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*The Story of Collective  
Ownership of Solutions.*

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With around two decades of work behind us, it is perhaps the right time to step back and take stock of what we are doing. Annually, more than 3000 small and big works are initiated under Goonj's flagship initiative '**Cloth for Work**' (CFW) across the most far-flung parts of India. Be it *Sunderbans* (West Bengal), *Banihal* (J&K) or *Keonjhar* (Odisha) the effort has been to reach out to the farthest parts of our country. BUT what is it that we really want to achieve with CFW?

Reaching 3000+ tons of material every year to people and development work that positively impacts the quality of life for millions of people, is great BUT is that really all that we do? We feel the most important bit is, empowering people to take collective ownership of their own problems and solutions.

We are a small team but the spirit of the communities we work with,

is massive.. They can move mountains if they make up their mind.

This story is a salute to these communities; giving you a glimpse into their resilience and sense of ownership. For all that they do so unassumingly; we have a lot to learn from them.

*Assi Ganga* flows about 14 kilometres away from the main town of *Uttarkashi* in the *Sangamchatti* belt of *Uttarakhand*. In 2012, monsoon rainfall, the bridge on this river was severely damaged. In the absence of an alternate path, people would still risk their lives walking on a swinging bridge. In 2013, after the horrific cloudburst and devastation in *Uttarakhand*, this damaged bridge was also swept away, leaving the people of *Seku* village completely cut off from the rest of the world. The villagers panicked in the first 6-7 days, fearing that nobody would be able to reach them and they would be stuck forever. Some people unsuccessfully tried the

dangerous route of a two kilometres long dark tunnel while others tried to cross the ravaged river. When everything else failed some people threw two fallen tree logs across the stream to re-establish contact with the outer world.

At this time Goonj was one of the few organisations reaching out relief to such remote locations in *Uttarakhand*. We reached this area and motivated locals to build themselves a temporary bridge as part of Goonj's *CFW* initiative. Next year, when the heavy flow of water again damaged the *Seku* bridge in the monsoon, the local *Sarpanch*, women's groups and other ward members reached out to Goonj's *Uttarkashi* office.

Lack of connectivity was again badly affecting livelihood, causing huge problems during medical emergencies and posing a risk for school-going children. This time all they wanted was some nails and an iron mesh for the base from Goonj. With this little support, the bridge was up again on the same spot with the villagers' labour. Made with the same enthusiasm as the last time, it was stronger and sturdier but not made under *CFW*. This is the best part of what we do; when people are self-motivated to do things themselves instead of waiting for any outside help.

While a permanent bridge still hasn't come up here despite efforts and demands made by the villagers to the local government. In 2015, when the temporary bridge collapsed again (for the third time in



monsoons) the village representatives reached the District Magistrate's (DM) office and shared their problem and how they had been tackling it in the past. The DM assured that this time his office would bear all extra expenses therefore, the villagers made the bridge again.

## **Bihar**

In 2008, when *Bihar* faced its worst floods, after initial relief operations we decided to spread out further to reach more people.

Fields, streams and canals were still brimming with flood water, distancing people from their own land and property. One such isolated village was *Kala Govindpur* in *Supaul* district. Here fields and other facilities remained on the other side of a river that had just come up. The monsoons that followed only added to the struggles of these people. We had recently helped build the first-ever bamboo bridge (made under *CFW*) in the neighbouring village of *Sukhasan*. We, therefore, encouraged over 100 people from this village with the *Sukhasan* story and mobilised them to source bamboo and make a bridge that measured 150x4 ft. That's not all..

This bridge served its purpose for two years and when it needed some repair the village community knew what to do, on their own. Everything happened exactly the way it did two years ago, except this time they took the ownership of finding a solution to their own problem. *Chaturanan Karpat*, a villager who has witnessed the transition says, “गूँज ने लोगों को एक राह दिखाई जिस से हम लोगों का जीवन आसान हुआ” (Goonj showed us the way and that made our life easier.)

*Kaladhar Mandal*, another resident of this village says, “प्रारम्भ में हम लोगों को अपने खेतों पर जाना मुश्किल था लेकिन गूँज के सहयोग से जो पुल बनाया गया था उस से हमारी आंखे खुल गई, यही कारण था कि पुल के



दुबाय टूटने के बाद हम लोगों ने इसे बिना किसी बाहरी सहयोग से पुनः चलने लायक बनाया”.

(In the beginning it was difficult for us, even to go to our fields but when we made the bridge with the help of Goonj, it opened up our vision. This is why, when the bridge broke again, we made it usable without any outside help.)

***When the so called unskilled, unlettered people of village India come together and take the ownership of their own problems it is time to assess our definition of what skill and education is.***

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## UPDATE FOOTNOTE

In the face of both development and disaster challenges, the resilient people of rural India have consistently demonstrated their power, efforts, wisdom, and local resources to address their own issues. Through Goonj's flagship initiative, ***Cloth for Work (CFW)***, our teams actively engage in mobilising, motivating, and enabling communities, emphasising their agency and dignity, leading to diverse hyper-local development efforts. Over the past 25 years, Goonj has not only expanded its people-centred development model but has also empowered disaster-affected communities to spearhead their own revival and restoration, catalysing further development efforts.

In the last nine years (from **FY 2014-2023**), Goonj has successfully catalysed over **75,000** grassroots development projects, addressing diverse hyper-local issues in remote villages across the country. This initiative has resulted in the creation of vital community assets such as bridges, roads, and water conservation structures through a barter system involving more than **55 million**

**kgs** of urban surplus material and the active participation of thousands of local communities. This approach nurtures a sense of pride and dignity among marginalised populations, including tribals, disabled individuals, women, and remote communities, recognizing and leveraging their efforts, wisdom, and resources. It promotes self-reliance and resilience in addressing community issues, curbing environmental waste, freeing up meagre monetary resources for urgent needs like food and health, and fuelling the rural economy through the creation of livelihoods.

Goonj's impact extends to addressing long-standing development challenges in areas such as water, sanitation, menstrual health, and education. It brings rapid relief to disaster-affected communities and facilitates self-reliant repair and rehabilitation in their unique contexts. The initiative also serves as a catalyst for large-scale civic participation and action on climate issues, fostering bridges of empathy and respect between people in cities and villages.