From USAID-DEF Biweekly meetings, both of the teams came to an understanding, it was also important for everyone one of us to get familiarised with the work being done by the Digital Sarthaks and District Coordinators on field.

To address the same, DEF team first conducted a meeting with District Coordinators (DCs) followed by meetings with Digital Sarthaks (DSs) of 10 districts. One DC meeting and 10 Digital Sarthak meetings helped in realising the challenges faced by the team and also addressing various queries arising from the field.

The conversations with the Digital Sarthaks helped in realising that the identification of 100 Women Entrepreneurs is one of the biggest challenges and DS were working at their full potential in identifying the right person for the program.
In order to identify committed and interested women entrepreneurs, along with going door-to-door and market places, Digital Sarthaks leveraged their previous experience as well as contacts at the village level while identifying women entrepreneurs. One of the good leads in identifying the working women entrepreneurs was reaching out to the women entrepreneurs who are a part of SHGs. Identified Women Entrepreneurs are largely in handicrafts, dairy business, retail shops, vegetable shops, poultry, goat rearing and others.

Coming to the challenges, interactions with the Digital Sarthaks helped the whole team to come a common understanding of the progress of the program. Many challenges weren't anticipated at the first instance, it is only after the Digital Sarthaks went on to the field and challenges started emerging. Following are the challenges which were discussed in depth and a lot clarities were brought in during the discussion.
Challenge 1: Non-availability of smartphone and no ownership of the smartphone

Here we are highlighting the most prominent and common challenges faced by the DSs while identifying women entrepreneurs. DSs are able to identify women entrepreneurs but to find one with access to smartphones is a difficult task. As the curriculum focuses on enabling the Women Entrepreneurs to build their digital resilience through the advantages of smartphones, it is essential for them to have access to smartphones when it comes to attending the training sessions conducted by DSs. Here one can draw a generalisation when it comes to women having access to smartphones that women would be the last member in the household to own a smartphone. Similar is in the case of many women entrepreneurs. Family members, mostly the husband or their children, may have access to a smartphone.

Possible Solution

So, it has been instructed to the DSs while identifying women entrepreneurs, they would be ensuring that WEs have access to a smartphone if not an owned smartphone for herself. Addressing this challenge at the earliest will help us in creating a network of robust 10,000 WEs who will make the most out of the one-year training program.
Challenge 2: Common understanding of the vocabulary among the various stakeholders

Even though an orientation has been done for the DCs and DCs have done the same for the DSs, there’s a high tendency of a different interpretation of the vocabularies by different people. During the meetings, we understood that Women Entrepreneurs interpretation from the perspective of DC, DS and that of Delhi office team were slightly different. The meeting helped in making the DC, as well as the DS, understand the differences between a job and an enterprise.

Possible Solution

There were multiple queries among the DS regarding who is a Women Entrepreneur and who is not and the meetings helped in bringing better clarity and common understandings among all the stakeholders involved in this program.

Challenge 3: Demographical characteristics of a particular region

The districts identified for the project have their own characteristics which directly has an effect on the identification of Women Entrepreneurs for the program. If we consider the districts of Barmer from Rajasthan and Barabanki from Uttar Pradesh, both are culturally and traditionally famous for woven products and women are the key player in the manufacturing of it.
If we consider the Nuh district in Haryana, the literacy rate is one among the lowest in India and when it comes to women it is even lesser. At such places, identifying women entrepreneur with some basic understanding of digital technology or smartphone becomes a challenge. The remoteness of the location creates a technical barrier of access to a stable mobile network. Districts such as Khunti and Ramgarh are having some technical barrier when it comes to connecting online. As the training will opt for both offline and online medium, a strategy has to be brought in place to conduct meetings with such a challenge. The remoteness of location may also lead to communication barrier and distrust when it comes to DSs reaching out to women from such a region.

**Possible Solution:**
Khunti district had a challenge of remoteness and communicating with tribal rural communities and which also has some presence of Naxalism. But the district coordinator identified belongs from the same region and has been working in the community for past 7-8 years. Sarita Devi, the coordinator for Khunti district helped us to tackle this challenge and she identified 10 youth Digital Sarthaks from the district and further, they could identify the women entrepreneurs.

The varying demographical characteristics will have an effect on the pace of the implementation of the project at the different districts. Central will be addressing the region-specific challenges and ensure that it won't be affecting the program deliverables.
Challenge 4: No access of laptops to the Digital Sarthaks affecting the documentation process

One critical challenge faced by the District Coordinators is the documentation. Even if the Digital Sarthaks are capable of working on laptops and work on Microsoft Excel or Word but many do not have their own devices. This transfers the work of documentation towards the DC and adds a little delay in completion of reporting and sending the required documents to the head office in Delhi.

Possible Solution:
To address this issue, Digital Sarthaks have been encouraged to visit the nearest Centres established by DEF where they can complete the documentation by themselves.

Challenge 5: Radius of location of Woman Entrepreneurs from the perspective of conducting trainings

Each DS has a responsibility to conduct training to 100 WEs. And most of the time, a single village may not help in identifying 100 WEs.

At such a situation, DS have opted to move out of the village and find the WEs. This leads to a challenge of managing the training sessions to WEs. The DS will have to schedule and plan the trainings sessions accordingly. DS may have to travel to different places for conducting a training module.
Possible Solution: A pre-requisite of radius not more than 5kms was set so that reaching out to Women Entrepreneurs should be within the limits.

Challenge 6: Fear of dropouts
Many of the DSs came with the question of how the program will proceed in case of WEs dropping out. Over here, there was a good discussion where the focus was on prevention rather than cure.

Possible Solution
Prevention to this is to brief the Women Entrepreneurs explaining the benefits and commitment towards the program. And the only cure is to identify new WEs and training has to be restarted from first module.

Few of the parameters considered for this were:

1. Interest among the WE in learning the digital technology
2. Access to smartphones at home
3. Basic understanding of the digital literacy
4. Proximity of WE and DS location

Contact Details
Sujith Ail
8097645018
sujith@defindia.org