

Securing livelihoods through skill development

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These days, livelihood promotion is often the most pressing priority for most organisations working with the rural poor. We believe that there is no cheaper and better way of livelihood generation for the poorest people other than investing in skill training in masonry, stone dressing, wire bending, painting and plumbing. Often, livelihood activities, as promoted and practiced today, focus on the non-vulnerable or less-vulnerable poor, who possess a minimum degree of entrepreneurial ability. The micro-credit approach often focuses on providing loans and merely collecting timely repayments. Loans by themselves would never ensure the creation of sustainable livelihoods. As far as rural development interventions are concerned, it is probably far easier to disburse loans than to organize people to start productive enterprises and far more difficult to ensure that these enterprises actually give positive returns that justify their existence. Merely giving loans does not shield the poor from uncertainties and vulnerabilities, especially in a scenario where even insurance is such an under-tapped market. Even other livelihoods operations find it easy to focus on those people who are already involved in some kind of livelihood activity already, implying that they have displayed an interest and ability to take risks and deal with the marketplace.

There are sections of society, who, in the face of centuries of 'exclusion' and marginalisation, do not possess such instincts; and generally, would never qualify to receive support for an organised livelihood generation activity, and thus, are 'excluded', here as well. This merely reaffirms the perpetuation of a systemic 'exclusion' of those living at the fringes of society, who gradually internalize a feeling of being sub-human, coming to believe that it is in their fate to be 'excluded' and oppressed at every step in life. In terms of livelihood promoting initiatives, skill trainings have no such bias/limitations; they can cater to even those who have nothing, but only their physical strength to offer. Thus, while trained construction workers are important to our own projects, these skill trainings also is able to create sustainable livelihood options for the poor.

It is often found in small towns that there is an acute shortage of skilled masons. Even as slightly skilled labourers flock to big cities in search for employment, often living in crowded slums and shanties, the smaller towns and rural areas are faced with an acute shortage of good quality construction workers. We have seen many instances of enormous amounts of government money being wasted on buildings that have cracked, or worse, crashed, within months of their being constructed. There can be no excuse for such waste of public money, when with a slight degree of supervision a reasonable quality of construction can be easily maintained.

In projects that Gram Vikas has undertaken, construction of physical structures has mostly been a key component. We have observed that except for the initial drawing and design of the proposed structure, the supervision of such works is possible through the involvement of barefoot engineers (our terminology for para-engineers, who undergo a six-month training with Gram Vikas). Barefoot engineers have not only been successfully supervising trainings in masonry, but have also been able to play a role in the construction of houses and school buildings carried out by Gram Vikas. They have also proven their utility in something as diverse as setting up micro-hydroelectricity projects in hilly areas in Kalahandi district, Orissa. Training barefoot engineers and skilled masons (both men and women) who go on to contribute towards the various projects implemented by Gram Vikas and also succeed in finding gainful employment in and around their villages has now become one of our leading livelihood interventions.

The first brush with training masons for construction started with the biogas programme run by Gram Vikas. This was basically in response to the experience with traditional masons who were found to be unsuitable for construction of biogas plants. Since a biogas plant needs to be an absolutely leak-proof structure where methane has to be kept from escaping, the construction had to be absolutely perfect. Traditional masons were unable to adhere to the stringent specifications that bound such work and hence, it was felt that it would be easier to work with fresh masons who were trained by Gram Vikas itself. Thus, starting 1983, for over the next decade, Gram Vikas trained over 5000 masons in biogas construction. Over this period, Gram Vikas constructed over 54000 biogas plants all over Orissa, which is over 70% of all plants constructed in the state during the same period.

All these masons, hitherto unskilled, were now in a position of strength from where, they could bargain for better wages for work. The masons had already built a favourable reputation for themselves, since they would ensure proportionate usage of inputs such as water and bricks and also ensure a substantial saving in material costs of construction. Thus, the employer always stood to gain and correspondingly, masons trained by Gram Vikas came to be valued highly.

From 1994 we started the process of spinning off the biogas programme. Our expectation was that it would be possible for our supervisors and trained masons to turn into independent turnkey operators and entrepreneurs with little difficulty. They could facilitate interested farmers to access loans and subsidies for constructing plants, provide the necessary technical support, and work as independent turnkey operators. The large pool of skilled and experienced personnel would work independently or with other local voluntary organizations, to promote biogas all over the state. We encouraged the supervisors and masons to take up entrepreneurship either individually or in small groups or in association with other local bodies. Gram Vikas would continue to provide the technical backup support and the necessary credibility to establish their enterprise. We also made an offer to each one of them that they could return to Gram Vikas, should they fail in their effort. At the end of two years, out of the 500 supervisors who left at the time, only six came back. This in itself is the greatest testimony to the success achieved in training skilled masons, who were now securing their own livelihood.

In the Rural Health and Environment Programme (RHEP) launched by Gram Vikas in 1992, there was, again, a requirement of masons who could construct cost effective structures, with appropriate use of material inputs. The construction of the toilets and bathing rooms also had to be perfect in all respects, strong enough to resist the inclement climatic conditions in this part of the world. As mentioned above, most of the masons working with Gram Vikas in the biogas project had decided to go off on their own and therefore, we needed to train masons afresh.

Thus, in RHEP, before construction of the toilets and bathing rooms, young men and women, who are unskilled labourers, were trained in masonry. On completion of the training, they constructed toilets, bathing rooms and overhead water tanks under the supervision of master masons and an engineer. These newly trained masons are assured of work for at least one year if they so desire. Some of them go on to become master masons, leading trainings in other project areas, or successfully securing contracts for work in nearby urban centers.

A significant difference from the earlier period was the involvement of women. Gram Vikas gave training to tribal women, who thus broke traditional customs and norms in deciding to take up masonry as a livelihood activity. This was a tremendous change induced among hitherto marginalized tribal women, who after being trained, were making their way up to the nearby town, Berhampur on their bicycles to secure regular and gainful employment. Thus, Gram Vikas effected a cultural change in the communities it worked with, ushering in the concept of women

masons. It has been seen that even if the men migrated afar in search of work, these women masons were now always available to handle work that came up in and around their villages. For all talk of women's empowerment and gender equity, this is a fine example of what women can achieve, if they are provided the right opportunity.

Thus, skill trainings are a viable livelihood generation activity, which overcomes considerations such as credit worthiness and ability to take risks. It is an activity that invests people with skills that they would retain for the rest of their lives. The skilled masons have the option of learning advanced skills and further strengthening their bargaining power. Masons are found to be in heavy demand in most places and with the help of such skill trainings, people are now able to get better wages for themselves. Gram Vikas has so far trained over 6000 masons, who have also learned plumbing, wire bending and painting. These people who could not earn even Rs.30 per day in non-agricultural season begin to get Rs.60-80 after the training and between Rs.120-150 after a year. Not one of these masons is sitting idle because he/she has no work opportunities/offers.

The next step in this should be establishment of masons' guilds. This would involve organizing groups of trained masons, investing on further enhancing their skills and registering them as self-help cooperatives. These groups could also be trained further to become blacksmiths etc. They can then bid for contracts and thus, find work. Thus, we could form groups of masons, who have multiple and complementary skills, which by themselves, would be equipped to carry out the entire construction work. Forming guilds of such unorganized workers could bring about a significant change in the way construction workers operate and alleviate to a large extent, the problems of the construction industry, in their search for skilled workers. It would also go a long way in improving the quality of lives and purchasing power of the labourers.

Organisations like Gram Vikas could handhold such masons' guilds in the initial phases, but over time, these groups would be able to function independently and secure work for themselves. For the poorest of the poor, this is not only has a chance of bringing livelihood security, but would also enable them to embark on a life of dignity. For an individual to be able to make free choices (in this case, regarding how best to employ his skill), without ever being at anyone's behest, is ultimately what empowerment is all about.