INVESTING IN COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP: HOW SMALL GRANTS TRANSFORMED LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS

INTRODUCTION

People in Need (PIN) is a Czech-founded, non-governmental and non-profit international organisation established in 1992. PIN began working in Nepal as part of the humanitarian response to the April 25, 2015 earthquake. Since then, PIN Nepal has worked to develop and facilitate systemic solutions that respond to the needs of vulnerable and marginalised populations, including people living in geographically remote areas and groups experiencing exclusion based on ethnicity, age, gender, or other social and structural barriers. Its work in Nepal currently spans three strategic pillars: emergency response and recovery, climate resilience, and civil society and inclusive governance. Across these areas, PIN Nepal works through partnerships with civil society organisations, the Government of Nepal, academia, the private sector, and other stakeholders. This partnership-based approach supports locally led solutions that strengthen inclusion, resilience, and access to opportunities and services.

WHY DID SJP INVEST IN COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS?

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a persistent challenge in Nepal, particularly for women and girls facing social and economic marginalisation. While laws, policies, and formal services have strengthened the response, harmful gender norms, unequal power relations, stigma, and limited awareness continue to shape how violence is understood, discussed, and addressed. In many communities, change cannot come from formal services alone. It also depends on trusted local actors who understand the realities of the people they work with, can start difficult conversations, connect people to support, and help turn awareness into action. **Community-based organisations (CBOs) are often at the heart of this work.**

Since May 2024, the Security and Justice Programme (SJP) has been working across Madhesh Province to strengthen communities' capacity to prevent and respond to GBV. A key part of this approach has been the recognition that lasting change needs **local ownership and leadership**. Communities need organisations that are close to them organisations that can bring people together, challenge harmful norms, support those at risk, promote accountability, and work with local governments to address issues that matter to them. This is also consistent with the growing emphasis on locally led development, which recognises the importance of strengthening local actors to lead and sustain change.

But building local leadership starts with creating space for people to reflect on the norms and behaviours that shape their everyday lives. **This is why SJP invested in Gender Transformative Social Norms (GTSN).** GTSN provided a structured and safe space for community members to explore questions of gender, power, masculinity, and GBV, and to reflect on how deeply held beliefs influence behaviour and relationships. The intention was not simply to increase knowledge, but to help people question harmful norms, build confidence to act differently, and begin conversations that could continue beyond the sessions. CBOs were then supported to take these conversations into wider community spaces, helping connect individual reflection with collective action.

Street dramas on GBV and child marriage

Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law dialogues

Family and women's group dialogues on gender equality, GBV and harmful norms

School awareness sessions and GIEN activities

Informal tea-talk discussions on gender norms and GBV

Referral of GBV cases to services

Peer mentoring and intergenerational dialogues

Street dramas and family dialogues funded through locally mobilised resources

Women's Day and 16 Days campaigns led by CBOs

Activites completed under the SJP program

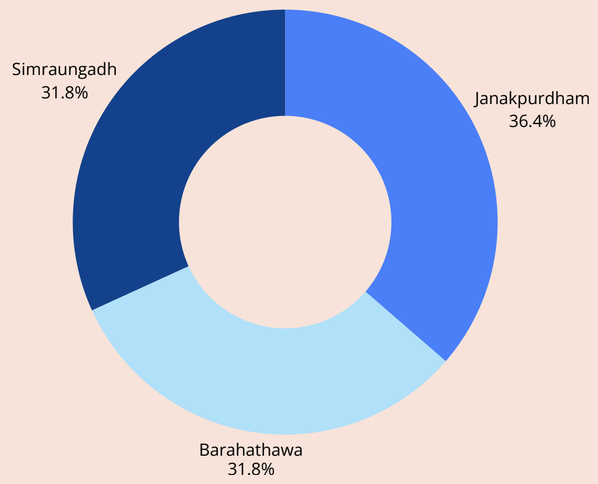
CBOs are often well placed to do this. They know their communities, understand local dynamics, and have relationships that formal programmes may take years to build. They can be the first people women, girls, persons with disabilities, Dalits, and other marginalised groups turn to when they need information, support, or a safe place to raise concerns. Yet many grassroots organisations operate with limited resources and visibility, and may have had few opportunities to strengthen their systems, build confidence, or engage with local government and decision-making processes. SJP therefore invested not only in activities, but in the organisations that could carry those activities forward.

SUBGRANT PROVIDED TO:

22 **CBOs**

WHO CONDUCTED:

135 **community activities**



Selected across Janakpurdham, Barahathawa and Simraungadh reaching diverse groups including women, Dalits, persons with disabilities and LGBTQI++ communities

What followed was more than a series of small community activities. For many CBOs, the grants became an opportunity to strengthen their own systems, build confidence, engage with local government, mobilise additional resources, and take greater ownership of issues affecting their communities.

This learning document looks at what changed within these organizations, how those changes influenced their ability to engage with their communities, and what this experience tells us about investing in local leadership as a pathway to more sustainable change.

LEARNINGS

1 Financial Support Opened the Door to Institutional Growth

For many CBOs, the sub-grant was their first opportunity to manage resources in a structured way, develop activity plans, and implement community initiatives as part of a donor-funded programme. Organisations that had been active in their communities for years often had strong local relationships and commitment, but limited experience with the systems and processes required to manage a funded project. Some had never written a proposal, prepared a budget, maintained formal financial records, or worked with structured reporting requirements. The sub-grants gave them an opportunity to learn these skills through practice.

One example is Smriti Tole Bikash Sanstha in Barahathawa Municipality. Although formally registered several years ago, the organisation had mainly focused on sanitation activities and small-scale community savings. Through the GTSN sessions and the sub-grant process, its members developed a stronger understanding of GBV, social norms, positive and harmful masculinities, survivor support, and referral pathways. At the same time, they were learning how to run their organisation more systematically. Members developed proposals, used voucher systems, maintained financial records, and introduced more structured decision-making within their executive committee. These may seem like basic organisational processes, but for a small grassroots organisation, having the opportunity to practise them can make a significant difference in how confidently it operates and engages with others.

The pathway from the grant to organisational growth was gradual but important: the grant created an opportunity to practise new skills; practising those skills strengthened internal systems; stronger systems-built confidence; and greater confidence helped CBOs engage more actively with local government and take greater ownership of their work. Rather than receiving training in isolation, CBO members could apply new knowledge to a real task learn from the experience, and gradually become more confident in managing their own work. The experience showed that **capacity development is most effective when learning is accompanied by a real opportunity to apply it.** The value of the grant therefore extended beyond the activities it funded; it helped strengthen the organisation itself and the capacity it could carry into future work.



Members of the Smriti Tole Committee showing a poster of the street drama they conducted

LEARNING

Small grants can be powerful organisational development tools. When combined with technical support and mentoring, they give grassroots organisations the opportunity to build practical systems, confidence, and leadership capacity while delivering work that matters to their communities. In this way, a relatively small financial investment can strengthen the organisation that remains after the project ends.

2 The Grants Helped Emerging Women-Led Organizations Find Their Voice

For newer and women-led organisations, the sub-grants offered something more than financial support —they created an opportunity **to build confidence, demonstrate what they could do, and establish their place within the community.**

Nawa Jagaran Tole Bikash Sanstha, established in 2022, initially focused on helping resolve domestic disputes within the community. Members faced scepticism when they began raising issues around women's rights and gender equality, while some had limited literacy and little experience engaging with government structures. Through GTSN sessions and training on safeguarding, financial management, reporting, and Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI), members gradually strengthened both their knowledge and confidence. As they gained experience, they also became more visible. Members began engaging with ward offices, participating in local discussions, and contributing to planning processes. What started as a relatively new community group gradually became more confident in speaking about issues affecting women and families and more comfortable engaging with local decision-makers. The experience suggests that technical capacity and confidence reinforce each other. As members gained practical skills and opportunities to use them, they became more willing to speak up, engage with institutions, and take on a more active role in their community.

LEARNING

For emerging women-led organisations, building confidence is just as important as building technical skills. Legitimacy grows through practice when organisations are given the resources and space to lead, demonstrate what they can do, and engage directly with decision-makers.

3 Credibility Comes Through Practice

One of the most visible changes across the municipalities was the growing credibility of participating CBOs. Managing a sub-grant gave organisations an opportunity to put new skills into practice. They learned to plan and document activities, maintain financial and administrative records, prepare reports, manage budgets, and communicate their results.

As CBOs demonstrated that they could manage resources and deliver activities effectively, their relationships with local government also began to change. Several organisations reported greater recognition from ward offices and municipal authorities. Their ability to organise activities, mobilise communities, manage resources, and report on results helped build trust and created new opportunities to engage with local government.

This shift matters because organisational credibility is not built through training alone. It develops over time through experience, accountability, consistent engagement, and the ability to demonstrate results. The sub-grant provided CBOs with a practical opportunity to demonstrate these capabilities.

LEARNING

Credibility grows through practice. When local organisations are given the resources and support to deliver, demonstrate results, and engage with institutions, they are better positioned to build trust and become credible partners for government, donors, and their communities.

4 Stronger Organizations Create Stronger Communities

As CBOs strengthened, their influence extended beyond organisational development and into broader social change.

Community awareness activities, dialogues, school programmes, and informal discussions created opportunities for people to reflect on gender norms, violence, and inclusion. Participants reported increasing willingness to discuss issues that had traditionally been considered private, including domestic violence and harmful practices such as dowry. In many communities, women who had rarely participated in public discussions began taking visible leadership roles. Women-led organisations became examples of what local leadership could look like, particularly in areas where women's participation in public life remains constrained.

This growing confidence was also visible in the way community members and CBO leaders began taking initiative beyond the activities directly supported by the programme. With greater knowledge, practical experience, and confidence to engage with local authorities, CBOs were increasingly able to advocate for issues affecting their communities and mobilise resources to address them. For example, Smriti Tole Bikash Sanstha mobilised NPR 200,000 from the local government to support street dramas, while Samagra Bikash Mahila mobilised NPR 500,000 for awareness activities and family dialogues. These examples show an important shift from receiving support to actively seeking and unlocking local resources for community priorities.

Importantly, these changes were not driven by externally designed activities alone. CBOs were empowered to identify local priorities and design interventions that reflected community realities. Activities ranged from mother-in-law and daughter-in-law dialogues to youth discussions, school awareness sessions, and informal tea-talk gatherings. This flexibility encouraged ownership, relevance, and innovation.

LEARNING

Social norm change is strongest when communities lead it themselves. Local organisations are often best placed to understand which conversations need to happen, in which spaces, who needs to be engaged, and how change can be encouraged in culturally relevant ways. Investing in local organisations means more than building skills; it means giving communities the opportunity to lead, mobilise resources, and sustain change.

5 Grassroots Organizations Are Essential for Sustainable Change

Perhaps the most important lesson from the sub-grant experience is the value of investing in local leadership. The 22 CBOs supported through the sub-grant mechanism reached 7,538 people, including 214 persons with disabilities and significant participation from historically marginalised Terai Madhesi OBC and Dalit communities. More importantly, the experience created opportunities for organisations to strengthen their systems, build confidence, engage with local government, and take greater ownership of issues affecting their communities.

There are clear signs that this capacity extended beyond the original grant. Smriti Tole Bikash Sanstha, for example, subsequently mobilised NPR 200,000 from local government to support street dramas, while Samagra Bikash Mahila mobilised NPR 500,000 for awareness activities and family dialogues. Other CBOs also initiated activities independently, including child marriage prevention and GBV referrals. Maa Bhagawati Mahila Samuha, for instance, referred cases to the One-Stop Crisis Management Centre (OCMC), while Nawajagaran Tole Bikas Sanstha initiated anti-child marriage activities independently. The strengthened relationships with local government were another important outcome. CBOs were increasingly recognised as stakeholders on GBV and invited to participate in planning forums.

One Smriti Tole Bikash Sanstha member described the change directly: “Before receiving the sub-grant… our Tole Bikash Sanstha was in the bag only. Now LG invites us in programs related to GBV prevention.”

The experience also shows that local organisations can contribute beyond the specific activities for which they initially received support. In Simraungadh, for example, Minthila Sarathi Samaj provided technical support for the development of the municipality’s GEDSI policy, which was subsequently endorsed by the municipality and accompanied by a budget allocation for implementation. Seven CSOs/CBOs also jointly organised a GBV awareness conference, while several organisations developed their own policies and community initiatives.

These examples suggest that the value of a small grant is not limited to the activities it directly finances. When organisations have an opportunity to practise managing resources, engage with institutions, and demonstrate what they can contribute, they can build relationships and capabilities that support further action. The evidence does not mean that every CBO will sustain the same level of activity after funding ends, but it does show encouraging signs of greater ownership, institutional confidence, and local mobilisation.

LEARNING

Local organisations are part of the long-term infrastructure for change. Investing in their capacity, confidence, and leadership can strengthen communities’ ability to respond to challenges and sustain locally led action beyond a project’s lifetime. Small, flexible investments can create lasting value when they give grassroots organisations the opportunity to practise, demonstrate results, build relationships, and mobilise resources of their own.

LOOKING FORWARD

The SJP sub-grant initiative demonstrates the value of investing in community agency as a pathway to sustainable social change. By strengthening the knowledge, skills, resources, and leadership of 22 community-based organisations (CBOs), the programme enabled local actors to become catalysts for gender equality, GBV prevention, and social inclusion.

The experience provides encouraging evidence for Output 3's theory of change: stronger community agency can support sustained social norms diffusion and community-led action. Beyond implementing planned activities, CBOs strengthened their organisational capacity, built confidence, mobilised resources, engaged local governments, and created opportunities for communities to discuss and address gender inequality and GBV.

Through activities such as street dramas, family dialogues, youth engagement, school initiatives, and informal community discussions, CBOs extended programme messages beyond GTSN sessions into everyday community life. Examples of organisations continuing activities and mobilising local support beyond direct programme funding suggest growing ownership and community leadership.

While this experience alone cannot confirm broader social norm change, it highlights important steps along the Output 3 pathway: investment in local organisations strengthened capacity and confidence; stronger CBOs created more opportunities for community-led action; and these efforts helped spread positive norms beyond direct programme participants.

The strongest legacy of the sub-grant initiative is not the number of activities delivered, but the emergence of stronger, more confident local organisations that will continue advancing equality, inclusion, and justice long after the programme ends. The key lesson is clear: sustained social norm change requires more than awareness raising. Communities need the skills, resources, confidence, and space to lead.

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