

Redesigning the National Rural Livelihood Mission to benefit Marginalized Rural Poor particularly Dalit and Tribal Women

Introduction

The Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) scheme was designed to promote self employment oriented income generating activities for Below Poverty Line households in rural areas. The main thrust of the programme was to organize SHGs of women to overcome financial, market and technical constraints that individuals faced. Micro enterprises taken up by SHG groups (75% women and 25% men) was the main intervention planned to increase incomes. In addition, 15% of the total SGSY allocation is earmarked for special SGSY projects in the nature of pioneer/innovative projects capable of triggering growth impulses. Several evaluation studies have highlighted following weaknesses in the existing programme.

Weaknesses of the SGSY

Programme evaluations have pointed out a number of gaps and weaknesses. These are uneven spread of SHGs, attrition rate, issues concerning access to credit, lack of the capacity building and training, lack of SHGs federations at various levels, inadequate risk mitigation, inadequate dedicated implementation structure, lack of convergence, lack of grievance redressal mechanism, and lack of transparency and accountability. While 75% of the SHG groups are women's groups and the programme is seen to “empower” women, the programme does not take into account the gender inequalities in society which disadvantage women in their ability to earn incomes.

One of the main weaknesses of the programme is its design. While the programme is meant for rural communities and BPL families an investment of Rs 25,000 is expected to generate an income of Rs. 2000 per month. Financially, given the constraints in rural India and denial of women's basic rights this is a near impossible task. While a few spectacular case studies show otherwise it is found that a large number of SHG groups become defunct after bank linkages are established.

New Proposals which take into account Gender Issues

It is proposed that the NRLM should not set only cash economic indicator (increase income by Rs. 2000 per month) to bring households out of poverty but to ensure the overall well being of the family. Well known economists such as Jeffrey Sachs have pleaded that it is important to invest in health and other capacity building initiatives to ensure poverty eradication on a sustainable basis.

It is well known that the root cause of poverty for both men and women in developing societies is the entrenched traditional structures such as class, caste and gender hierarchies, ethnic and religious discrimination and unequal land distribution. As noted by Ch. Srinivas and S Abdul Thaha (A study on Alternative Public Distribution System, 2004) “All these add up to lack of access to economic resources and lack of power on the part of the masses which limits their ability to take control of their lives and improve their well-being. Women however are much more affected in these societies because of gender-specific causes, which stem from patriarchal kinship system. These traditional cultural forces impact women in many ways.

- Firstly, due to their impact, most women have less direct independent access than men to capital, property, market and extension services (while SGSY scheme addressed this project “leakages” highlight women's vulnerabilities)
- Secondly, many women have limited geographical mobility, economic independence, or personal autonomy, and as a result remain economically dependent on male kin
- Finally, because of their perceived liabilities and their limited bargaining power, women and girls often receive less health care, education and training than men and boys” (Affecting their productivity)

The Deccan Development Society has utilized the SGSY special stream to set up food sovereignty programme (promoting household food security) with women’s leadership in Medak district, Andhra Pradesh. Working in 30 villages they have promoted

employment generation and food security to address environmental issues, health, and conserve biodiversity under women's leadership. Since the NRLM programme is to be implemented in rural areas, it is proposed that we upscale demonstrated innovations which highlight the potential for creating employment, food security, increased incomes by increasing productivity of land, and set in place institutional structures which can lead to poverty eradication over a reasonable period of time.

Utilizing SGSY funds, DDS has supported mahila sanghas to set up an Alternative PDS in 30 villages. Currently each village has a grain bank and emergency food is also provided to extremely vulnerable persons in the village. An evaluation of 11 villages where the programme is implemented has highlighted that it created 31,000 days of employment in a single farming season. Most employment supported local skills, like bullock ploughing, weeding, threshing, basket making etc. 55% of the employment days generated were for women. Women increased household income by increased productivity, better health and less expenditure on health costs.

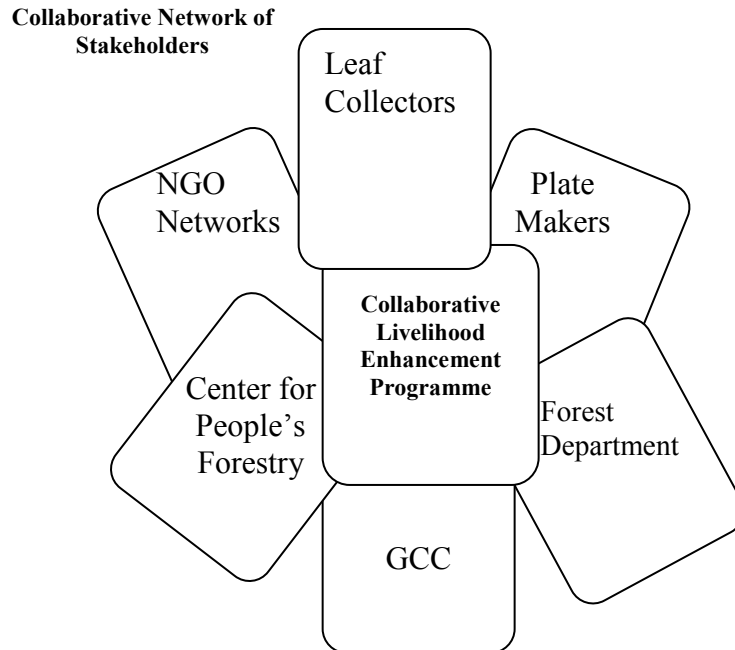
The DDS:

- Organized groups of women to regenerate their own fallow lands (100 families divided into five groups)
- Ploughing and cultivating fallows
- Emphasized growing food crops
- Regenerated land by farm yard manure
- Vermi-composting
- Soil and moisture conservation
- Emphasized bio-diversity, 89 – food crops grown
- Identified poor in the village and ensured alternative public distribution system

The programme has proven to be sustainable with large numbers of additional villages copying the scheme. The groups have moved on from food production to setting up small scale units for food processing and marketing.

Increasing incomes through Enhanced Forest Produce

NGOs working to promote livelihoods based on minor forest produce collection have highlighted the enormous potential to address poverty through NTFP collection, processing and marketing. The Center for People's Forestry has taken several initiatives to improve incomes of tribal communities in collaboration with the Forest Department, and the GCC. A number of issues need to be addressed to ensure higher rates of return and better incomes from NTFPs. The study, "Non – Timber Forest Products and Forest Governance", synthesized by Sushil Saigal, Forest Governance Learning Group – India, 2008 has identified a number of overarching issues to increase value addition and the need for holistic planning along the supply chain. To sustain the incomes at higher levels, policy issues need to be addressed such as the need to prioritize artisans, improve capacity of PRI institutions where control over NTFPs has been transferred to the PRIs etc. Tribal women are mainly involved in gathering of a variety of NTFPs such as bamboo, tendu leaves, Mahua flowers, Tamarind fruit, Sal seeds etc. In the case of Adda leaves and value addition for leaf plate making efforts by NGOs have led to increased income of Rs. 800 to 1000 per month. This appears to be a reasonable increase in income in rural areas with low level of investment. However to make this possible a collaborative network of stakeholders needs to be put in place.



Source: Turning a New Leaf
CPF, AP Forest Department, and Girijana Cooperative Corporation, 2008

Unless such a collaborative frame is used it is extremely difficult for BPL families to rise above poverty.

Creating Employment and Regenerating Lands and Incomes

Another major initiative to improve poverty conditions and enhance incomes has been taken by the Ananta Paryavarana Parirakshana Samithi (APPS), a network supported by Center for World Solidarity and Oxfam. This network has demonstrated how communities can improve the productivity of commons and increase incomes by creating access to fuel wood, fodder, and fruit trees which meet gendered needs. Since the Department of Land Resources has notified 68.35 million hectares in the country as waste lands, there is huge potential to increase the incomes of rural poor particularly women. The programme with a network of NGOs in Ananthapur has directly reached out to 21,262 members (12,527 women and 8505 men). The programme is community managed with women playing a significant role. With this as a background the network has now organized 117 labor groups covering 13 gram panchayats to access the NREGP. They have undertaken drought proofing work in 13 panchayats and created 278,289 work days with an income of 25,254,000 for 6,162 households last year.

Recommendations

The above examples are provided to highlight that the NRLM should broaden its focus. The SHG formation and access to credit should not be seen as the only means to increase incomes. Throughout the country Civil Society Organizations have demonstrated that it is possible to increase rural incomes for men and women. For the NRLM to be successful, it should take up activities:

- Based on available natural resources
- Strengthen groups through capacity building. This should not be done by the government setting up training institutions at the state level. Rather efforts should be made to work with existing NGOs or set up training institutions at the sub district level.
- The current objective of the programme to enhance incomes by Rs. 2000 per family in rural areas is unrealistic if incomes are determined only as cash earnings.
- Efforts must be made in the programme to meet women's gendered needs to collect firewood, fodder, NTFPs etc which hold economic value.
- Since the country has a large number of working poor we need to address improvements in income without demanding too many additional hours of work.

Concerns of the Women's Movement

The women's movement in the country has been watching the growth of SHGs with concern since indicators for success are almost entirely based on financial dimensions. It is important in the process of development that the objective of gender equity is also met (Consultation process by Nirantar). The movement has suggested that success indicators take into account

- Expenses on self – food, clothes, health and reading material
- Improvement in nutritional status
- Mobility
- Ability to articulate views and communicate
- Understanding of gender, class, caste, religion etc

- Bodily integrity including but not limited to control over fertility
- Access to media and technology

Enhancing livelihoods should take into account:

- Enhanced access to credit
- Affordable rates of interest
- Non coercive methods of recovery
- Reduced dependence on money lender
- Increase in ‘income’ (where this is an objective)
- Reduced ‘distress migration’
- Viability of enterprise
- Process of selection – mapping possibilities including natural resource based, value addition in existing livelihoods, services (not only production of new products)
- Backward and forward linkages
- Remuneration for labor of SHG members in government schemes
- Awareness and action related to minimum wages and equal wages
- Ability to negotiate with NGOs, banks and MFIs regarding terms of credit
- Food security

For Poorest of the poor

- Ownership of assets – including common property resources
- Focus on grants for survival needs, not credit
- Highly subsidized interest rates

To ensure sustainable poverty eradication it is clear that a multidimensional approach is necessary to increase incomes as well as overall wellbeing.

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