

# SOME DIMENSIONS OF WORKING OF A NON GOVERNMENT ORGANISATION IN MAHARASHTRA

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*This paper delineates how non governmental efforts can contribute to poverty alleviation in remote rural areas by drawing on the specific experience of an NGO.*

## INTRODUCTION

Our country has just completed 50 years of independence. During this period one of the main objectives was planned development. Over the years, it was realised that poverty alleviation is an important facet of development process. Therefore, specific attention was given to chalk out and implement various programmes for poverty alleviation. Different strategies were contemplated for the purpose — one among them being to encourage the efforts and activities of voluntary agencies, popularly known as Non-Government Organisations (NGOs). Performance of the NGOs has been viewed as quite a purposeful intervention in the socio-economic dynamics associated with the rural poor. The paper covers some of the dimensions of the functioning of an NGO in the state of Maharashtra. It is exclusively working for the poor and socially backward villagers living in very difficult conditions.

The origin of the NGO under study could be traced to the Graduate Voluntary Scheme (GVS) initiated by the University of Bombay in the year 1973. It was an innovative experiment wherein selected graduate students were expected to organise the rural poor (for their all-round development) by

staying among them for two years. The scheme was in operation from 1973 to 1978 and 50 students participated in it. Some of them were quite inspired and self-motivated to continue their activities on their own on a long term basis.

## THE BEGINNING

One of the volunteers of GVS was highly committed and convinced about the need to work with the rural poor on a sustained way with a long term perspective. He himself belonged to a socially and economically backward community. He initiated the work in 1977 in and around his native place in the backward pocket of the Western Ghats in Maharashtra. As a first step, he commenced with the sole objective of uplifting members of the community to which he belonged by forming their organisation. He succeeded in motivating two educated youngsters from his community to join him. Team approach (which is acclaimed quality of good leadership) was adopted since inception. In a way, it has sown the seed of creating a second line in command right since the inception itself. Subsequently, in 1980, formally they launched the NGO with GVS worker as the Chairman and a trust was registered.

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To begin with, there was no definite plan of action as such before the NGO in the initial years. Instead, it spent the first year in establishing rapport with the villagers and understanding their problems. This was extremely necessary "to break the ice" and ensure meaningful participatory process of 'development'. In other words, developing intimate feel about the operational area and its people — environmental scanning — and thereby creating a base for future course of action was perceived as a strategy.

### **EDUCATION : THE INITIAL FOCUS**

The beginning was made with 'education' as (i) the state of art of the educational institutions in the area was quite deplorable and (ii) it was considered as a basic prerequisite for improving socio-economic conditions. At this stage, brainstorming (as to which aspect of 'education' could be taken up on a priority basis) led to formulation of a scheme for establishing a hostel for selected boys and girls. This, it was thought, would give them wider understanding and also prepare some of them as change agents. This would also help students to look beyond their domestic life and get some exposure to outside world.

It is important to realise that through the means of hostel activity the trust has shown an inclination to attach greater significance to creating a cadre of selfless, socially conscious youth to service the village community rather than just focussing on formal school curriculum. Also equally vital it is to note that in terms of priority, it was preferred to any other activity aiming at direct economic upliftment of the poor.

Needless to state, running the hostel was not free from teething troubles. Stress and strain was witnessed, though the results were encouraging. This experience enhanced the trust's understanding of the

environment and it started thinking towards undertaking a more comprehensive programme encompassing economic, social and medical fields to cover a larger segment of the population. This, it strongly felt, would not become a reality without active involvement of motivated and trained local youth. Therefore, in 1979-80, 60 local youngsters from 30 villages were trained who would be able to hold meetings of villagers, study their problems, formulate socio-economic activities and ensure effective participation of the people. Two aspects need to be highlighted in this context. First, the faith of the trust that without a strong cadre base, work of this nature cannot be undertaken and, therefore, committed grassroot cadre should be developed beforehand. Second, faith of the trust in training as a tool to create dedicated and motivated social workers.

### **DAIRY**

Organising dairy activity was taken up thereafter. Marketing of milk was a major hurdle, though other factors were favourable for conduct of dairy business. However, a survey was undertaken beforehand to work out potential for milk collection. Cost-benefit analysis was made particularly taking into consideration the difficult mountainous terrain and lack of transport facilities. Despite a large number of problems, particularly in the beginning, dairy activity was successfully organised and efficiently operationalised. A Dairy Cooperative Society was formed and arrangements for making of milk were made. The trust succeeded in securing benefits of Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) for the deserving farmers in the area. The concerned government officials were not enthusiastic in extending IRDP to these families due to non-availability of veterinary services and no guarantee of assured quantity of milk collection. These

issues were resolved by the trust to the satisfaction of government functionaries through the process of discussions. It also arranged for supply of cattle feed. Youngsters were trained in running the milk collection centre. Training programmes were also organised for milk producers on a continuous basis. Dairy activity has thus turned out to be a success. Improving the quality of breed, cultivation of fodder crops, and expansion of veterinary services are on the future agenda of the trust.

### **BEE KEEPING**

The Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) officials dealing with economic activities in the state were called to train the youngsters in bee keeping. Thirty six persons were trained who later on formed a co-operative organisation. Honey boxes were supplied by KVIC at concessional rates. KVIC also undertook the responsibility of supervising the activity from time to time and also looked after marketing arrangements of honey. On behalf of the trust, two youngsters exclusively attended to supervision of the activity. KVIC officials, who were enthusiastic and cooperative in the beginning, were unable to provide the promised support primarily due to inaccessibility and remoteness of the area. The group had to struggle hard to make alternative arrangements and was able to overcome the problems after a long time. This, of course, produced some adverse impact on the activity and beneficiaries. But in due course, the things were set right.

### **CANE AND BAMBOO CO-OPERATIVE**

Formation of a Cane and Bamboo Co-operative Society was also taken up. A long training programme of nine months duration was organised under the Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment (TRYSEM). This was one more instance

where the group made successful use of facilities provided under the government schemes. A batch of 45 rural youth was trained. A shed was constructed through the voluntary labour put in by the villagers. Machinery and other equipment was donated by another voluntary organisation. Quality of raw material available in the area was not superior. Hence, some raw material is required to be purchased from far-off places. This adds to the cost in terms of transportation charges. Marketing, which did not prove to be a difficulty in the initial stages, is gradually posing to become a serious issue with the saturation of local market. The government has forbidden cane cutting as the forest around the area has been declared as 'protected' and the trust is trying to negotiate with government officials to find a way out. On the whole, though this activity is going reasonably well, it is not hurdle-free and the future seems rather uncertain, particularly when raw material supply may turn out to be a serious problem.

### **LABOUR SOCIETY**

A Labour Co-operative Society was established by the trust to provide employment to villagers and ensure them better wages as also good working conditions. The society had a membership of 112 persons. The society was able to provide the services of the members to government and other project works in the vicinity. It was able to ensure fair wages to the members which they would not have been able to get otherwise. Contractors in the area, who were deprived of cheap labour in the process, began to instigate the villagers (including the Society's members) against the trust as well as the Society. The group counselled the members suitably but the contractors' efforts did affect the image and efficiency of the cooperative to some extent. The Society had to face not only

resistance and competition from the contractors but also had to suffer due to government delays and inefficiency in making payments.

### FISHING

Launching a fishing co-operative was the next venture — the first of its kind in the region. With the help of the village youth the trust conducted fishing activity for nearly four months — just to explore its feasibility. The experience proved to be quite fruitful. It led the group to firmly conclude that fishing has a potential for giving employment and income and hence the formal cooperative was thought of.

### SOCIAL ASPECTS

The group firmly believes that social development and economic development are equally vital. The youngsters working with the group were so trained to believe that these two are inseparable and in the present environment, one without the other, has no chance to succeed. All training programmes of the group laid equal emphasis on techno-economic aspects and social dimensions. The group also initiated social development programme for women which focussed on issues like child marriage, child care, health, small savings, and mahila mandals (which met regularly every month to discuss matters of their concern). Campaign against child marriage proved to be a success in terms of creating awareness and preventing a few such marriages.

### FUNDING

As for the funding required to run the show, no financial support was available either locally or from outside. Hostel — the first activity — was funded largely from contributions made by the parents. Later on, sources of funds from outside were tapped

including those from foreign countries. Government assistance through schemes like IRDP was also availed. Various societies' members pay for the services which they have utilized from the respective cooperative society. This has been the prime factor to ensure viability of all the societies. This is a noteworthy feature. It implies that voluntary efforts towards upliftment of the rural poor can acquire financial self-sufficiency if the right kind of economic activities are chosen and conducted appropriately. Of course, the gestation period involved could be quite long.

### CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Though the scope of this paper is restricted to a small region having specific and peculiar socio-economic and geographical features, general lessons can be drawn to promote further thinking. This is particularly relevant in the case of NGOs dealing with the rural poor since this segment of society has many characteristics in common. The important aspects which emerge from the study of this NGO are :

- (a) A cadre of local village youth is quite helpful towards organising the poor to come forward and take advantage of any developmental scheme. The youngsters can effectively be trained, can organise the poor, supervise their economic activity and guide them for their overall development.
- (b) The order of priority in voluntary efforts could be (i) organise the poor for a collective action; (ii) train them in technical, social and organisational matters; (iii) secure benefits from various developmental schemes; and (iv) make them self-reliant. Anti-poverty programmes should take into consideration all these factors for lasting and effective outcome.

- (c) It is essential to identify obstacles in development process before any scheme is introduced in a region.
- (d) Training of beneficiaries on a variety of relevant aspects is an absolute must. It ensures better participatory outcome
- (e) Creating second line leadership as also workforce to look after grassroots level operations is quite an imperative for long term success of any NGO.