



### How Clusters are Bringing Individuals and Network Together in the Fight against COVID-19

The topic of nearly every conversation right now is centered around COVID-19, and rightfully so. The coronavirus pandemic is already changing life as we know it. However, COVID-19 has also shown the need to build strong, relational networks. The Essential and Aromatic Oils cluster of Indian Micro Enterprises Development Foundation (IMEDF) in Churachandpur, Manipur runs an orphanage with over 150 children. The IMEDF is a special purpose vehicle of the Development Alternatives (DA) Group that accelerates the development of micro enterprises at scale. IMEDF is the Nodal Agency (NA) for the SFURTI programme empaneled with the Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises.

With the imposition of nationwide lockdown, the orphanage soon started facing the issue of unavailability of ration to provide for the children. DA contacted its networks and the Assam Rifles, the oldest paramilitary force of India, stepped up to provide relief on 22 April 2020. In just two days more than 1200 Kgs of ration were made available by the military unit to the orphanage. Troops and Battalions of Assam Rifles have been continuously working to assist locals by supplying essential food items, ration, masks, hand sanitisers and is also informing the general public against the COVID-19 pandemic. Collaborative efforts and joint action of the Churachandpur cluster and Assam Rifles have transformed the scenario at the orphanage in these testing times, making us believe again in the power of bringing about change through cooperation and collectiveness.

Another important story from the clusters comes from the Heggodu village in Karnataka, which is home to 380 households. It is located in Sagara Block, famous for the Charaka Natural Dye Cluster of DESI Trust, IMEDF, and Ministry of MSME. The cluster deals with producing designer ladies, men's and kids wear from natural dyes. The waste coming out of the process is also used for making Quilt Covers and sold through retail outlets across India.

Anita – the sole breadwinner for her family of five and a ‘warrior’ in times of COVID-19, has been making masks with the Charaka cluster.

Anita and her younger sister have been working with the cluster since it started in 2018. While she works with the tailoring unit, her younger sister supports other sampling units. Their younger brother is a daily wage labourer and the mother helps with casual work in the fields around Heggodu. With the lockdown, their work has stopped. Anita and her sister were still receiving their salary, but it wasn’t enough to provide for a family of five for two months.

Then she saw a post by DESI Trust on Facebook, which was promoting the work Anita and her fellow colleagues have been doing in tailoring. She continued swiping her phone that night, not thinking much of it or the next few days. With no routine, their day revolved around household chores, and occasional chit chats with their neighbours.

On 17 April 2020, her supervisor, Padmashri came to visit her with a hope in her voice. She told Anita that they have received a bulk order for making masks at the Cluster and asked her to join in.

Anita jumped at the opportunity and since then has been making masks day in and out. She has been able to make an additional income of INR 5000 for her family. The slow hum of Anita’s sewing machine is a reminder of near normalcy in village Heggodu, even in times of a pandemic.

