

SMART

JOURNAL OF BUSINESS MANAGEMENT STUDIES

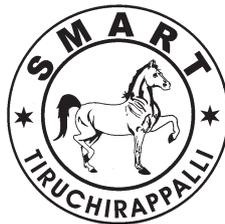
Vol.I

No. 2

July - December 2005

ISSN 0973 - 1598

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Chief Editor



SCIENTIFIC MANAGEMENT AND ADVANCED RESEARCH TRUST
(SMART)

TIRUCHIRAPPALLI (INDIA)

<http://www.geocities.com/smartbard>

POSITIVE AND SYNERGETIC ROLE IN EMPOWERING RURAL SHGs (A CASE STUDY OF SHARE)

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Abstract

Almost 30% of our population live below the poverty line. Poverty certainly means a deprivation of the basic needs for survival: nutrition, clothing, housing, medical care, education, information, and work. But it also means lack of access to financial and technical resources as well as severe limitations on participation in social and political life, in decision-making processes. More than two thirds of the Indian population live in rural areas where poverty tends to be endemic. Acting in its sphere of influence, SHARE (NGO) is particularly aimed at the poor inhabiting the countryside. Therefore, this case study attempts to know the positive and synergetic role in empowering rural SHGs through SHARE.

Introduction

Self Help Association for Rural Education, commonly referred to as SHARE, is a non-profit, non-governmental, and secular organization founded and run by community women independently since 1992. This NGO is involved in integrated development aiming at the empowerment of women in the rural areas of Vellore District, Tamil Nadu, India. Its main field of action is income generation as a corollary to broader social change. SHARE is based on the belief that development is intimately linked to the active involvement of women and communities being enabled to take all decisions concerning their lives. Poverty is a relative term. It differs from one country to another and between different regions within the same country. It also depends on individual perception and understanding of a situation. Legally SHARE can carry out its activities all over Tamil Nadu but it concentrates on three districts: Vellore, Thiruvannamalai, and Dindigul. Its work covers the Kaniyambadi, Anaicut, Vellore and Jawadh Hills. Its target areas are solely rural. Therefore SHARE viewed and addressed the issue of rural poverty in a comprehensive manner.

Issues and Challenges of Rural Women

a) Economic Issues

Landless Farmers

The main work available is agriculture but land holding is in the hands of a few. While some selected few own 50 to 100 acres of land, some possess less than 5 acres and the majority do not own any. Due to the lack of alternate occupation, the workers are at the mercy of rich landlords who pay them wages much below the minimum prescribed by the government. In practical terms they can be equated with bonded laborers.

Women Underemployment

As far as women are concerned, they work for less wages and only find seasonal employment in the fields. During other seasons, they remain either unemployed or underemployed. Although the men folk are supposed to be the main breadwinners of the rural families, only a part of their earnings ultimately reach home as they are squandered on drinking and smoking. In quite a number of homes, the money brought in by a woman is the only family income. Therefore the underemployment faced by women leads to the impoverishment of the whole family.

Life Long Debt

Poor families often do not have access to financial institutions. Therefore, loans for consumption and productive activities are almost solely available from private moneylenders who charge exorbitant interest rates. Finding no way to repay their interests and debts, they continue to be debtors for the remainder of their lives.

b) The Social Issues Education

Although all the villages have government primary schools, the rate of continuous study is very low as there are lots of drop outs among girls. Girls are expected to work either at home or in the fields to provide additional income. The same conditions do not apply to the boys for whom education seems to be a worthy investment. The average literacy level, defined as the ability to sign one's name, though not implying fluency in reading or writing, amounts to 50% overall but only 30% among women.

Health Status

Lack of drinking water, nutritional deficiencies, and prevalence of preventable illness are acute problems in the villages. The groups of the population that are the most affected are children under five years of age, women and the elderly.

Status of Women

Generally speaking, villages are male dominated. Women exercise very little and sometimes no influence at all in decision making either at home or in the community. Culturally they are viewed as inferior to men and continue to be at their mercy. Freedom to move in the village on their own, initiative, autonomy are unknown for most of them. The dowry system is on the increase and covers almost all

castes. Dowry harassment, physical as well as psychological violence seem to be the integral part of the marital relationship and alcoholism is increasingly becoming a reason for its perpetuation. Patriarchy is institutionalized. The values attached to the family system as well as the society norms prevent the women from opposing it. The ones who are single or separated are ostracized to an even greater degree, as society views them as failures in maintaining a household. Similarly, the community sanctions widows with harsh restrictions and banishment. By and large, throughout her life, a woman is defined only in relation to man: as daughter, wife, mother, and eventually widow. Self-confidence and dignity remain a distant goal. In short, woman is not regarded as an individual, a human person worthy of dignity and autonomous functioning.

c) The Political Issues Weak Representation

Despite the fact that since 1993 one third of the seats in panchayats are by law reserved for women, most of these bodies are still in the hands of men. Because of a limited access to information and lack of societal support, women do not take part in the political life of the villages. Even the women who get seat in the local governance are compelled to remain inactive due to the men's interference. Scheduled castes are generally affected in the same way.

Incidence of Poverty

The Planning Commission has been estimating the incidence of poverty at the national and state level using the methodology contained in the report of the expert group on estimation of proportion and number of poor (Lakdawala committee) and applying it to consumption expenditure data from the large sample surveys on consumer expenditure

conducted by the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) at an interval of approximately five years. The latest available large

sample survey data on consumer expenditure are for the 55th Round covering the period July 1999 to June 2000 and it is given in Table-1.1.

TABLE 1.1

Estimates of incidence of poverty in India						
YEAR	Poverty ratio(%)			Number of Poor(million)		
	Rural	Urban	Combined	Rural	Urban	Combined
1973-74	56.4	49.0	54.9	261.3	60.0	321.3
1977-78	53.1	45.2	51.3	264.3	64.6	328.9
1983	45.7	40.8	44.5	252.0	70.9	322.9
1987-88	39.1	38.2	38.9	231.9	75.2	307.1
1993-94	37.3	32.4	36.0	244.0	76.3	320.3
1999-00	27.1	23.6	26.1	193.2	67.1	260.3
2007*	21.1	15.1	19.3	170.5	49.6	220.1

*** poverty projection for 2007**
source : Tenth Five Year Plan, vol.1, planning commission

Poverty Alleviation Programmes of SHARE

Palm Leaf and Sisal Fiber Work

The initial and main thrust of SHARE's activities is socio-economic empowerment of women through income generation activities. The primary craft at SHARE is palm leaf and sisal fiber work, which is exported and sold through international agencies, mainly to Alternate Trade Organizations (ATO). Multipurpose baskets and Christmas decorations are in great demand. This programme is open to any woman of the target area above the age of 18. There is a craft center in each village where the craftswomen can work together as well as sharing with each other. But women also have the possibility to work at home if they need to. As they are paid by piece-rate, the average wages depend on the efficiency, speed, and skill perfection of each worker.

Skill Development Training

SHARE organizes skill development training like craft design workshops, and design competition to improve the skills and

foster creativity among its members. To avoid total dependency on export market orders, SHARE members have always been anxious to diversify their income generation projects. A couple of women were trained in handloom and woollen carpet weaving, producing lungis or handkerchiefs, which are in demand locally. With a view to helping the non-craft individuals and families to raise their living standards, SHARE started in 1997 a dairy programme with the support of the Presbyterian church- sponsored anti hunger program. Beneficiaries, who belong to the socially and economically underprivileged sections of the population, are given one milching cow as an income generation asset. The milk provides them with a regular monthly income and initiates the process of economic independence and empowerment of women. While the family owns the cow, they have to give the female calf back to SHARE to benefit new families. This passing the gift scheme ensures the growth and self-sustainability of the programme.

Self Help Groups (SHGs)

SHARE - INITIATING THOUGHT PROCESS

The beginning of self-help groups emerged from the willingness among SHARE members to reach more needy people including non-craft persons. Several years of experience have given them the knowledge that for individuals, families and communities to prosper, one has to combat the prevalent lack of awareness. The women around them in abject poverty do not realize the reasons for their situation and therefore they do not make any attempts to overcome it. They needed a force to help them from problem identification to all other steps of development. In 1995, members of SHARE felt that they could help them by bringing them together into groups. The methodology adopted in the formation of SHGs was one of education, motivation, and voluntary action. Education programmes were organized first for the executive and chief functionaries of SHARE, secondly for the animators working under the programme, and finally, for the village women concerned. This includes expansion and discussions on the concept, principles, functioning, roles, and responsibilities of self-help groups. Leaders of the groups attended leadership and management training as well.

Present Scenario of "SHARE" SHGs

Groups formed	: 230
Total members	: 3871
Total habitation	: 91
Savings amount	: Rs.47,83,237
Loan given amount	: Rs.3,64,69,000
No. of loan given	: 13,341
Revolving fund given	: 80

No. of credit given

(SGSY) : 67

Credit

(50% subsidy-SGSY) : Rs.54,80,000

Subsidy (SGSY) : Rs.27,40,000

Credit rating completed : 142 SHGs

Eligible SHGs for grading : 57 SHGs

Success of SHARE

The main reason for success of SHARE is due to the participatory approach, adequate support, openness, capacity for adaptation and financial sustainability.

Case Study

Marikozhundu

Marikozhundu is the name of one particular group. It is in Edayansathu Village. Twenty poor women joined together and formed themselves as a SHG on 21.08.1996, linked with Corporation Bank, Adukkamparai Branch, Vellore District. (A/C. No. 5061). They collected their savings and rotated their money among themselves as loan for consumption purpose. Then they realized that their savings money of more than Rs. 92,890/- could be utilized for a group activity so that they would be able to get continuous employment. They decided to go for palm leaf basket weaving under SHARE which would give a ready market. The training they got from Government scheme helped a lot to start with. An additional weeklong training was also proposed. Fortunately they were able to get a design support and orientation from CDC through SHARE. A full fledged training gave them encouragement to go for producing palm leaf, garland, baskets and beautiful decorations. When they tried to organize a group activity, they had to look for some more financial support for their venture. That was the time DRDA readily obliged to

consider their request for SGSY scheme, which provided some more confidence within them because of the sanction of Rs.75,000/- with 50% subsidy. This helped them to go ahead and start their production. Their financial problem was solved and marketing was taken care of by SHARE.

They started earning Rs.10/- to Rs.20/- per day. They wanted to earn a little more and they tried to reach at least Rs.30/- per day. Their hard work and timely motivation by SHARE brought them to receive an average of Rs.40/- to Rs.50/- per day. Now they are all very happy and remembered the timely support of CDC, SGSY. They are also very happy that their products are going to various countries in the world. The design support they got from design workshop sponsored by AHVY of DC(H), Government of India has helped them to go for need based innovative craft products suitable to export market. It is hoped that they would be able to increase their income through crafts in the near future.

The money in the hands of poor rural women made them economically independent and the money earned is being utilized for a right purpose like children education, family expenses for basic needs, to take care of their health and some for savings for their future actions. Even now they are having more savings and as a group, Rs. 9,57,000/- has been rotated as internal loan. The loan repayment from their own savings and loan taken from bank has been repaid periodically without any defaulters. Now we could see the smiling faces with self-confidence and they are getting a good response and respect not only from the family members but also from the rest of the community.

Recognition of “SHARE” Successes

Recognition at The Regional Level

SHARE made a name for itself in the area both among the grassroots level people and the local government agencies. In the local government spheres, SHARE has a well-established reputation. The government has recognized the efficient work of SHARE and has delegated to the organization the implementation of various governmental programs. Therefore SHARE has linkages with various governmental agencies. The District Rural Development Agency approached on its own this SHG to implement programs like training rural youth in self-employment, development of women and children in rural area as the record of SHARE in undertaking, implementing and managing similar programs has always been good over the years. Another sign of recognition is the fact that a SHARE woman got the opportunity of being a member in the governing body of DRDA. By and large, SHARE has built its reputation among the top-level district officials, including the Collector for being a society truly working for the development of women and children.

Recognition at The National Level

Within two years of its formation, SHARE was recognized by a central government agency. The office of the Development Commissioner, Textile Ministry of the Government of India, organized various programs like an advanced skill training program, a market meet and product promotion program as well as the exhibition for the development of SHARE.

Recognition at The International Level

Getting orders on a regular basis from different foreign trading agencies mainly ATOs like OXFAM and Traid Craft but also from commercial companies such as the Body Shop in England, is a proof that SHARE has been recognized as a reliable trading partner. But SHARE has also gained an international dimen-

sion, as some of its members have been specifically required to attend international meetings. The former secretary has participated as the only representative of India in the women entrepreneurs workshop on environmentally sound technology held at Chonguing in China in December 1997. As the craft woman, she presented a paper on natural dyes used in SHARE and took active part in different discussions. However the year 97 witnessed the major international recognition as Mrs.Rani, former secretary of SHARE, received an international award from the women's world summit foundation based in Geneva. This award is meant to recognize her creativity in rural life and SHARE's commitment towards empowerment of the rural women.

Conclusion

Rural poor are a vulnerable population who live on the brink of subsistence. The micro finance through SHARE entered their doorsteps and acted as an instrument in alleviating their poverty. In recent years, there is encouraging growth in the micro credit to micro enterprises owned and managed by rural women in the SHGs after the SHARE-model. The impact of micro finance and micro enterprises owned by SHGs are quiet significant in terms of socio-economic transformation. The incidents highlighted in this paper are clear evidence to prove that women SHGs in Vellore District, Tamil Nadu are playing a positive and synergetic role in empowering rural women in terms of their economic sustenance and inde-

pendence. Thus SHGs have been making silent revolution by addressing various socio-economic issues of rural people. The need of the hour is not only to make them more bankable with financial institutions, but also increase the level of flexibility in credit instruments that would match their multiple credit requirements.

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