

ActionAid India — 15 Million People, 362 Districts, One Rights-Based Argument

In Bhubaneswar in 2024, ActionAid India convened a National Consultation on Tribal Empowerment. Voices from tribal communities across Odisha and neighbouring states filled the room. The consultation laid down an agenda — not ActionAid's agenda, but an agenda that communities them...

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This is how ActionAid works. They do not deliver services to communities. They work alongside communities in their struggle to claim rights that already exist but are not yet being delivered. The distinction sounds philosophical but produces different programmes: a service delivery NGO asks "what do communities need?" A rights-based organisation asks "what are communities entitled to, and why aren't they getting it?"

ActionAid Association has been asking the second question in India since 1972.

Who They Are

ActionAid India — registered as ActionAid Association India in 2006 — works in 24 states and two union territories. They reach over 15 million people across 362 districts through partnerships with more than 700 grassroots organisations and movements. Their constituency: Dalits, Tribals, DNTs, Muslims, the urban poor, people living with HIV/AIDS, small-scale farmers, fisher communities, people affected by disasters, and persons with disability — with particular focus on the most marginalised among them, including women and children.

The 2024-25 Annual Report documents: leadership building for more than 27,000 Human Rights Defenders across the country; social security and welfare linkages for thousands of informal workers; land and housing rights secured for Dalit and tribal families; pension and food entitlement access for excluded households.

The Rights-Based Distinction in Practice

ActionAid's transition from a "service-based" to a "rights-based" organisation — completed by the mid-2000s — produced a specific kind of programme design. Rather than building water systems, they advocate for communities to claim their entitlement under Jal Jeevan Mission.

Rather than running schools, they ensure out-of-school children are enrolled under the Right to Education Act. Rather than providing food, they help families access their legal entitlement under the National Food Security Act.

This approach has a specific strength: when ActionAid's programme ends, the rights remain. A toilet built by a development programme disappears when the project closes. A family that has been helped to access its MGNREGS entitlement continues receiving wages after the programme ends.

The Annual Report 2023-24 documents 11,000 workers participating in 13 workers' conclaves across India — events where informal workers articulate their rights and coordinate advocacy with policymakers. The MGNREGS Workers' Conclave in Raisen, the Nirmaan Mazdoor Mahapanchayat in Delhi, the Women Workers' Conclaves in Parbhani and Indore — these are not service delivery events. They are civic power-building events.

The Odisha Tribal Consultation

The National Consultation on Tribal Empowerment held in Bhubaneswar is specifically documented on ActionAid's website — signalling that Odisha is an active programme geography. With headquarters in New Delhi, Bhubaneswar, Vadodara, Mumbai, Secunderabad, Bhopal, Bangalore, Kolkata, Patna, Chennai, Lucknow, Guwahati, Jaipur, and Budgam, ActionAid's network covers the country comprehensively.

For Odisha NGOs: ActionAid's Bhubaneswar office is a direct partnership resource. Their work on tribal rights, Dalit rights, women's economic security, and disaster response in Odisha has established community relationships and government relationships that new organisations typically cannot build quickly. The tribal consultation agenda that emerged from the Bhubaneswar convening sets priorities that any Odisha NGO working in tribal districts would recognise.

The Fisherfolk and Workers' Organisation

ActionAid's engagement with fisherfolk across 7 districts of Bihar and the formation of FPOs (Farmer Producer Organisations) in Medinipur, West Bengal — beginning with 36 shareholders in May 2023 and growing to 394 — documents their capacity to build economic collectives alongside rights advocacy. The Medinipur Fisherfolk FPO is a model for how rights-based organisations can extend into livelihoods work when communities identify economic organisation as a rights strategy.

For Odisha NGOs working with coastal and inland fishing communities: ActionAid's fisherfolk FPO model, combined with their rights-based framework for fisheries governance, is directly relevant to Chilika lake fisherfolk organisations, coastal fishing communities in Kendrapara and Balasore, and inland fisherfolk in Subarnapur.

The Disaster Response Framework

ActionAid's disaster response work — documented in Kerala for the 2024-25 period with school and home repair following severe weather — reflects their longer-term disaster resilience approach: building community organisations before disasters that are capable of leading recovery after disasters. The organisation believes that the best disaster response is done by communities for communities, with NGOs in a supporting rather than leading role.

For Odisha's cyclone-exposed coastal NGOs: the ActionAid disaster resilience model — women's groups, community-led damage assessment, entitlement access during recovery — is the most relevant alternative to dependency-creating external disaster response.

Contact and Further Reading

Website: actionaidindia.org | **Bhubaneswar Office:** listed on website | Annual Report 2024-25 available

Key evidence:

- ActionAid Annual Report 2024-25: 27,000 Human Rights Defenders, Kerala disaster response
- Give.do ActionAid profile: 15 million people, 362 districts, 700+ grassroots organisations
- ActionAid Annual Report 2023-24: 11,000 workers in 13 conclaves, fisherfolk FPO documentation
- ActionAid website: National Tribal Consultation Bhubaneswar documentation

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