**Report on Site Visit at Kumargram, Alipurduar District, Northern West Bengal**

**29 March 2016**

Organisation (Jalpaiguri Project): Sabuj Sangha

 Nandakumarpur

 South 24 Parganas

 743349 West Bengal

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Sabuj Sangha is an organisation with head office in Kolkata and four regional project offices. They are working in the fields of health and nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene, education and protection, livelihood and women’s empowerment and environment and disaster response. The organisational structure is general body, governing body, director and advisory board, senior management and regional and programme managers. There are no other similar organisations working in the region.

The site visit was planned, i.e. it was not a surprise visit.

The first priority of this project is education, followed by health check-ups and sanitation with the ultimate goal of community development. The community in the area of Narartholi and West Marakhata consists of about 175 to 200 families, of which approx. 98% are tribal. The land looks quite fertile, and there is no lack of water. Nevertheless, there is not much farming. Apparently, elephants often come to the fields and destroy them, so the villagers are not keen on farming. They mostly collect wood or chop down trees for wood (which I understand is illegal) or collect stones and pebbles from the nearby river and then sell these goods. The children are often involved in this work and not sent to school.

The way Sabuj Sangha works is to facilitate self-help groups. These then send their delegates to so called federations. Each village is represented in a federation by two members of their self-help group. Sabuj Sangha encourages them to keep a women quota. To illustrate the facilitator role of Sabuj Sangha, on the way to the school we passed two hand-pump wells, which were provided but the maintenance is the responsibility of the villagers.

The teachers for the schools are recruited from the community, proposed by the federations and finally approved by Sabuj Sangha. There is apparently no lack of applications, but at the moment the funds only suffice to pay two teachers. The salaries usually range between INR2,000 and INR6,000. There are formal meetings with the parents once a month and home visits if there are any issues to be resolved. As the teachers are from the community they often also have informal chats with parents.

The government primary school at a distance of about 6 to 7 km, and there is no public transport or school bus. The secondary school is even further away. Sabuj Sangha had four schools in the region, but two had to be closed due to lack of funds. The mode of teaching is non-formal. The aim is to integrate the children into the government school and to help them keeping up with the syllabus once they have joined government school. So the school timings and holidays are synchronised with the government school. School hours are from 7.30 to 9.30, and breakfast is provided. The children who have already joined government school use the early morning classes as back-up.

Currently, there are 130 children enrolled, and none have dropped out during the past 12 months. 70 out of the 85 children in the school I visited go to school regularly, and only 15 skipped classes for various reasons in the last 6 months. The school I visited is very basic. It is an iron sheet structure with mud floor, and the students sit on mats. There are no dividers, and the children of all grades sit in the same room. There are currently only 2 teachers for 85 children. The children are provided with exercise books and pens, but they have hardly any school books. Funds are badly needed.

Sabuj Sangha has the following objectives for which they require long term funding:

* Re-opening of the two schools closed.
* Hiring of enough teachers to bring down the teacher / student ratio to 1/25
* Provision of school books
* Monthly health checks
* Provision of school uniforms
* Building of sanitation facilities
* Provision of simple tables and benches
* Sponsor a child initiative for the children who join secondary education

Sabuj Sangha has FCRA and keeps one central bank account for incoming funds. However, each project has its own separate financial accounts. I asked to see the accounts for the Jalpaiguri project, but accounts are kept in the Kolkata office. They will be provided. They will also send us the completed questionnaire and a budget.

It was very clear that there is an urgent need for funds. I believe from what I have seen that the project is genuine and I recommend to take this on.

Pictures will follow.