

**Influencing Sustainable Social Change**

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**Abstract:**

There are direct and indirect ways of achieving social change. Direct ways include advocating policy change, and promoting movements for or against specific issues or influencing communities (and individuals) to change their behaviour. Indirect ways include helping organisations (NGOs, Govt. Programs) to change their thinking and behaviour to improve their effectiveness. Both direct and indirect ways may include working simultaneously with multiple stakeholders.

This paper takes 3 examples to explore how 3 ABS practitioners influenced both direct and indirect social change. They have used known methodologies in new and difficult contexts to co-create new ways of learning, enabling the participants to “use self as an instrument of change”, thereby influencing the system at multiple levels, leading to long lasting sustainable social change. In the community related example, over hundred individuals with disability engaged in deep reflection of self and role, recognized the power of collective voices to influence change, thereby forming the DPO (Differently Abled People’s Organisation), which makes significant changes in the society they live and work in. In the organisation example, people working in a Govt. program on poverty alleviation are helped to restructure their attitudes vis-à-vis the communities they are supposed to work with, and build skills of relating as equals to these communities. In the community-based organisation (CBO) example, a co-operative organisation formed by rural women to produce and market poultry is helped to align its thinking and vision with that of the community the CBO represents.

## **Case 1: Leadership Development for Differently Abled People**

People with disabilities are generally seen as helpless and needy, and hence are often approached with a “welfare mindset” - that is outsiders need to take care of the differently abled. The intervention rejected this mindset, and considered intervening in a way that built on the internal resources of the differently abled people.

### **The Challenge**

During the 2 decades of work with various vulnerable groups, the authors had always envisioned the representatives of marginalized group being able to stand up for themselves, rather than being always represented by others. Consequently, our quest had become “what can we do to make differently abled people stand up and speak for themselves.”

In order to convert this idea to reality, the authors thought of conducting an interactive event for people with disability. The idea was accepted and supported by Handicap International, India, where the practitioner was employed (Jan 2003-Mar 2009).

### **The Program**

A three-day program was considered ideal for initiating rapport building, leadership identification and strategy envisioning. More than 100 people from all the districts of Gujarat came together to stay, eat, sleep, play and dream together irrespective of the nature of disability, caste, class, age, sex and creed.

The program began with the formal traditional welcome of each individual. The invitation to change the look of the venue with available decorative materials inspired the participants to get engaged, and within a short time, the venue assumed a festive mood.

Using brainstorming, the participants listed what they needed to know or do. This gave shape to the program’s agenda. As things unfolded, as they played, drew, danced, walked the ramp, sang, dreamt, talked, made friends, addressed media, press conference, government and other senior officials from NGOs, a new awareness dawned upon them. The slogan became “*you can*” and “*I can*” as they cheered each other.

This discovery of life-giving abilities of people, who were made to believe from childhood that they are “disabled”, inspired them to start searching for what is theirs but not known to them, what belongs to them but does not reach them. This convinced them that they could all convert their dreams into a reality; that they could pursue their individual and collective dream by understanding their inner strength and what the government has provided for them.

The program marked a shift from “we can’t” to “we can” in the light of the way they are made to carry themselves. People who attended the program in despair (not with hope), with fear (not confidence), feeling isolated (not with a sense of belonging), walked away rejuvenated, with their head held high, with creative dreams and aspirations, and with a sense of belongingness and relationship that they looked forward to nurture.

With this knowledge and discovered ability, the participants dreamt of a community they could call their own, which would work for them and be managed by them. This dream phase was elaborated and concretized by their ability to understand the need for a collective approach to their needs.

The motivated and energized members went back to their place of origin (districts and villages) and initiated change processes in their lives as well as in their surroundings. While all members displayed signs of change, sixty odd members took lead in reaching out to a number of other differently abled people in their geographical reach, and started paying attention to situations and opportunities to highlight and address issues linked with rights and dignity of differently abled people.

In this period, all the leaders were constantly mentored and their action was supported by team of professionals at Handicap International. This mentoring was mostly done remotely, though in some cases there was also in person mentoring.

Handicap International continued to organize an annual event for the next 4-5 years, bringing differently abled people from the entire state together for learning, sharing, planning, celebrating, establishing their leadership, claiming their space in development process and most importantly believing in their own strengths and capacities.

This effort and the consistent process of follow up led to the formation of a Disability Advocacy Group (DAG), and they followed a step-by-step approach to co-create a new community of their own.

### **The Impact**

Today, DAG with a membership of about four hundred differently abled people is a registered organisation with the government of Gujarat. This organisation has become an advocacy group for people with disabilities and is able to meet government officials to demand their right.

DAG is a state level network of people with disabilities (PwDs) in Gujarat. Its efforts are directed towards capacity building and leadership development of PwDs. It creates opportunities for its members and other persons with disabilities to enquire about and acquire development avenues for

their growth. It strives to provide equal opportunity to all types of disabilities, for women, children and men alike. DAG is also involved in creating awareness amongst all stakeholders, government departments, NGOs and other institutions and ensuring participation of persons with disabilities at all levels of development. ([www.disabilityadvocacygroup.org](http://www.disabilityadvocacygroup.org))

## **Case 2: Facilitating Human Interaction Processes for Poultry Co-operatives led by Rural Women**

This is the story of ongoing work with a community-based organisation, where the practitioner has made interventions at various levels over the last 3 years. The organisation is people intensive and operates at 3 tiers – the co-operatives formed and managed by rural women of central, western and eastern states of India, the Federations (supporting the co-operatives) and the governing body (enabling the co-operatives and federations). The practitioner's work with this organisation is focused on helping achieve the mission of the organisation, by facilitating behavioural changes for people involved at all 3 levels.

### **Working with the New Entrants**

The practitioner engaged with the organisation initially to help their new recruits develop a human touch. The organisation used to run an L-Group, similar to the T-Groups run by ISABS. The practitioner's initial diagnosis revealed that the L-Groups were not helping the new recruits beyond creating a sense of belonging amongst themselves. It was insufficient to equip them to deal with challenges in the field and their ability to work with the members of the co-operatives. Consequently, the practitioner recommended 2 things. First that the L-Group should be replaced by a semi-structured intervention which would build Social Intelligence or the capacity to know oneself and to know others (Honeywill, 2016) , and second, that the trainees should be sent to a BLHP in an ISABS event for a T-Group experience.

Both recommendations were accepted and the organisation made necessary changes in its Learning and Development Strategy. In the semi-structured workshops for the trainees (veterinary doctors and microbiologists), the practitioner used a combination approach. The design of the workshop was such that 40% of the time was used for creating an experience using L-Group approach, and 60% of the time for learning through innovative methods such as the use of theatre to build awareness of emotions and creative art (drawing and poetry) for articulating one's dream for oneself. This approach pushed the boundaries and challenged the left-brain of the trainees, helping them to express freely their feelings and build authentic relationships.

The result of this intervention was a surprise to all. The trainees felt more ready to face the “world out there”. It improved the retention of new recruits by 80%. About 50% of these trainees have

now moved into 2<sup>nd</sup> line leadership roles, making significant impact on the livelihoods of the members of the cooperatives.

### **Working with the Whole System**

The practitioner had an opportunity to work with the whole system by way of facilitating the annual meet of the organisation, which brings together a cross-section of all stakeholders i.e. the cooperatives, the federations and the governing body. This is massive congregation of over 250 people. The practitioner started facilitating this meet 3 years back.

The 1<sup>st</sup> year was about aligning **ALL** stakeholders to the Mission of the organisation. The practitioner used the Large-Scale Intervention (LSI) approach, to meet the objective of seamless internalization of the Mission statement. Over the 3 days of the annual meet, about 250 plus people worked in small and large groups to:

- Articulate the Mission statement
- Aligning to the statement by
  - Making SMART commitments at individual and team level
  - Establishing a monitoring and reviewing process

The practitioner used the principles of T-Group and Appreciative Inquiry for creating conditions which encouraged diverse groups to have open conversations with each other. The result of the 3 days' work was that 250 people fully internalized the Mission 2020 statement. Subsequent reviews over the year revealed that the last person on ground knew what the Mission 2020 was!

The second Annual Meet focused on building Collaboration across all levels. The writer continued to use LSI as a methodology, but added creative tasks to build awareness of what actions and behaviours are required for true collaboration. The large group was divided into 6 sub-groups and asked to build identical (size, shape, color etc.) models of elephants using balloons, paper, cello-tape and colored markers. The writer also used process of "Image Sharing" i.e. looking at self and others through lens of what we like, what we wish to see more of and what we wish to see less of, in self and others. The results were phenomenal. People could easily share with each other the most difficult feedback, without feeling scared of how it will unfold later. The groups went back feeling fully energized, with a bag full of strengths that others appreciated in them, and a sense of purpose towards fulfilling what others were seeking from them.

The third Annual Meet is expected to focus on enhancing achievement motivation and building self-leadership skills at various levels.

## **Working with the Second Line of Leadership**

This is a critical organisation building piece. The “Professionals” – typically veterinary doctors and microbiologists, are the unique link between the co-operatives, the federations and the governing body. The practitioner has designed a Leadership Development Program for this group. The program has 3 contact modules, and participants are supported in between the modules through coaching. The practitioner has helped the organisation in building internal capability for coaching by coaching the 3 top leaders of the organisation. The module focuses on building deep self-awareness and aligning one’s life purpose with the purpose of the organisation. The second contact module builds leadership skills. The closing module looks at the next level of growth. The program has just begun and the results of the first contact module are visible. Overall work-life balance has improved, thus improving efficiency and effectiveness of the units. This is a capacity and capability exercise, which will enable the organisation in expanding its outreach.

## **In Conclusion**

The biggest validation for the organisation was being able to present their working model to the Honorable Prime Minister of India at the recently held Expo in the capital city. The organisation continues to thrive and grow with grants and funding from government (State and Centre), as well as from the banking sector. They have more proposals from investors than they can handle. The organisation attributes a part of this success to the people initiatives that have been taken over last 3 years. It believes that the various interventions – Sensitivity training, Appreciative Inquiry and Coaching, have strengthened the people, added to their skills and helped in building both – capability and capacity.

## **Case 3: The DPIP Experience**

The Government has the impact on the lives of under-developed sections of the society. Both by its size, and its legitimacy, it has the potential to truly effect social change. However, as is generally well known, people working in the Government, sooner or later fall prey to cynicism, and ineffective working. They also acquire an attitude of talking down to the community, of imposing their solutions on such communities, and generally not paying attention to or listening to the problems experienced by the communities; or even the solutions thought of by them. It is the systemic prevalence of this attitude vis-à-vis the communities that prevents the Government from positively impacting social change.

Keeping these challenges in mind, the Government of MP designed and implemented a program called the District Poverty Initiatives Program (DPIP). DPIP was a World Bank funded program that started in the year 2000. Initiated in a few selected districts of MP to begin with, it later

expanded to cover a major part of the state. The example given below relates to the year 2000, when the program was first getting established in the state.

In order to ensure DPIP's effectiveness in influencing social change, 3 key decisions were taken. First, that DPIP should not be situated within an existing department - for then it would fall prey to the existing culture of non-responsiveness to communities. Rather, DPIP would be set up as an independent society outside the traditional departmental structure. Second, it should hire a core group of young officers from various departments of the Government, officers who had not yet become cynical about what the Government system could actually achieve. Thirdly, these freshly recruited officers in the DPIP would be put through an experiential training program to change their attitudes, understanding and perspectives vis-à-vis rural communities.

SRIJAN, an NGO with extensive experience of working with rural communities was hired to do the selection of the officers, and then to train them appropriately. The practitioner anchored the recruitment and training processes for DPIP. This paper talks about the first such experiences of trying to change the attitude of newly hired Govt. officers.

SRIJAN conducted the first Orientation Workshop between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of April, 2000. In all, there were 19 participants, including 8 newly recruited Govt. officers. (The others being personnel recruited from different NGOs)

### **Objectives of the Orientation Workshop**

- a) To make the participants in the DPIP (Govt. and NGOs) familiar with the core principles and values of DPIP and help them internalize it
- b) The participants should go back excited that they as “pioneers” are starting a joint journey in a new area. This implies that they have to understand the value of
  - Taking risks
  - Being innovative
  - Being quick learners from their own and others experiences.
- c) Participants begin to reflect on their capacity building needs
- d) Have some ideas on how they can approach the villages
- e) Prepare them for the next assignment

### **Key Principles used in the Design of the Workshop**

- Use Participants' own experiences as starting point of learning
- Participants working in groups apply themselves in the village situation to have first-hand experience of areas for self-improvement/development
- Build on the immediate experience and link with DPIP's core principles and values for internalization

A key behavioural principle for attitudinal change used in the design of the workshop was based on the Lewin Theory of change. Get the participants to experience the shock of cognitive dissonance; get them to realize that their previous perspectives and attitudes were totally wrong and to consider alternative perspectives. It was also to confront individuals in what they think they believed in and what they practiced.

### **The Workshop**

The workshop was divided into 3 phases. Phase one took place in the classroom; Phase 2 was a field visit (a day spent in the village) and in Phase 3 the participants went back to the class room, trying to generate learnings from the field visit.

#### **Phase 1: Classroom**

This phase focused on making participants comfortable with each other and the trainers, and the over-arching concepts of DPIP. It also set the foundation for the next phase of the workshop. Thus, in the final session of the day, the participants were asked to discuss and present their views on 'what are your experiences regarding successful and unsuccessful interventions with village communities? What factors enable successful interventions?'

Interestingly, the responses of the group were as follows:

- A proper preparation, at the personal level, of skills and attitudes, to do this kind of work
- A good relationship with villagers
- A good plan for intervention
- Provision for adequate logistic support when the time comes to implement the plan
- An appropriate style and method of working, a method that will ensure the actual implementation.

The participants were then told that they would be sent to spend the next day in a village - with the objective of preparing a plan for improving the state of the village. Participants were divided into 3 groups; each group was expected to make an intervention plan around a different topic: viz., Natural Resources, Agriculture and Women's Development.

Each of the groups was asked to identify 1 or 2 group members as observers. The observers were briefed separately by the facilitators to observe individual specific data on the roles taken by the participants; whether they were listening or giving solutions/answers; whether the members were working as a team; whether they used the opportunities that were so obvious to the observer, etc. Observers could collect data independently, which they could share during the presentation of the village intervention plan. The facilitators were to make independent observations.

## **Phase 2: Village Visit**

The actual experience in the village was a bit as follows:

In 1 group, the observers got very agitated. They were very upset by the behaviour of some of their group members who they thought were not taking any interest in the proceedings – 1 person, in fact, slept off in the village meeting!

In another group, a government PFT (Project Facilitation Team) coordinator was heard commenting that "This is the first time I was sitting on the ground with the villagers and listening to them instead of giving instructions." (However, this seems to have been a bit of an exception, as we shall see in the subsequent section on visit debrief!)

In the third group, the individuals adopted distinctly separate ways of dealing with villagers. While one sat and listened patiently to a group of villagers, the second used the opportunity to advice (almost harangue!) another group as to what they should be doing. Others, coming from a background of working in the Govt., opted to meet the official representatives in the village first – the teachers!

## **Phase 3: Return to the Classroom**

Each group had been asked to prepare 3 presentations for the next day. The first focused on content, the second on process.

The content presentation was divided into 2 parts: part 1 focused on information gathered from the village; part 2 on the plans for intervention. Regarding the information they had got from the village, the groups were also asked to respond, during the presentation, on the following four points:

- What kind of information was required by your group in order to make an effective plan?
- Did you get the information you needed? Were they as per your expectations?
- What was the extent of confidence your group has on the information it gathered?
- Do you think you require more information?

In the presentations, the following common themes emerged:

- There had hardly been any thinking, prior to the village visit, by any of the groups on the kind of information they thought would be required
- However, they all seemed quite satisfied with, and confident about, the information they had managed to collect from the village. (The question of whether the information gathering was as per expectations or not could not be always answered as many admitted that they had not planned the gathering of information)

The debriefing that followed focused on the issue of the extent of confidence one could place on the information that had been gathered. The point was made that gathering of information is not a simple, one-way exercise. Information is, after all, received from different individuals in a village setting, and all those villagers who provide information have differing motives in telling or hiding something. Many times, the motive is to know what is it that the Government official coming to their village is going to give them. The moment villagers believe that they have figured out what exactly the Government official is looking out for, the villagers dexterously serve up the same, tailoring the facts to suit the objectives. The question here was, how gullible were the outsiders in accepting the inside information as the truth.

An example of the gullibility of outsiders was then taken from one of the presentations. One of the groups had “found out” that there was no irrigation in the village they had visited. In the presentation, the group also indicated that the agriculture of the village was very backward and that the villagers had no knowledge of modern agricultural technology.

The facilitator, who had also visited the same village (at the same time as the group; and was like the rest of the group, equally new to the village) had seen about half a dozen diesel powered water pumps in the village. On inquiring where these pumps were used, he was taken to a stream (which was close to being perennial, so good was its flow) that wound its way around the fields of the village. He was also told that almost half of the village fields were irrigated from this stream.

The facilitator said that though he could not yet place credence on the information he got about the extent of irrigation, he had at least one incontrovertible fact: that there was irrigation in the village. Secondly, on enquiring further, he had been told that before Rabi, the villagers cumulatively purchased at least 200 bags of fertilizers. Thirdly, he had observed at least 2 tractors in the village: tractors owned by some of the villagers themselves.

All in all, though the facilitator could not say with certainty what was the extent of irrigation, fertilizer use, or the use of modern agricultural tools, what was certain that many villagers were now experienced in the use of all 3. In other words, there was no way for the Outsiders to come to a facile conclusion that the villagers had no idea about modern agricultural practices!!

The facilitator then talked about the importance of knowing who it was that had access to modern technology, and those who did not. In other words, it was important to know who the better off in the village were, and who were not. Continuing in the same vein, it was important to know whether these 2 segments had different perspectives and different requirements. In other words, the facilitator pointed out the importance of understanding the political economy of the village.

Taking some other such examples, the Facilitator concluded with the following points:

- It is hard for outsiders to establish the veracity of the information they receive for the first time from the villagers
- In order to be able to trust this information, it is important that similar information is corroborated from multiple sources. The greater the number of sources, the greater the confidence the outsider can have on it.
- One important way of gathering information was observation. Information obtained through listening needed to be cross-checked through discussions and vice-versa
- One should always reflect on the motives of the individual giving information to the Outsider. Is the information being given because the villager believes that this is what the Outsider is looking for or is it to settle some internal political squabble? (e.g., people talking ill of the Sarpanch because they are actually from an opposing group!)
- One important basis of getting reliable information is building relationship with villagers
- However, as both building effective relationship, and the verification of received information takes time, there is no way that any group of Outsiders can conclude in one (or even a few days) what is it that the villagers really require; and what can effectively be done there

To substantiate some of the points made by the Facilitator, the Resource Person from the NGO – whose area had been visited – then presented his understanding of the area. The presentation clearly indicated that the groups had been on the wrong track: they had reached improper conclusions about their respective villages through the interpretation of inadequate data.

At the end of the day, after a series of discussions, the participants accepted the following:

- They did not plan the trip as a group
- They did not work in the village as a group
- A majority of them adopted a style of lecturing the villagers, rather than listening to them. Listening, as the facilitator explained, was perhaps the most critical attitude of all, if the outsiders ever hoped to understand what was happening in the village
- Some did not take the village trip seriously at all

### **The Long-Term Consequence of the Orientation Workshops on the Participants**

One of the big consequences of the Orientation workshop was to change the way the PFT Coordinators - the key Government officials who had gone through this training, changed their way of work in the field. Some aspects of these were:

- Talking to the community members as equals. In private conversations, the NGO workers working with these Government officials frequently commented that the Government

officials were as effective and appropriate in their behaviour as any NGO person. They had little difficulty in sitting down on the ground to interact with the community members

- Giving far more time to understanding village realities than they had ever being given before. In one celebrated case, the PFT Coordinator spent one month in a single village to understand the realities there, while resisting constant pressure to start multiple projects in that village or others. Subsequently, the projects started in the villages where she had spent focused time were considered to have the highest quality

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In the 3 cases listed above, various applied behavioural science methodologies have been used to bring about Sustainable Social Change:

- Mentoring in case 1
- Coaching in case 2
- Image Sharing in case 2
- L groups or Human Process labs in case 2
- Use of Theatre, poetry and drawing as learning methodology in case 1 and 2
- Using the concept of cognitive dissonance in field situations in case 3
- Appreciative Inquiry in cases 1 and 2
- Large Scale Intervention in case 2

While the methodologies are well known, their use has come about in distinct contexts. The challenges faced by the 3 practitioners in the 3 cases too have been distinct. In Case 1, the practitioner faced an uphill task, given that these are people who have lived in isolation, living on scripts written for them by others and a self-image of “cannot.” But convinced by one of the strong Appreciative Inquiry (AI) assumptions, “what you focus on becomes your reality”, the practitioner was able to join them in co-creating their world and their self-belief. Discovering individuals' strengths, building collective energy, generating possibilities, building environment for dreaming and experimentations and celebrating and creating an appreciative mind was the hallmark of this program. There was high flow of energy, creative environment space, facilitative actions and behaviour, willingness and openness to trying out new things and high involvement for learning and sharing exchange. In this case, the social change is both direct and indirect. The direct change is in the way the differently abled people are viewing themselves and the way they have organized themselves to become an advocacy group for policy change. The indirect change is the impact this advocacy group has had on the way the Government system responds to pressures of policy changes with respect to the differently abled.

In Case 2, the social change is indirect. Initially, the practitioner faced a challenge of ensuring continuous and sustained learning. The organisation was focused on tangible results and viewed learning initiatives as “feel good” only. However, when the new recruits’ retention increased, the perspective shifted. With sustained learning initiatives, the organisation has seen positive results in the areas of new recruit retention, capacity & capability building (2<sup>nd</sup> line leadership being groomed), internalization of the Mission statement, enhanced collaboration across all 3 tiers of the organisation, and proactive reaching out to seek & provide support. All of this has resulted in the organisation a) expanding its outreach within the existing 6 states, increasing their coverage to more villages and larger number of rural women, and b) planning expansion to new states that remain untapped. The outcome is seen as the organisation gains prominence and receives greater funding, which has set up a virtuous cycle to benefit a larger number of rural women indirectly; and increasing the ownership of existing women members directly.

In Case 3, the social change is indirect, as the change came about at the level of the Government officials who had been recruited to implement a program on poverty alleviation. The officials learnt that their attitude vis-à-vis village communities had been, hitherto, very top down. They understood that with the approach they had been adopting hitherto, they would be unable to understand village level problems, and be unable to develop effective relations with them - all important for the village communities to take ownership of the programs meant for them. This change in perspective eventually led to these Government officials helping design projects along with village communities; projects that actually led to poverty alleviation.

## Reference

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