What we do

The Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS) programme works in 90 districts in seven of India’s poorest states – Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal – to help socially excluded communities claim their rights and entitlements more effectively.

The poverty levels in these PACS districts are higher than the average for rural India, and a substantial proportion of the population belong to socially excluded groups.

PACS addresses social exclusion by focusing on two key themes:

• Access to sustainable livelihoods – we help socially excluded communities to improve their livelihoods through access to Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (the Indian government’s rural employment scheme, also known as MGNREGA), land and forest rights, inclusive livelihood models and skills training.

• Rights to basic services – we support socially excluded communities to access various government schemes in education, health and nutrition.

We believe chronic poverty in India is largely caused by identity-based discrimination. Socially excluded groups experience greater challenges in accessing rights, entitlements and opportunities, and in moving out of poverty.

Our main goal is to reduce the welfare gap between socially excluded groups – specifically women, people with disabilities, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Muslims from poorer backgrounds – and the rest of the population. To achieve this, we are:

• strengthening 85 civil society organisation (CSO) partners to prioritise and work on issues affecting socially excluded groups

• ensuring socially excluded groups are better represented and have a greater voice in committees (at village, block and district level), in CSOs and in government bodies

• ensuring civil society works to make service providers more responsive and accountable to socially excluded groups

• widely sharing learning from the programme.
Who we are

PACs was launched in 2009 and is funded by UK aid from the UK Government, which has appointed the Indian Forum for Inclusive Response and Social Transformation (IFIRST) consortium as the management consultant for the programme. The consortium is led by international development agency Christian Aid, along with Caritas India, the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, ACCESS Development Services and the Financial Management Services Foundation. The programme, which ends in March 2016, also has a National Advisory Board to oversee its implementation.

Who we work with

Socially excluded groups

Women and girls – Gender discrimination is one of India’s main development challenges. (India was ranked 114 out 142 countries in the 2014 Global Gender Gap Report.) Women and girls are excluded from many aspects of life including health, education and work.

People with disabilities – Most service providers, governments and workplaces in India are not equipped for the full participation of people with disabilities, leaving them excluded.

Muslims – Muslims from poorer backgrounds fare poorly in a broad range of socioeconomic indicators.

Scheduled Tribes (STs) – People from STs, otherwise known as adivasis or tribal groups, face discrimination on the basis of their ethnicity. PACS also works with nomadic, denotified and ‘primitive’ tribes who may not be listed as STs.

Scheduled Castes (SCs) – SCs, otherwise known as Dalits, face discrimination on the basis of their position at the very bottom of the Indian caste system. SCs make up 16.6% of India’s population (Census, 2011), although this figure is higher if Dalits now practising other religions, such as Christianity or Islam, are included.

People who belong to more than one of these groups can face multiple forms of social exclusion. For example, Dalit women may suffer double discrimination based on their gender and their caste.

Case study

In the tribal village of Khajuripadar, in the Koraput district of Odisha, PACS partner SPREAD has supported the Maa Tareni Women’s Self-Help Group to bring about many changes.

Initially, the women (many of whom are from Scheduled Tribes and live in isolated dwellings) discussed the difficulty those living in remote areas faced in getting monthly rations from the distant Public Distribution System centre – a government scheme providing food to poor families.

They highlighted this problem at the district and block offices and, as a result, people living deep inside the forests began to receive rations to their doorsteps. The episode raised Maa Tareni’s stature in the community.

‘People started recognising our group and women from other groups came to our village for advice,’ says leader Malati Nayak. ‘Gradually our membership increased and now we have 500 members.’

The group then campaigned for clean water. ‘People used to drink muddy water from the nearby stream or river because we did not have any tube wells,’ explains Malati.

The group came up with an innovative strategy, presenting bottles of muddy river water to local government officials and asking them to drink it if they felt the group’s demands were unreasonable. The campaign worked and 18 tube wells were constructed in the respective villages.

Maa Tareni has also taken on tree smugglers, alcohol vendors and cockfight organisers in the area, being so successful that even the police and the divisional forest officers now work with them. The group has also targeted traditional customs such as child marriages.

‘We take pride in working for our people but cannot take all the credit for the achievements,’ says Malati. ‘It is the continuous support we have received from SPREAD that has enabled us to achieve so much in such a short time.’
Civil society

PACS works directly with 85 civil society organisations, which were identified through a rigorous grant application process, and a further 139 organisations networked with PACS’ core partners. 58% of our partners are led by a person belonging to a socially excluded group.

Our partners work with over 14,000 community-based organisations (CBOs) covering 21,552 villages. These CBOs – rooted in local communities – are instrumental in helping PACS effectively reach socially excluded communities.

We believe civil society has a critical role to play in addressing social exclusion and we are working to strengthen organisations by:

• providing grants – to enable CSOs to carry out projects that assist socially excluded people to claim their rights and entitlements. These grants help our partners to effectively raise and address issues of social exclusion at the grassroots, district and state levels

• capacity building – whether in financial management, legal literacy or communications, capacity building is part of PACS’ plan to leave a lasting legacy of empowered communities and organisations who understand their rights and entitlements and have the confidence and skills to negotiate with others to claim them. We also provide training opportunities and networking events which support alliance-building and joint advocacy.

Community-based organisations

Our overarching aim is to enable CBO members to understand and be confident in their rights, working together to demand and secure these entitlements. Our CSO partners are doing this by:

• training CBO members about their rights under our key thematic areas: employment, land and forest rights, education, health insurance schemes, maternal health and child development

• supporting CBOs to lead public information campaigns and advocacy events in their communities, such as mass rallies, interactive meetings and public hearings, to teach others about their rights

• helping CBO members to carry out community-based monitoring of services and to speak out to the relevant authorities when service providers are not meeting their obligations

• strengthening the confidence of CBO members to participate in meetings with local government at village and Panchayat (local self-governance system) level to advocate for their rights and more inclusive policies and practices

• working with CBO leaders to develop their leadership capabilities, specifically through our ‘With.in Leading Together’ programme and CBO conclaves.

PACS is committed to increasing the number of people from socially excluded groups who are members and leaders of CBOs. Typically, these groups are excluded from decision-making processes and many do not know the rights they are entitled to, so it is vitally important to ensure these groups are represented, that they understand their rights and their voices are heard.

A lasting legacy for all

PACS wants to leave a legacy of empowered communities that understand their rights and entitlements and have the confidence and skills to negotiate with others to claim them. Furthermore, we want to see a society where authorities are accountable to all their citizens, in which lessons and responsibility for change are shared and in which everyone has the opportunity to interact freely and productively with others and to determine the course of their own economic and social development.
On the day Dalit villagers took control of 30 acres of land that was rightfully theirs, the Indian flag was raised on a peepul tree in Salaha, in the feudal district of Bettiah, Bihar.

It is the first time Dalits have been able to acquire land in Bettiah, where upper caste landowners (who constitute 30% of the population) own 90% of the land, and 90% of Dalits are landless.

While many Dalits have a record of their land rights, they do not have actual possession of their land. They are forced to work as labourers on their own land for paltry wages in poor conditions.

PACS partner SSEVS supported villagers to form a land rights committee, Lok Sangharsh Samiti (LSS), to promote awareness among Dalit villagers about their rights, educate them about the benefits of availing government schemes, and help them to gain possession of their land.

In April 2015, villagers submitted their application for land possession to the then chief minister of Bihar. But they were beaten with lathi sticks by police and 214 of them were arrested and kept in custody for 12 hours.

A month later, LSS petitioned the district magistrate (DM) to give them occupancy of land within 15 days, or they would organise a Satyagraha (Gandhian-style non-violent resistance) and seize the land. The DM didn’t take action, and the villagers took matters into their own hands.

On 25 June, the Dalits of Salaha took over 30 acres of land, supported by 5,000 people from nearby villages. Together, they ploughed and levelled the land, and sowed seeds.

Landowners threatened to shoot them and take back the land. ‘We were not frightened. We were even prepared to die to get possession of our land. We will cultivate it and reap the harvest,’ says LSS District Coordinator Sohan Ram.

More than 100 land cases in Salaha remain unresolved. Backed by LSS and SSEVS, the villagers continue fighting for their rights through dharnas (sit-ins), satyagrahas and rallies.

‘Land is our only hope for a living,’ says villager Mohan Ram. ‘If we get land, there will be food on our plates, our children can study, and our families can live in dignity. That’s why we are fighting till our last breath.’

The flag on the tree is a symbol that land rights and justice are possible, and a reminder not to give up hope.