in making banana chips, while five are engaged in piggery and another five in weaving.

The impact of Rangsang PG on its members is clear. Women are now able to support their families and are contributing to household income alongside their husbands. This sense of financial independence has brought about noticeable changes in their lives.

The success of Rangsang PG has even motivated other women in the village, which led to the formation of five new Producer Groups in Thorikakona.

Today, the women of Rangsang PG continue their work with determination. They are making big strides toward achieving their objectives and are focusing on their next steps for growth and development.



In addition to our business initiatives, the group has implemented a loan system for members to support individual activities like piggery and weaving.

This system has enabled members to launch their own ventures, where some of our women are displaying tremendous creativity in weaving by designing unique hand-woven clothing that has garnered local recognition.”



TREMIDISH M. SANGMA

Building Educational Access and Opportunity

In Kerupara village, about 22 kms from the district headquarters of South West Garo Hills, lives Tremidish M. Sangma, IVCS member and the principal of Darong Valley English School, the village's only English medium school. Her involvement with the school first began in 2013, a time when it was managed by the village. In those early years, the school was known to provide quality education.

However, as time passed, financial difficulties started to wear down the school's operations. The village struggled to maintain resources like textbooks and teaching materials. Eventually, all avenues were exhausted, and the school faced closure. The community was left disheartened, and the local primary school's irregular teaching schedule meant that many students could not keep up with basic literacy skills.

Seeing the distress of both parents and students, Tremidish felt a strong responsibility to act. And the community turned to her for help by asking if she would take charge of the school.



In 2016, despite the odds, she decided to manage the school herself. While the school's infrastructure was basic, it offered a critical alternative to students who were not able to afford to attend more expensive schools elsewhere.

Running the school came with many difficulties. There were times when enrollment was low, and funding was tight. Tremidish often used her own savings to pay the teachers and took on extra work to cover costs. Through it all, she remained dedicated to keeping the school going.

The challenges were not just financial. The classrooms were cramped, and the school lacked adequate resources. But Tremidish stayed committed to improving the situation. Slowly, with help from the school children's parents and local supporters, the school began to make progress. Volunteers helped with maintenance, and businesses donated supplies.



In no time, collective support from the community resulted in much-needed renovations, new supplies, and the hiring of additional teachers. And with improvements, Tremidish introduced new teaching methods and extracurricular activities. Students thrived in the improved environment, and Darong Valley English School regained its reputation for providing good education in the area. Families from neighbouring villages even began to enroll their children.

Tremidish organized workshops for parents, emphasizing the importance of education and encouraging greater involvement in their children's learning. She also worked with local authorities to improve the region's overall education system.

But even with the progress made, she knew there was more to be done. She continued to push for improvements to ensure that the children in her community had access to quality education.

In 2023, she took part in a loom weaving training organized by her church. After returning, she trained 40 women in the village, and 16 of them became actively involved in the activity. This weaving project developed into a business and an income generating activity of the IVCS.

Tremidish's dedication to her community is far from over. She continues to seek out new ways to expand access to learning and growth opportunities.



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BRINBAWE AGRO FOOD PROCESSING AND MARKETING COOPERATIVE SOCIETY LTD.

Enabled Women Leaders

Gender discrimination in leadership roles remains a widespread issue across various sectors. Stereotypes, bias, limited access to networks, challenges in balancing work-life responsibilities, and outdated organizational cultures all contribute to the underrepresentation of women in top positions, which in turn limits economic opportunities and perpetuates inequality. Addressing this requires strategies like gender-bias education, mentorship programmes, and policies promoting work-life balance and diversity.

In this context, the story of the Brinbawe Agro Food Processing and Marketing Cooperative Society Ltd. in

Mineggre under Gasuapara Block, South Garo Hills, stands out.

Initially, it was primarily women who attended the awareness sessions, and these women later came together to form the Cooperative Society in March 2022. Supported by the South Garo Hills NABARD unit and the Cooperation Department under the One District One Product initiative, the society started with 23 members, most of whom were women. Positions like president, secretary, and managing committee roles were filled predominantly by women, with Lolitha D. Sangma as Secretary and Sorna Marak as CEO, while the sole male member plays a supportive role.

The society covers four registered villages, and despite initial concerns about being led solely by women, the group quickly proved capable of effectively managing and strengthening the society. The unit produces chips and bhujia from jackfruit, makes flour from jackfruit seeds, and engages in the trade of cashew nuts, areca nuts, and black pepper. These products meet local demand but have showcased potential for broader markets.

Despite the existence of other food processing units in the region, Brinbawe stands out as the only women-led food processing unit in South Garo Hills

In terms of expertise, two members completed a hands-on training programme in jackfruit processing, organized by the Directorate of Food Processing, Government of Meghalaya, in collaboration with CAU

Tura in 2022. The other members have been trained in various other aspects of managing and operating an organization.

The success of the Brinbawe Agro Food Processing and Marketing Cooperative Society Ltd. is primarily due to the initiative and ownership taken by the women involved. Their dedication and leadership have been influential in driving the initiative forward. Government bodies such as NABARD, MBMA, and MBDA have provided essential support through financial assistance, training, and resources, but it is the community-led approach that has truly enabled the unit's success.

Moving forward, Brinbawe aims to expand its current operations and continue empowering women in other sectors.





SENGNACHI S. MARAK

Creating Safe Spaces for Women in East Garo Hills

Sengnachi S. Marak works at the Onestop Centre, a facility supported by a central scheme designed to aid women affected by violence, whether in public or private spaces, within families or communities. Born and raised in Williamnagar Balsrigittim, East Garo Hills, she was deeply influenced by her mother, a school teacher known for her kindness and dedication to the community. Her mother often emphasized the importance of education and standing up for what is right — values that shaped Sengnachi from a young age.

After graduating, Sengnachi moved to Bangalore to pursue further education where she chose to study law. She was driven by a desire to address the injustices she had witnessed growing up. During her time at law school, she earned a reputation for her strong sense of justice and empathy. Her professors would even praise her for her focus and ability to grasp the complexities of legal matters.

In 2020, after several years of practicing law, Sengnachi decided to take a break from litigation. She joined the Onestop Centre, initially viewing it as a temporary respite.

However, as time passed, she realized that the work deeply resonated with her. The centre offered legal, medical, and psychological support to women who had experienced violence. Hearing their stories, she felt a growing responsibility to help them, and the role soon became more than just a job—it became her focus.

One evening, while at the centre, she received a distress call around 9:30pm. A woman reported that her husband was attempting to assault her. Sengnachi acted quickly. She contacted the local police for immediate assistance. Her decisive actions ensured the woman's safety that night.



At the centre, my role is varied, but every part of it is deeply meaningful. I provide legal counseling to women who are in need of support, and I work tirelessly to raise awareness across the district. Through numerous programmes, I aim to educate women about their rights and encourage them to seek the justice they deserve.

These efforts have taken me to some of the most remote villages, where I've sat with women who have shared their stories with me—stories of pain, resilience, and hope. It's in those moments, listening to their voices, that I realize how important this work truly is."



Many other affected women were initially hesitant to speak out due to fear of backlash or social stigma. But over time, the environment she created, and her efforts made a difference, with more women coming forward to seek legal protection and justice.

Working at the Onestop Centre has brought many victories. Sengnachi helped many women navigate the legal system and access necessary support services. Her work, though often challenging, was meaningful. The women who sought her help frequently spoke of how her support had given them the strength to take action.

Today, Sengnachi remains committed to advocating for women's rights.



CHENGGALDARE IVCS LTD.

Opportunities for Women and Families



The Chenggaldare IVCS, formed on September 27, 2019, in West Garo Hills under Dadenggre Block, now has 418 members. The IVCS has received various support from the Megha-LAMP project, starting with funds for office equipment and a corpus fund to support their working capital. They currently operate out of the CMC space, where they have also established a ginger processing unit.

The IVCS, comprising 15 members—three of whom are women—ensures that every member has a voice in decision-making. During their Annual General Meetings (AGM) and regular gatherings, women are encouraged to share their thoughts, with their suggestions actively influencing the group's direction.

Inclusivity is a key value, and the IVCS takes care to support members with special needs to ensure that everyone feels included.



One of the major functions of the IVCS is providing loans to Producer Groups (PGs). To date, the cooperative society has disbursed over Rs. 10 lakhs to 205 PG members, which has supported ventures like pig fattening, ginger cultivation, and other livelihood activities. These financial resources have helped members strengthen their businesses and, in turn, improve their families' well-being, including offering better educational opportunities to their children.

A total of 18 PGs have benefited from these loans.

Beyond financial services, the IVCS has branched into other enterprises. They are engaged in the cashew nut business, exporting their products to markets in Mumbai, and they run a betel nut nursery that sells saplings to local farmers. Through their Custom Hiring Centre (CHC), they have received power tillers, grass cutters, sprayers, fruit harvesters, and fencing

materials, all of which they offer to fellow farmers at comparatively much lower rates.

Under the leadership of Manseng M. Sangma from Chenggalgre village, the IVCS takes on more than just financial matters.

One of their key focus areas is raising awareness about social issues, especially the practice of early marriage. They emphasize the importance of education and establishing livelihoods before considering marriage and are advocating for more opportunities for youth to focus on their futures.

Empowering women is also a central aim of the IVCS. They encourage women to secure their own livelihoods, making financial independence a priority. As a result, women in the community are becoming more active in various societal roles.

Each December, the IVCS hosts a Song and Dance Christian competition that provides a platform for local youth and women to showcase their talents. The event has become a highlight of the year since it promotes community spirit and participation.

Already, the impact of the IVCS's initiatives is evident. Women in Chenggalgre village are taking on new responsibilities, gaining confidence, and acquiring valuable skills through various activities. They are now contributing not just to their households but also to the broader local economy.

Looking ahead, the IVCS plans to introduce more comprehensive training programmes in agriculture and other livelihood activities. By strengthening partnerships with government agencies and non-profit organizations, they aim to secure additional resources for ensuring continued support for their members and the larger community.



ROSE ANGELINE KHARSYNTIEW

Local Leadership in Action

In an era where modern technology is essential in daily life, Rose Angeline Kharsyntiew of Pyndengumiong village, Mairang, is helping her community access digital services. Operating a Common Service Centre (CSC) at Mairang Market in the Eastern West Khasi Hills, Rose offers essential services that connect rural and remote residents to government programmes and digital resources.

Starting her career as a primary school teacher at St. Thomas Higher Secondary School in Mairang, Rose faced challenges making ends meet on her teaching salary. Determined to improve her livelihood, she took the CSC e-Governance exam, attended an interview, and was selected as a Village Level Entrepreneur (VLE) in June 2016. With a single computer in a small room, she launched her CSC to make government services accessible to those in need.

The CSC e-Governance initiative, developed by the Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology, Government of India, was designed to bring essential digital services closer to rural and remote communities. With the support of Village Level Entrepreneurs (VLEs) like Rose, these CSCs serve as crucial access points, connecting local residents with government programmes, financial services, and other essential resources—saving them long, difficult journeys to distant city offices.



Rose's journey began with simple services, starting with online electricity bill payments; her uncle, her first customer and primary supporter, lent her the funds to establish the centre. Through her dedication and careful expansion, Rose aligned her offerings with CSC guidelines, steadily growing her services to meet her community's evolving needs.

Today, her centre offers a variety of services, from E-District support and banking to assistance with loan applications, and essential online services from the Deputy Commissioner's Office, like Scheduled Tribe certificates and EPIC cards. Her CSC also helps residents with PAN card applications, ticket booking, insurance, ITR filing, GST registration, and more, covering a broad range of practical services.

Each morning, Rose's CSC fills with locals seeking help with online tasks. As demand grew, she hired staff to support her in handling the daily operations. She would frequently help those in financial difficulty without charging for her services. Furthermore, she often visits nearby villages to help those who might otherwise miss out on essential services. During these visits, she completes registrations on the spot, verifies farmer IDs, and assists with documentation, ensuring that even remote residents benefit from available digital services.

With her focus on digital literacy, she began offering training in 2019 through the CSC e-Governance and Tele Entrepreneur Course (TEC) for youth interested in similar work. She holds both paid and free sessions to teach digital literacy, business management, and service delivery. To date, she has trained about 30 young people, with some going on to establish their own CSCs, while others have secured jobs in government offices. Rose also extends her training to elderly women in need of computer skills for their jobs, patiently helping them adapt to digital demands.



“

My goal is to help bridge the digital divide to ensure that through my centre, people can access various schemes to support their everyday needs. I also hope that my training centre will give young people a chance to deepen their knowledge of computers and technological advancements to be able to keep up with the rest of the world.”

Between 2018 and 2021, Rose played a key role in CSC's free basic computer training programme for youth, through which 2,000 young people earned certificates and learned digital skills. After the programme ended, Rose remained committed to providing training locally. She established Rose Academy as a CSC training and testing centre, aiming to provide an accessible venue for online exams, so residents do not have to travel to cities like Shillong or Guwahati.

Rose's work has earned her local recognition. Since 2018, she has consistently received the Excellence Award for best CSC each Independence Day and was awarded the MEG-ERA award in 2019. She has also been acknowledged for her dedication with awards such as the Best VLE Performance (2022) and the District Excellence Award (2024), reflecting her consistent commitment to her community.







ARMSTRONG SHYLLA

Uniting a Community through Food and Purpose

Mawbidong Village, located about 16 kilometres from Mawkyrwat in the South West Khasi Hills, faces numerous challenges due to its remote location. The locals contend with poor road connectivity, limited healthcare services, substandard schooling, and various other basic insufficiencies. However, in this village, one individual stood out with a determination to uplift his community: Armstrong Shylla.

Armstrong's journey into food processing began during the COVID-19 lockdown. Like many farmers in Mawbidong, he encountered an unprecedented crisis as markets closed and crops went unsold in the fields. Yet, Armstrong viewed this challenge as an opportunity. He turned to one of his most cherished local crops, the king chilli, and began experimenting with preservation techniques, creating a paste that not only saved the chilli harvest but also provided a new source of income for the farming community.



Starting with basic equipment, Armstrong began grinding the chillies from his fields, bottling the vibrant, fiery paste, and sharing samples with family and friends. The response was immediate and enthusiastic; neighbours began requesting more, spreading the word of his product across nearby villages. As demand grew, Armstrong expanded his operations, sourcing chillies from other local farmers who, like him, were struggling to make ends meet. By purchasing their produce, he created an additional income stream, benefiting the entire village.

Recognizing his dedication and the potential of his work, Armstrong approached the Directorate of Horticulture for formal training. His passion was acknowledged, and in 2021, he attended food processing training at the Institute of Hotel Management (IHM). Equipped with new skills, he experimented with other locally grown produce, adding blackberry and pineapple squashes, bamboo shoot pickles, bay leaves, black pepper, and, of course, his signature King Chilli Paste to his product lineup.

After his training, Armstrong looked beyond his own operations, reaching out to Self-Help Groups (SHGs)

and Producer Groups (PGs) in neighbouring villages. He encouraged them to pursue similar food processing training, highlighting the new opportunities it could bring. Over time, he referred 30 women from these groups, who subsequently attended training at IHM and other centres. These newly trained women began producing their own goods—pickles, jams, and squashes—under the PG's brand name, "Na Diengkong ki Nongrep." Armstrong marketed their products but took only a small portion of the profits, stating that being able to provide these women with a means to earn more was far more important.

Armstrong's processing unit, "Sharak Rit," has since expanded, employing two local women on a daily wage. Farmers who once left ripened jackfruit in the fields due to transportation challenges now have a reason to harvest, as Armstrong buys their jackfruit to produce chips. His initiatives have a broad reach; the high demand for King Chilli Paste even drives him to source chillies from farmers across the district, providing them with an expanded market.

Today, Armstrong produces between 400 to 500 bottles of King Chilli Paste each year. Known for its bold flavour, his paste has not only captivated the taste buds of Meghalaya but has also reached cities across India, including Delhi. Recently, 50 bottles were showcased at the Pineapple Festival in Delhi, where the positive feedback reaffirmed Armstrong's vision for continued expansion.

His work has caught the attention of government departments, and he is frequently invited to lead training sessions, becoming a master trainer for farmers eager to learn about food processing and its benefits. His presence at these workshops offers hands-on insights to communities throughout the district.

Armstrong's drive to inspire others is evident. He encourages individuals to take their training seriously, seeing it as a pathway to a better future.

“

I urge my fellow community members to take their training sincerely because there is so much benefit. Now our produce will no longer go to waste; we can add value to it and fetch much better prices.”



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