

IELA AWARD WINNER

The Learning Hub – Empowering Remote Rural Communities across India through Blended Learning

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ABSTRACT

This case study explores The Learning Hub, an initiative of the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF), which hosts, among many other learning assets, a three-strand learning programme to enhance the quality of life of rural communities in India through innovative blended learning strategies. The programme, delivered by the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme India (AKRSPI), addresses critical issues such as water, sanitation, sustainable agriculture, and governance by delivering courses through a combination of video-based content and in-person facilitation. The study provides a brief analysis of AKF's blended learning approach, and its impact on community resilience, economic development, and social equity.

KEYWORDS

blended learning, rural development, human-centred design, Aga Khan Foundation, Aga Khan Rural Support Programme India, water access, regenerative farming, rural governance, community resilience, women's empowerment, India, The Learning Hub

1 INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the Aga Khan Foundation, together with La Caixa Foundation and local civil society organisations (CSOs), co-created a new – blended – capacity building model to strengthen CSOs, initially in Africa and later across Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Today, all learning resources created using this approach are shared through The Learning Hub, an online platform which offers free, globally accessible resources including courses, videos, toolkits, podcasts, and webinars in 30 languages. Today, The Learning Hub collaborates with 140+ content development partners, as well as funders and implementers, to produce locally relevant learning content, all fully aligned with the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This case study focuses on one such partnership in rural India (Bihar, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh), where blended learning courses were designed to support farmers, communities, and elected representatives. It assesses The Learning Hub's

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innovative approach, programme structure, and impact on community resilience and development, highlighting the potential of blended learning in rural development.

2 PROGRAMME BACKGROUND

Throughout its history, AKF has partnered with communities, local governments, and other key stakeholders to improve quality of life. In India, among many other initiatives, AKRSPI – the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme India – has been implementing a comprehensive programme aimed at improving rural life in three Indian states. More than two thirds of the Indian population live in rural areas [1], and the rural economy plays a significant role in the country's growth [2].

The programme focuses on three main areas: (1) Health and Hygiene, improving access to village-level water systems; (2) Regenerative Farming, supporting farmers to adopt sustainable practices; and (3) Governance and Civil Society, strengthening village councils and promoting good governance. A blended learning approach was adopted for scalability across large, remote areas, ensuring consistency and quality through materials hosted on The Learning Hub. The blended learning approach also reduces costs and makes learning more accessible and more relevant and engaging through practical face-to-face sessions tailored to local contexts.

3 BLENDED LEARNING STRATEGIES AND PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION

AKF's blended learning model combines locally produced video lessons with short, in-person workshops, applying a "flipped classroom" approach.

The video component is produced using an innovative, low-cost approach that features AKF staff, volunteers, and community members as relatable "talking heads". Research highlights that this approach enhances learning by improving engagement and inclusivity [3], [4]. Learners can follow online in self-paced manner or offline in a facilitated group session.

In this particular initiative in India, the locally-produced instructional videos in Hindi and Gujarati aimed to deliver impact through three strands: (1) educate farmers and rural communities on government guidelines for water schemes; (2) support farmers in transitioning to regenerative farming practices; and (3) train Gram Panchayat (village council) members on governance and leadership skills, particularly promoting inclusivity and empowering women.

A crucial aspect was ensuring offline access to videos, given India's significant 2G user base [5]. In this context, AKRSPI facilitators show the instructional videos offline, in a community setting, and combine them directly with practical, interactive activities, enhancing learning application and engagement.

4 IMPACT ANALYSIS

The programme's success is attributed to combining technology and high-quality learning content with local knowledge and flexible implementation, facilitating effective communication and adaptation to diverse socio-cultural contexts [5]. This initiative is improving access to clean water, promoting sustainable agriculture, supporting women's entrepreneurship, and enhancing local governance across targeted communities.

Strand (1) has already enabled more than 500 communities to establish and sustain clean water facilities, benefiting hundreds of thousands of people. In India, where 37.7 million suffer from waterborne diseases annually, this addresses critical health challenges [6]. Strand (2) supports nearly 12,000 farmers in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh to adopt regenerative farming practices, producing sustainable bio-fertilisers and bio-pesticides. This not only enhances food security but also improves nutrition, health, livelihoods, and climate resilience [7]. Strand (3) provides training to elected officials across 25 communities, enhancing their capacity to serve effectively within Gram Panchayats. This strengthens rural governance and empowers communities in decision-making processes.

5 FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

The programme continues to scale up. AKRSPI, in partnership with other organisations, is working to facilitate full implementation of Strand (1) at the state level in Bihar. The blended learning course in Strand (2) is now available to other CSOs through the National Coalition for Natural Farming (NCNF) at the national level across India. In partnership with local organisations and CSOs, Strand (3) is expanding to Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, aiming to further empower rural communities through tailored development approaches.

The Learning Hub continues to produce a range of learning content, available in 30 languages, completely free of charge, as a public good. The Learning Hub actively seeks partnerships with CSOs, educational institutions, local governments, and other organisations to increase impact by localising and disseminating existing learning content or co-creating new learning content.

6 CONCLUSION

Cost-effectiveness has been key to AKF's blended learning model since its inception, using low-cost portable video labs with basic equipment, avoiding the need for professional studios, and employing local non-professional actors and narrators. Streamlining, testing, and localising the course development process for different countries, contexts, or languages quickly and easily also dramatically reduces production costs. With these videos available offline, access is ensured for even the most remote communities. Combined with the technical expertise and community engagement skills of AKF and partner organisation facilitators, impact can be scaled while preserving the integrity of the key learning messages, offering a more meaningful and hands-on learning experience to deliver high-impact programmes that improve quality of life and strengthen communities.

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