

Gram Vikas - Towards a new development paradigm

The case for a new approach

The significance of the work done by non-governmental development organisations stems from the inability of the government to deliver the goods - with regard to rural poverty alleviation. It is in this space created by government apathy towards the have-nots and the inability of its large structure to respond creatively to difficult situations that have made the NGOs a force to reckon with. The importance of NGO action in the various states of India has been a well researched and documented subject. However, it remains a fact that attempted objective analyses of non-governmental action, missed the cues halfway by stressing more on the success of the sector vis-à-vis governmental non-performance, and not on any absolute parameters of evaluation.

It may be difficult to frame absolute criteria for assessing NGOs' impact in India, given the complex socio-economic and cultural backgrounds that these organisations work in. What could be used as a proxy indicator for an absolute analysis could be the influence of the sector on government policies governing the sector. The question that needs to be asked is 'how many NGOs in the country have effectively influenced policy decisions, thus making the external environment conducive for high quality development interventions?' The answer, unfortunately, may not be very encouraging. Barring a few organisations in diverse pockets getting as much to as the district or at times state administration to force a certain policy, the NGO sector as a whole in the country has not made any remarkable contributions to policy making. The reasons for this failure are not hard to come by.

How many NGOs in the country have achieved the kind of grassroots credibility that will force the government to listen to their voice? How many such organisations have reached such large numbers of people so that their collective voice is adequate to reach the corridors of power? The issue of achieving a 'Critical Mass' becomes important here. There is not a need for a debate on the importance of NGOs being able to influence government policies. It becomes increasingly important when, as a result of large scale economic liberalization, the role of the state in welfare related sphere is becoming more pronounced than earlier.

Gram Vikas

Gram Vikas has been working in Orissa since 1979. It currently reaches out to about 15,000 households in the state which has a total population of more than 32 million. It has built up for itself a name among the people with whom it works, for being a proactive, friendly organisation, which can deliver the goods. There is a question that Gram Vikas has been asking itself for some time now - "Are we doing what we are capable of doing?" Finding an answer to this question has not been a painless experience for it. True, in an organisation with the spread and diversity as that of Gram Vikas there could be multiple answers to a question. However, there seems to be a consensus on one issue - that Gram Vikas has performed sub-optimally with regard to its influence on policy making, essentially because it has not achieved the critical mass referred to earlier. After all, how does it matter if you work with less than one four-hundredth of the population of a state, that too spread over its entire breadth?

The case of minor forest produce in Orissa is a good example. Collection and sale of MFP is a major source of income for the tribal communities, who form more than 75% of Gram Vikas's target group. However, in Orissa a large number of MFPs come under direct government

regulation, with the government monopolising the trade in such goods. This policy constrains the earning capacity of the communities depending on forests as they are left at the mercy of a corrupt, apathetic government machinery. A policy of liberalizing trade in MFPs could mean increased income and employment opportunities for this section of the Gram Vikas target group. But Gram Vikas has not been able to achieve this as its bargaining capacity with the government is not high enough to produce such results.

There is also the experience of Gram Vikas with its bio-gas project. Gram Vikas undertook the bio-gas programme as an implementing agency for the Government of Orissa, with a view to popularizing bio-gas technology among the rural masses. It achieved its goal in a very big way. Using only a fraction of the funds used by the parallel government programme, Gram Vikas single handedly constructed more than 80% of all the bio-gas plants built in the state. A recent survey showed that 82% of all the bio-gas plants built by Gram Vikas were still functional. The result of this success for Gram Vikas was the voice it found in the government with respect to policy formulations related to spread of bio-gas. The government machinery began to acknowledge Gram Vikas's existence and as a result Gram Vikas was allowed to participate in the process of formulation of policy matters.

These two examples are meant to highlight the need for Gram Vikas to achieve a voice in the government and other fora where policy formulations are discussed and decided. Gram Vikas could not use the bio-gas success to obtain a better result in the MFP case, as they happen to be two different departments altogether. Its success in the bio-gas case was confined to the energy department, and did not pass to the forests department which dealt with the MFP case. Hence, the need is for a general success story, that would make the entire government machinery sit up and listen. Gram Vikas needs to achieve a threshold level of success to make this happen. The first step towards this threshold level is to think in terms a very wide reach - to reach a large proportion of the population of the state to help them make a meaningful difference to their own lives.

Presented below is the outline of a plan that would help Gram Vikas achieve this critical mass.

What is the critical mass ?

A critical mass is the minimum size required to achieve a given set of expectations. In the context of Gram Vikas' work we could define it as 1% of the total population of Orissa. We are talking about a time period of from five to ten years - around AD 2005; the population of Orissa will then be around 40 million and one percent of the population will mean 400,000, i.e., about 80,000 households. Since Gram Vikas' focus is on the poorer sections, which could broadly be defined as families living below the poverty line, it is expected that the critical mass achieved will be that of 100,000 poor households. Given the social and cultural diversity among the poor themselves, it is essential to have a fair representation of all social, ethnic and cultural groups from all geographical regions of the state in this sample. Thus we are envisaging reaching out to about 100,000 households belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled tribes and other economically backward communities from representative regions in Orissa, but especially the non-coastal tribal hinterlands.

Why is the critical mass needed ?

The need for achieving the critical mass has been enumerated in the previous paragraphs. It is essential for Gram Vikas to achieve a strong bargaining position vis-a-vis the government on

behalf of the communities it works with. It is essential for the organisation to make the external environment conducive to the work it is doing. Obstacles and constraints in the form of government regulations are plenty in Orissa. The MFP case is a good example. With the macro social and economic conditions undergoing fast and tremendous transformations, the poor of Orissa will be the ultimate losers if they are forced to continue to lead their lives governed by archaic and people-unfriendly regulations of the government. There are greater chances of influencing and ultimately getting rid of anti-poor people legislations, when pressure is mounted by a 'critical mass' of people.

How will this be achieved ?

Gram Vikas can achieve this goal by aggregating its experience over the past 20 years as a rural development organisation. The envisaged scale is probably beyond the reach of Gram Vikas alone - but is definitely possible if one accounts for the large number of organisations that Gram Vikas has supported all around Orissa. Gram Vikas has over the past years spun off a number of its interventions to become independent entities, as part of a conscious strategy. These organisations which amount to more than a hundred, share with Gram Vikas a common approach to development. Most of these organisations maintain contact with Gram Vikas and look up to it as a friend and guide. It is the combined strength of these organisations supported once again by the accumulated experience and credibility of Gram Vikas that will help achieve the goal.

So, what is the goal ?

The goal is to work with at least 100,000 households in Orissa, over the next five to ten years, to help themselves to achieve a better quality of life, with a view to developing a sustainable and replicable model of development. In other words "to empower these 100,000 households so that others can do it the same way."

By empowering we mean, to actively support these households to access resources to create for themselves a better quality of life.

By quality of life we mean -

- *assured quality education for every child of school age in the household upto the secondary level, and further if needed*
- *a sustainable source of livelihood for each household*
- *a minimum level of infrastructure both for the household and the community*
- *access to adequate health services*
- *a self reliant community*

These five components of the definition of Quality of life will be the basis for formulating the strategy to achieve the goal.

There are three integral aspects of the goal that can be discerned.

Network

The approach to achieve the goal is through the network path. It will not be a single handed show by Gram Vikas. Each of the one hundred or so partners who will form this network will have an equally important role to play in achieving the goal. In the process they will be sharing experiences and learning from each other. One of the incidental outcomes of such a programme would be a higher learning plane these organisations would achieve.

Empowerment

Empowerment of the communities is the goal that is to be achieved. On the face of it the definition of empowerment given above looks ambiguous. This may need some elaboration.

In conventional development debates, the process of empowerment is assumed to be independent of those who empower, and is considered the responsibility of those being empowered. This means that those who empower remain in an advisory role, quite detached from the actual happenings. In what is being proposed here we define a more proactive role for the empowering agents. Rather than be detached advisors, we perceive them to be active catalysts. To be a catalyst one needs to be in the middle of the action. The five components of the proposed strategy will carry forward this thinking of empowerment in its implementation.

Advocacy

Successful achievement of the goal would mean a better bargaining position for the communities and Gram Vikas vis-a-vis the government and other external agencies. It is the strong basis for undertaking advocacy for policy reform on a large scale that is the most motivating aspect of this new approach.