

# MULTI-STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS FOR IMPACTING AT SCALE

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## DO PARTNERSHIPS MATTER?

The great epic Mahabharata, in the Aadi Parva describes itself thus: “Yadi hasti tadanytra yannehasti natat quachit” (what is here is everywhere and what is not here is not anywhere else). The phrase denotes the vastness and all-encompassing nature of the Magnum Opus that it is. Sure enough, even today the Gurus do not tire giving examples from the Epic. There are countless lessons there for any facet of life-love, duty, devotion, daily matters and even business management. The ancient text also talks about how to choose beneficial partners in life, or business. Modern management texts talk about strategic alliances and partnerships, which are complex arrangements that companies get into in order to launch into a higher orbit or just to stay afloat. The choices one makes at the time of bringing in partners are crucial and can have telling impact on the satisfactory achievement of the goal itself. The most defining moment in the Mahabharata is the Great Battle that left a trail of destruction for the cousins in two camps. One of the most amusing incidents that build up to the battle is about how both Duryodhan and Arjun went to Krishna for seeking a ‘strategic alliance’ if we may call it that, just prior to the show-down. Other than the broader need for winning the war, what were the specific calculations both the leaders made, we do not know, but the results of the choices that they made then decided the

course of the war. As an astute strategist we can safely say that Duryodhan made a deliberate choice when he opted for the Narayani Army rather than a Charioteer; but then he did not win the war even with an army one and half times larger than the opponent. May be he did not realise that times had changed. May be he did not fathom that size no more mattered and there was much more to fighting than just the physical combat-there were mind games, sleight, backroom manoeuvres, and even deceit, and the phrase ‘everything is fair in warfare’ had just been coined. We can only guess who would have won the war if Krishna and his army had not joined it. Without access to the ‘out-of-the-box’ thinking and strategies devised by Krishna, the Pandavas may even have struggled to win. But we see that the choice of partners definitely helped alter the course of action and could even have upset the results.

Strategic alliances and partnerships are technically two different terms in strict legal parlance. But in a more literal sense we can use the terms interchangeably and for the purpose of this Chapter we will mean the same thing by both the terms. It is now an accepted tactic in businesses to bring in partners for strategic alliance when seeking to do something differently -an arrangement that allows each of the partners to maintain their autonomy yet reach a goal higher than hitherto reached. This is an agreement for cooperation or collaboration between businesses, with the ultimate result being a synergy where each party will benefit more from the alliance than from

individual efforts alone. 'Such alliances allow each partner to pool resources while concentrating on their competitive advantage and simultaneously growing their respective businesses'.

A lot of the recent discourse on development also seems to be advocating for partnerships for achieving scale and impact. Given the complexities in the problem of poverty, the nature of partnerships also could be complex. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the UN Member States in 2015 is a global statement of intent to alleviate poverty and misery from the face of the planet by 2030. The SDG 17 emphasises on the value of collaboration and the need to forge robust partnerships so that the previous 16 SDGs can be achieved in full earnest. The description accompanying the Goal Statement highlights the interconnectedness of the world today. Advent of technology and communication has made easy the sharing of knowledge, ideas and resources. Well curated partnerships can help make the resource investments more productive; foster innovations and facilitate better policies.

## NGO-GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIPS

India has a vibrant civil society movement, which goes back many years and pre-dates independence. The co-operative movement in India is about 115 years old. Similarly, there have been countless ideas and innovations, which emerged in the NGO space that informed the major programmes that the government launched at different times whether it was in the field of self-employment, wage employment, watershed development, microfinance, even health or education. The two major flagship programmes of the Ministry of Rural Development today, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) have their genesis in NGO programmes. It has been observed in the recent few years that the government policy makers take an idea that has proven successful on reasonable scale in the NGO space, converts that into a government

scheme and promptly issues guidelines. This has happened with a significant number of ideas such as the SHGs, watershed development, non-formal schools and the community health activist programme. One would expect that the civil society that invented these models in the first place would be natural partners in scaling these models across the country. However, in more cases that not, we see that NGOs are left out from the big programmes.

It is no contest that the state has the mandate to reach across the country but what is the instrumentality that the state has to reach out and ensure sustainable outcomes at the community level? The state allocates a massive quantum of resources through its multiple departments. The departmental outlays are spent as per guidelines. The guidelines mandate how the resources are spent and do not pin accountability for outcomes. In fact, it is perhaps not possible or even right to seek outcomes from a given department, because the outcomes depend on slew of externalities that the department has no handle on. For example, the health condition of a set of villagers would depend a lot on the nature and quantum of food they consume, on the availability of clean drinking water, existence of functioning solid and liquid waste management systems, and even basic amenities like liveable houses, roads, electricity and play grounds. With none of these in their control how can the health department personnel accept responsibility for healthy living of the villagers—for that matter agriculture department for farm prosperity and banks for financial inclusion? Fund allocation does not automatically ensure outcomes.

It is obvious from the above that what we need is convergence of resources and targets of multiple departments and for them to function in unison, a Himalayan task in itself. But even this will not be adequate to ensure outcomes. The biggest systemic problem the departments face (alone or in convergence) is the last mile disconnect; especially in reaching out to the marginalised groups. For achievement of robust outcomes at the level of the deprived communities what we require are NGOs who can work along-side both the departments and the community—in organising them and achieving

the outcomes. As the SDG exhorts what we need are multi-stakeholder partnerships.

There are not many examples in the recent times to quote experience from. For the purpose of this Chapter we will be drawing on case studies of two government-NGO partnership projects aimed at achieving significant scale in two States- West Bengal and Odisha-where PRADAN is a partner. The project in West Bengal is called the Usharmukti Programme that aims at coopting Integrated Natural Resource Management principles in implementation of MGNREGA and treating about 1.2 million hectares of land in the western highlands of West Bengal, rejuvenating seven depleting rivers, thereby enhancing water availability to the villages in six districts. Having realised that it is an ambition which the department cannot hope to realise by itself, the government decided to seek support from NGOs, donors and other departments.

Another large multi-partner project that has been initiated by the Ministry of Agriculture, Cooperation & Farmers Welfare of the Government of Odisha expects to organise 100,000 small farmers in 12 hill districts in Odisha, and support them to earn INR 100,000 annually from farming. The one lakh farmers are to be organised into about 60 Agriculture Production Clusters (APC). In order to realise this audacious goal, the ministry has sought to mobilise different ministries and departments, NGOs, donors and market actors to build a synergistic coalition. PRADAN has a role as the lead NGO in both these projects. The chapter will try to draw out some principles based on which to build multi-stakeholder partnerships from these experiences of the Usharmukti and the APC Projects.

## CASE STUDY I USHARMUKTI

### Context

The western highlands regions of the state of West Bengal comprises of the entire district of Purulia, a large part of Bankura, West Midnapore and parts of Bardhaman and Birbhum. The

region is characterised by high yet erratic rainfall, leading to risk-prone mono-crop rice farming. Abysmal public investments in water harvesting and irrigation, has led to reduced faith of the community in agriculture and increasing out-migration to cities.

### Usharmukti - A Multistakeholder Partnership

In 2017, the Government of West Bengal conceived and launched a unique, multi-stakeholder partnership project, Usharmukti, focusing on western highland districts of West Bengal. Usharmukti, through MGNREGS, focuses on treating large areas for groundwater recharge, revitalizing rivers and creating scope for farm intensification and diversification. Besides the Government, the other partners in Usharmukti include Bharat Rural Livelihood Foundation (BRLF), seven NGO partners with PRADAN as the leading NGO partner and BRLF. While BRLF provides the financial and knowledge support, the NGOs engage in community mobilisation, capacity building of the community and ground functionaries, and handholding implementation of MGNREGS through Integrated Natural Resources Management (INRM) approach.

The project endeavours to rejuvenate the decaying rivers of Ajay, Mayurakshi, Damodar, Kansai, Shilai and Subarnarekha and their tributaries through treating a large area of about 1.2 million hectares of the degraded catchment.

The major objectives of the project are:

- Restoration of degraded land, soil enrichment and in-situ water harvesting
- Conversion of agriculturally marginal lands to appropriate land use
- To reduce the impacts of climate variations and to make the communities resilient to climate change
- Intensification and diversification of farming

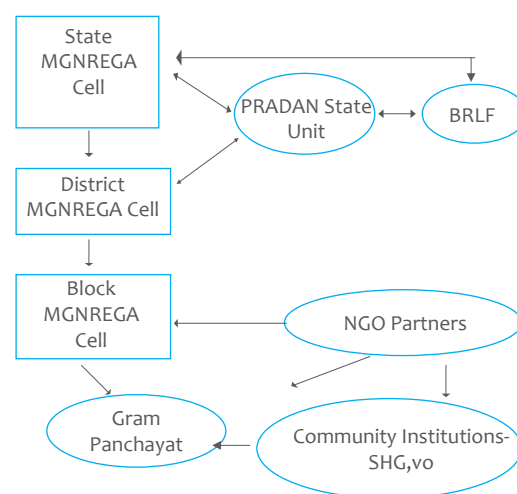
The NGO partners in addition to PRADAN are Prasari, Loka Kalyan Parishad, Development Research Communication and Service Centre, Rural Development Association, Samayita Math and Tagore Society for Rural Development.

Some of the important steps undertaken through Usharmukti to strengthen the partnership for effective implementation of the project are:

- **Selection of suitable partners:** Identification of the right partners is one of the most crucial aspect of the partnership. The Panchayat and Rural Development Department, being the primary stakeholder brought in BRLF, Prasari and PRADAN based on earlier positive experiences. The other NGO partners were selected through a rigorous process.
- **Shared understanding among partners:** A series of workshops and meetings were organised at the state, district and block levels involving all the respective stakeholders, through 2017, to develop a shared understanding on the project, its vision, the approach and strategy, guidelines and the need for the multi-stakeholder partnership for the project.
- **Defined roles and responsibilities:** A tripartite agreement was signed between the state government, NGO partners and the BRLF articulating the roles and responsibility of each of the stakeholders as follows:
  - The State MGNREGA cell headed by the Commissioner MGNREGA has responsibilities of fund allocation as per requirement, regular review and monitoring, timely issue of circulars and guidelines to debottleneck operations, and facilitate convergence.
  - BRLF brings in the necessary funds for NGO support, facilitates partnership-building processes and also carries out review and impact monitoring
  - The NGOs catalyse implementation by the block and panchayat frontline staff by building their perspectives and skills, and handholding
- **Creation of coordination mechanism:** Effective coordination mechanisms have been put in place at the state, district, block and panchayat levels by creating empowered cells, headed by the top leadership at the level of Commissioner, and bringing in representation from all departments. There is also a NGO Consortium which functions

as a learning forum and facilitates in problem solving.

- **Capacity Building and Knowledge Sharing:** A comprehensive knowledge and capacity building protocol to induct required knowledge and skills at all levels has been



**Figure 8.1:** Implementation architecture - Usharmukti  
Source: Project documents

created by the State Cell. All ground functionaries of the NGO, district, block, and panchayat have been trained on planning processes, how to conduct training, preparing Detailed Project Reports (DPRs), and the MGNREGS processes. The state cell also issues circulars, government orders, technical manuals and IEC materials from time to time. In addition to training events, exposure visits are organised for district, block, Panchayat functionaries and community leaders on regular basis to learn from the best practices.

Usharmukti has a dedicated web site which is well-stocked on resource material. It is a one-stop resource for material ranging from manuals and best-practice documents, videos to latest circulars and government orders. The NGOs are encouraged to actively contribute to the Panchayati Raj Patrika regularly. Usharmukti also has an active WhatsApp group where everyone from the ground functionary to the Commissioner are connected real-time.

## Achievements So Far

The project was initiated in 2017. In a period of just about one and a half year, DPRs for a total of 2034 out of 2365 micro-watersheds have been finalised and uploaded in the MIS. Out of this plans worth INR 90 crores were sanctioned in the 2018-19 budget and approximately INR 40 crores were spent. It being the first year, a lot of systems and protocols are yet to be in place, thus there was a significant gap in plan-achievement.

## CASE STUDY II PROMOTION OF AGRICULTURE PRODUCTION CLUSTERS (APC) IN TRIBAL REGIONS OF ODISHA

### Context

The highland regions of Odisha comprise of 20 districts in north, west and southern part of the state. These highlands have a forest-clad undulating topography, dominated by tribal population. The Odisha highlands fall under the Agro-climatic Zone VII with more than 35 percent of area under forest cover with an average rainfall of 1500 mm. The region is abundant with natural resources but suffers from extreme poverty because of low and unpredictable agriculture, declining source of sustenance from the forest and livestock and lack of employment opportunities locally.

These challenges, however, can be translated into possibilities with investment in the farming sector. There is a need to develop highly remunerative diversified farming systems suitable to the context and develop parallel ecosystems to support access to market, resources as well as knowledge and technical know-how. In this

**Table 8.1:** Districts and CSO partners under the APC project

S.No.	Districts	Blocks	CSO Partner
1	Rayagada	4	PRADAN, Harsha Trust
2	Kandhamal	3	PRADAN
3	Mayurbhanj	4	PRADAN, Centre for Youth and Social Development (CYSD) Shristi
4	Koraput	8	PRADAN, CYSD Harsha Trust Foundation for Ecological Security (FES)
5	Keonjhar	5	Ideal Development Agency (IDA) PRADAN, Shristi
6	Kalahandi	3	Anchalik Janaseva Anusthan (AJSA) Jana Sahajya
7	Dhenkenal	1	Shristi
8	Jharsuguda	2	SEWA (Social Education for Women's Awareness)
9	Sambalpur	2	SIDI (Sambalpur integrated development Institute)
10	Bolangir	5	Adhikar, Vikalapa Shramik Shakti Sangha (SSS), Bolangir Gramodyog Samiti (BGS), Janamukti Anusthan (JMA)
11	Boudh	1	Youth Council for Development Alternatives (YCDA)
12	Nuapada	2	Lokadrusti

Source: Collated by authors from project documents

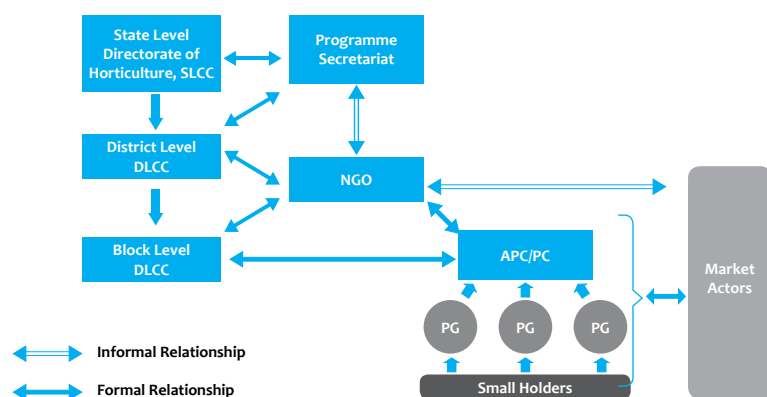
**Table 8.2:** Budget allocation for the project by different stakeholders

S.No.	Stakeholder	Amount (in INR crore)
1	Department of Agriculture and Farmers' Empowerment	293.4
2	OLM	70.86
3	APICOL	17.8
4	BRLF	16.74
5	CSO partners	3.6
<b>Total</b>		<b>401.6</b>

Source: Collated by authors from project documents

context, Government of Odisha in November 2018, launched a multi-stakeholder project 'Promotion of Agriculture Production Cluster (APC) project in tribal regions of Odisha' to trigger growth in farm sector wherein different





**Figure 8.2:** Implementation architecture - APC Project

Source: Project documents

**Table 8.3:** Convergence of schemes under the APC project

Particulars	Probable Sources/ Department
1. Irrigation	OLIC
	OAIC
	Department of Agriculture
	OAIC
	OLIC
	MGNREGA, Department of Agriculture
2. Farm mechanization	OAIC
	Department of Horticulture
	OLIC, OAIC
3. Fruit tree Plantation	Agro Service Centre
	Department of Horticulture, ITDA
4. Aggregation, sorting and packaging centre	Department of Horticulture
	Department of Horticulture in convergence with MGNREGA
5. Shed construction for livestock	Department of Horticulture, ITDA
	MGNREGA, ITDA

Source: Collated by the author from projects documents

The APC is a multi-stakeholder partnership between the Directorate of Horticulture, Agriculture and Farmers Empowerment Department of the Government of Odisha; Odisha Livelihood Mission (OLM) under Panchayati Raj and Drinking Water Department, The Agricultural Promotion and Investment Corporation of Odisha Limited (APICOL), Bharat Rural Livelihoods Foundation (BRLF) and

PRADAN as the lead Civil Society Organization (NGO) with 16 other NGO partners.

The APC project strategizes promotion of remunerative crop production by improving the farming skills of the small and marginal farmers especially women. Under the initiative, through multiple partners it is proposed to organize 100,000 women farmers into 650 Producer Groups for synchronized and climate resilient farming suitable for small holders. A total of 750 local youth would be mentored as agri-entrepreneurs and value chain enablers to catalyze the change process and for long term sustainability.

## Strategic Alliance and Coordination Mechanism

The APC special project has evolved after a series of consultations between the Department of Agriculture and Farmers' Empowerment, BRLF, OLM and PRADAN, with common objective of sustainable and significant enhancement of income of the small farmers in the Odisha highlands through convergence.

To meaningfully achieve the objectives, the Directorate of horticulture is integrating the relevant schemes under the department in the APC project areas. Simultaneously, the project mobilizes resources from other departments also to create sustainable productive assets that hold promise for better village economies. The existing members in SHGs promoted by OLM are being further mobilized to form Producer Groups. The community mobilization part is being undertaken with the support of potential partner NGOs who are working in the project areas and have a good understanding of the local context. PRADAN having expertise in the promotion of livelihoods through collectives is playing the role of Programme Secretariat. PRADAN supports and mentors the partner NGOs, coordinate with the Directorate Horticulture and OLM for smooth implementation of this project.

The APC project has developed a coordination mechanism with all the stakeholders at the state, district and block levels. The Coordination Committee meets regularly for joint monitoring, impact assessment and review of the project

comprising of all stakeholders and is headed by the Principal Secretary at the state level, District Collector at the district level and Agriculture/Horticulture Officer at the block level. Table 8.1, 8.2 and 8.3 shows the project districts and the NGO partners involved, the budget allocation and the different schemes converged under the project respectively.

## Community-based Institutional Mechanisms

This project is taken up in the areas where social mobilization has been done carried out by OLM or CSOs. The focus has been to leverage the existing social mobilization base to strengthen the livelihood processes. At the village level, a Producer Group is formed which would be responsible for village level resource planning and synchronized agriculture and marketing of the produce at the village level. A Producers Group is formed involving around 150 farmers from a cluster of 1-4 villages that becomes the General Body and meets every quarter.

The executive body of 13 members of the PG meets fortnightly.

## Achievements

The Project was inaugurated by the Odisha Chief Minister, Mr Naveen Pattnaik and is one of the most coveted and high investment projects by the Department involving multiple stakeholders. The project received the prestigious SKOCH Governance Award in September 2019, which is considered as highest civilian honor in the country conferred by an independent organization. Table 8.4 gives an overview of the achievements of the project presented in the SLCC held on September 2019.

**Table 8.4.** Achievements of the APC project ( till August 2019)

Parameters	Achievement
Number of Producer Groups formed	548
Number of villages covered	1,366
Number of families covered	57,379
Number of families doing high-value crops	34,768
Total area under High-Value Crops (Acre)	11,074
Total area under Non-Pesticide Management (NPM)	2,614
Total plantation (Acre)	1,628
Total number of Community River Lift Projects Planned (CRLP)	277
CRLP approved	82
CRLP installed	26
Revival of old CRLP planned	248
Old CRLP Revived	29
Micro River Lift Projects Planned	146
Micro River Lift Projects Installed	83
Number of families covered under livestock rearing (goat and backyard poultry)	18,630

Source: Presentation made to SLCC, September 2019

## MAJOR TAKEAWAYS FOR BUILDING GOVERNMENT – NGO PARTNERSHIPS

In the following sections, an attempt has been made to assemble together a set of principles that could be of use in trying to build partnerships between the Government and NGOs primarily, and other partners as need be like the donors or resource institutions. These principles should help us think through the steps to identify most suitable partners, to cobble together the coalition, function together towards achievement of the stated goals and to remain together till the formal closure. A limited set of experiences from Usharmukti and Project APC are being referred to here, to list a few lessons. What are the essential pre-conditions that need to be in place for a fruitful partnership to emerge? What are those factors that keep a partnership going and how do we strengthen partnerships?

## Pre-conditions

That brings us to the question as to what can facilitate effective Government-NGO partnerships. What set of enabling conditions need to exist before a large-scale Government-NGO partnership can be conceived?

## The Intent

One obvious factor that comes into mind is that there needs to be a realisation at the level of both parties that partnerships are required. This can only come from an objective understanding of one's own strengths and limitations. It is a universal truism that nobody is perfect; but does the relevant person at the right moment of time feel so? That is the moot question. The state undoubtedly has the decree, the authority and the financial muscle to undertake development projects. The NGOs traditionally have been involved in various aspects of facilitating citizen-centric development which includes mobilisation of communities, knowledge and technology transfer, reaching to the weakest, innovations, relief and rehabilitation and so on. The engagement of the NGOs at the community level has also created a large number robust community-based institutions including skilled and motivated human resources. Thus, one can say that a fertile ground exists for fruitful partnerships to emerge so that scale and impact can be achieved ensuring that the people with propensity to get excluded do not, and the change is institutionalised at the community level.

Yet why do we not see many partnerships between the state and the NGOs being initiated? One of the most prominent causes is the belief that partnerships are not required. The state is the more powerful party here and if the state believes that it can go alone, then of course it is not in any organisation's capacity to veer the state around to a partnership. By state, of course what is meant is a certain individual, mostly a senior officer at the district or state level who controls resources. If the officer is convinced that partnerships are useful, then it becomes policy and if the incumbent person is not convinced then nothing can move the mountain.

While there is reluctance at the level of the officials, even many of the NGOs are not keen on partnerships as they believe that they are not in the business of scale; the state has that mandate. In such case too, there will be no efforts to look for partnership projects. A lot of organisations lack trust in the state. The major complaint is about the quantity and quality of funding. At one level the activities are mostly not adequately funded and at another level the release of funds remains extremely erratic. This leads to cash flow problems for NGOs, and sometimes problems for the community, like in farming related projects when farmers miss precious time waiting for project support. Therefore, organisations have become sceptic about partnerships; most of them having unpleasant memories of the past. In many cases improper selection of project implementation agencies also results in low quality implementation. This too discourages well-meaning officers who otherwise could be ready to seek partnerships. The main reason here could be that of not having a robust shortlisting and selection mechanism. Not following a proper selection procedure leads to various agencies, even of questionable motives getting into the programme, causing bad name for genuine organisations.

In case of the Usharmukti project the Additional Secretary and Commissioner, MGNREGA, Government of West Bengal has played the lynchpin role. After having a positive experience of witnessing productive NGO – Block / Panchayat collaboration in a few districts, the Additional Secretary was convinced that the experiment can be scaled up for much higher outcomes. In Odisha, the officer who has played a decisive role in the inception of the APC Project is the Principal Secretary of Department of Agriculture, Government of Odisha. Like in West Bengal, it was the Principal Secretary's conviction that sowed the seeds of the partnership project with very ambitious aims. The two officers were able to then build a favourable environment around the idea and bring together multiple actors.

On the other side there were also NGOs who were willing to trust the State once again and try out partnering since there seemed a vision



and a sense of purpose. When the officer in the key position displays conviction and vision it encourages more players to rally around the idea. The presence and encouragement from BRLF, which has a mandate for promoting state-NGO partnerships, was a welcome phenomenon.

## Articulation of the Need and Clarity of Vision

As discussed earlier a clear public statement on the need for starting a partnership has to be there; and this has to be made by the government officer who would be the nodal authority for the partnership to ensue. This statement will be the dealmaker for the partnership. This statement articulates an inspiring goal and explicitly makes clear the intent for building partnerships. All department officials, NGO partners, resource agencies and the community rally around that declaration.

For that statement to emerge, the concerned officer has to feel the need, emanating from a larger vision and also the realisation that she and her department may not be able to achieve the vision if they go ahead by themselves. There has to be a realisation of one's own inadequacies in achieving a goal if help is to be sought. Most often the initial informal dialogue with the incumbent authority is undertaken by members of NGOs or by another senior officer who has had a positive experience with partnerships. But it is important that there is a public statement of intent for building a partnership. The support sought may not be just in implementation, but also in policy formulation, research, documentation, evaluation and knowledge and capacity building.

The two officers must have realised that they would be able to allocate resources required for the programmes but the social mobilisation and the process innovations required, need to be ensured by the NGOs. The NGOs also should continue to work with the community even after the livelihoods assets are created, on the front of livelihoods promotion. Once a community centred programme implementation methodology is created it becomes easier for gradually layering resources from different departments and programmes. Previous experiences have also

been of help in these matters. In Odisha the positive experience and ambience created through Mission Millets Programme anchored by WASSAN was a major influence on the thinking of the Principal Secretary. The Mission Millets is a multi-location, multi-stakeholder partnership aimed at reviving millets as a major crop in the rain-fed areas. In West Bengal the Springshed Revival Programme in the Northern Hills, in which BRLF brought in the financial resources and many NGOs like Prasari were participants, was an encouraging pre-cursor that had created a facilitative climate. Informal discussions held by the senior officers with civil society helped clarify the objectives and the contours of the programme after which the projects were formally announced. The pre-launch activity of intense discussions with potential NGO partners, donors and departmental staff at all levels acted as the design phase and helped detail out the project constituents such as the goals, budget contributions, the architecture, the systems and processes, and the distribution of roles and responsibilities. The formalisation was a simple procedure after that.

## Evolving Understanding about Strengths and Weaknesses

It is often said that we build partnership on strengths. But a more nuanced statement would be that partnerships are built on a realistic understanding of one's strengths and those of others and a candid admission of one's shortcomings. The glue that holds a partnership together is not the confidence of one's strong points but an honest appreciation of one's weak points. The endurance of a partnership depends on how strongly each partner realises the importance of the others.

Having established that the partners need to be appreciative of each other, an important pre-condition to a successful partnership is that the partners need to be well aware of what each partner brings to the table. The partnership is not a casual arrangement but a serious engagement; there is a reason on why each of the partners is there in the partnership. Some of the partners may be there for the implementation of the

programme (say watershed development); while another may bring in the money; and some other may be in capacity building. A set of the partners may be in knowledge and technology provision; yet another may provide the overall management support. How well one understands one's own and others' roles and duties well, would determine the durability of the partnership.

While the group may expect a certain capability from a partner, it goes without saying that it is important to ensure that the capability as claimed actually exists, as evidenced through unbiased reports. Also, there is need to ensure that the partners are above-board in their own internal financial and other dealings. A formal due-diligence audit should be mandatory if we are thinking of setting up partnerships for the long-term.

Both Usharmukti and the APC project have set of capable partners and each of the partners brings in specific capabilities. The government departments bring in the programme investments, whereas the donors bring in the NGO costs. The departmental investments are specifically for livelihoods assets creation and nothing more. The role of the NGOs is not only to ensure that the government allocations are invested properly and reach the deserving communities, but they broaden the agenda to farm-based livelihoods and sustainable incomes. Since the livelihood's agenda is broader than asset-creation, agencies such as the Livelihoods Mission in Odisha have been brought in which provides capacity building support to farmers' groups and helps in market linkages.

BRLF which is the donor partner for NGO costs also ensures that a due-diligence on the systems and capacities of the organisations is carried out. BRLF also works with the lead NGO PRADAN in policy advocacy so that the lessons that emerge from the field are converted to government orders and guidelines in a timely manner.

## Like-mindedness

Another factor that contributes to the longer-term sustenance of the partnership is that the

partners are chosen carefully for their ideology and approach. It is the responsibility of those conceiving the partnership to ensure that the organisations and individuals who come on board have similar ideas about development. So, while we look for specific technical capabilities, it is good to be watchful of the development philosophy of the organisations. Both in Odisha and West Bengal most of the NGOs selected are existing BRLF partners who already are engaged in livelihoods promotion among the tribal communities.

## Need for a Process Facilitator

Partnerships are complex because of the diversity of the people involved and the vantage each one comes from. There are complex human processes involved here as much as technologies and systems. True partnerships exist where there is not only the meeting of minds, but there is the meeting of hearts. Ignoring the human processes and sensitivities involved in many-sided partnerships will be to the peril of all involved. Involvement of a process facilitator who is unbiased should be explored as a critical ingredient to building the partnership. The role of the facilitator actually begins even as the partnership is being conceived; in defining the larger vision, the possible architecture, the relationships and the processes. The facilitator may play an important role in identifying partners and also in negotiating roles and responsibilities. The facilitator also could help in designing the systems and processes to be followed. Even as the operational components of the partnership are being put in place, the most important intervention of the facilitator will be to put in place a value framework. Nurturance of fundamental principles such as transparency, trust, autonomy, collaboration and so on is extremely crucial to the endurance of the partnership. Identifying and empowering a process facilitator is an essential step to be taken right at the beginning. This facilitator would be a co-traveller through the project period.

Yet the fact is that in both the Usharmukti and the Project APC there has been no process

facilitator explicitly appointed. PRADAN and BRLF who have experience in partnership processes are informally playing the role, in addition to their assigned roles. PRADAN and BRLF maintain an oversight of the programme in order to ensure that the communication channels are open and the spirit of professional collegiality is maintained. There are regular interactions with the partners and the officials individually and in groups to ensure that all points of views are received and the most suitable policies are formulated. These interactions are in addition to the routine monitoring and review meetings which help build a facilitative working environment.

## Funding

Many of the government programmes as they are originally designed do not have provisions to pay for the costs of the NGOs. They have funding for the community-based investments but not for payment to NGOs. In such cases it might be useful to bring in one or more external donors into the group support NGO costs based on the overall plan. For the donor too, it is a win-win arrangement, as their limited support to the NGOs will help unlock a substantial quantum of resources from the government. If there are external donor partners, it also will be beneficial to the NGOs as there will not be any fund-release uncertainties, which is routinely associated with government funds. BRLF, the Ford Foundation and Arghyam are funding the NGOs and the overall project management costs exclusively for the partnership, whereas the NGOs are drawing additional support from their existing partners like the Axis Bank Foundation, Hindustan Unilever Foundation, Azim Premji Philanthropic Initiatives, The World Bank and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, in the Usharmukti and APC Projects. There is no state funding for either the NGO costs or for the overall project management. While this is not the best arrangement for the NGOs as they have to arrange financing from multiple sources because of insufficiency from any one source, it is a step forward in the sense that there is recognition at the level of the state that adequate funding for

NGOs is important and arranging that has to be part of the initial plan.

## FACTORS THAT STRENGTHEN THE PARTNERSHIP

A task well begun is half-done. Thus, the launching of the partnership with the right preparation and the right set of partners is a desirable beginning. However, it also true that task well begun is only half done. The other half also needs to be carried out successfully, then only can we claim that the task is completed successfully. A lot of care has to be taken to ensure that the partnership itself and the purpose for which the partnership was put together are not compromised.

## Defining a Shared Vision

The first and foremost step that is needed to nurture the partnership, once the partners are in, is for all to gather and evolve a shared vision, a challenging goal and the foundational values. This might even be a facilitated process yet the important point is that the government officers, NGO staff, the researchers, donors and the other partners must be excited by the same vision of change among communities that they are intending to serve through this partnership. This dialogue right at the beginning is also necessary because of each of the parties brings a different world view, language and theory of change. It is an opportunity to align these differences and mobilise themselves to work together. Fixing a challenging goal is an unavoidable step. A goal that is defined in operational terms, and high enough so that each of the individual present is inspired by it, owns it and commits to it.

The major investments in Usharmukti are sourced from the MGNREGA; and in Project APC it is the agriculture department. Yet in Usharmukti the aim is to rejuvenate seven depleted rivers in the western highlands and in Project APC the mission is to create 100,000 farmer lakhpatis. These are formidable goals that are inspiring and challenging. Each partner

including the departments realise that these are goals that need everyone to pull hard and together. Setting and agreeing to a super-ordinate goal of this nature itself is a step in building a unified force.

### Clear delineation of roles and responsibilities

Each partner is in the partnership for a reason. It is of supreme importance that these roles and responsibilities, deliverables, penalties, accountability framework, and rights of each partner are delineated clearly. These roles, duties and rights are to be evolved based on detailed discussions held jointly with all partners. It is also necessary to detail out grievance redress and exit mechanisms.

To ensure that these are well understood and owned by each partner it is often the practice that each party enters into a formal agreement with the government department.

Depending on the situation and the need, the contracts could be bi-partite or multi-partite. In both the West Bengal and Odisha projects there are a slew of MoUs – both bi-partite and tri-partite between the department, donors and the NGOs. In case the support from the donor is only for a specific component with an NGO, then there would be a bi-partite between the donor and NGO too. The agreements are drafted and executed depending on the need of the project for delineating responsibilities clearly.

### Reinforcing Values and Vision

Some of the basic values in any functioning partnership would be trust, autonomy, mutuality and dignity. These are indicative and in an actual situation the set of partners need to generate their own list. Ideally these values are evolved through a discussion among all and documented. It is then circulated and made known to all. The role of the facilitator in evolving the list of values is crucial to ensuring that everything significant is incorporated and the list is owned by all.

Strict observance of these values would ensure that there is transparency in the dealings and there is democratic space available to all partners to contribute as equals and be heard when

there is a grievance. More importantly it would motivate each partner to perform to their best knowing that their contribution is valued, with the awareness also that all contributions together lead to the desired outcome. Adherence to these values at all points of time in the partnership is mandatory, irrespective of the short-term results. The achievement of the end-results in the best possible manner does not depend upon setbacks in the immediate term. It depends upon the ability of the larger group to re-mobilise itself, fix accountabilities, support each other and focus on getting back on track while maintaining transparency and dignity.

This necessitates reinforcing and internalising the values on a regular basis. Every partner, especially the government departments, donors etc., who hold unequal power compared to the implementing partners, needs to ensure that in any manner of interactions-whether one-to-one or in small or larger groups-the basic values are constantly emphasised. One cannot underplay the necessity of regular reflection events (as separate from target plan-achievement review meetings) where the partnership processes especially the observance of values are reviewed.

It goes without saying that there would be many more processes in the partnership to ensure that all the partners are constantly reminded of the significance of the partnership, and the deliverables in the partnership as mandated to each member are meticulously adhered to. The most important aspect is for each partner to realise that everyone's contribution is as important as one's own. The given task is not complete till everyone's task is finished. Thus, a process of laterally reaching out and helping each other in ensuring overall task accomplishment is a good practice to be encouraged in partnerships. This at one level ensures that all the project goals are achieved, but more importantly, helps build a team spirit.

In addition to the events, there are also the routine processes like planning, budgeting, monitoring, reviewing and reporting, and re-planning. The values that we cherish of transparency, trust, participation, etc., need to inform these processes also.

How easy or difficult is pinning accountability and taking responsibility for setting things right that have gone wrong is also an important indicator of a successful partnership. Unlike in a bi-lateral arrangement, in a multi-actor project, it could be difficult to pin-point which actor is directly responsible for a slip-up. But it has to be done; only then can we identify the agency to be tasked with fixing the fault. It is also true that if not handled with utmost care, improper fixing of responsibility can also lead to partnership breakdowns.

As for values, even though there are no explicit statements or documentation of values, yet observing the partnership processes in both Odisha and West Bengal, the values can be identified. We see trust and equality in operation which is an extremely rare phenomenon when government and non-government staff work together. The camaraderie and the openness, the senior officers try to maintain with the NGO staff and the relatively junior officers, point to a healthy operating environment. There is less fear in expressing views, as compared to the routine departmental way of functioning.

It is obvious that these values flow from above, but that has helped created a facilitative climate of achievement and hard work. The interactions that we see between the staff of the departments and the NGOs is less about monitoring and supervision, but more about learning, seeking support and even challenging to do better. There is seemingly enough space and autonomy for the partner NGOs to innovate and experiment, within the scope of the larger project. Mutuality and inter-dependence are another set of values seen in operation, as there is a general conviction that the partners need each other and only together can they achieve the big goal they have set for themselves. Watching the various meeting and other communication processes, it is also visible that these values are reinforced as and when there is an opportunity.

## Ensuring Timely Fund Release

Funds are important, especially for NGOs who are dependent on grants. Even larger NGOs would not have large quantities of untied funds with which to tide over delay in funds

release by donors. In a number of government funded projects, a major lacuna is the inordinate delays that occur every time in releasing funds. This happens both with NGO costs and also with programme funds. Both these types of delays can have adverse effects on the smooth implementation of the activities.

In case external donors are supporting the NGOs costs, then there is a relief on that part. However, this still will not ensure the community investment funds are released on time. While co-ordinated efforts at all levels must happen in order to ensure timely release of funds, some special steps also need to be taken to guide funding any partnership projects. Since this would be a special project of the government, the relevant department must ensure that appropriate guidelines are issued in order to prioritise the releases for this project.

As observed, the release of funds for the programmes is slow in some cases. In the Usharmukti there is an issue that the wage release is delayed. Similarly, there was a delay in release of working capital funds to Producer Groups promoted under the Project APC, by the Odisha Livelihoods Mission. But since there is a regular review of the project by the senior leadership of the state, there is special attention paid to unlocking the bottlenecks. This being the setting up stage of the partnership, there is much more ground to be covered in terms of increasing ease of doing business; but the ground is ready and there are visible changes.

## Putting in Place a Project Management Unit with Special Skills

In a large-scale project of this nature, it is only obvious that there must be a Project Management Unit (PMU) that will ensure the outcomes. A PMU is the external face of the project and therefore must represent the values and stance of the Project. The extent of purposiveness and sophistication the PMU develops will have an immediate and direct impact on the overall achievement of the Project. Thus, the PMU needs to be created carefully.



In complex partnership projects as the ones being envisaged, it must be ensured that a PMU must have senior development professionals who can understand and handle the complexities. The PMU most importantly anchors the essential tasks of initiation, planning, budgeting, implementing, monitoring, review and closure.

In development projects where there are multiple parties involved and we are looking for community-based outcomes, the PMU needs to follow up on not just target achievement and cost and time efficiencies, but also must deal with these issues based on community realities. The PMU must be responsible not only towards the government department concerned and the donors, but also must be sensitive to the field realities and the uncertainties associated.

In addition to the routine management responsibilities, the PMU also should have the ability to visualise the kind of issues at the implementation level and make available support for the same. Appropriate technical support agencies may be brought in for this purpose.

In addition to the complexities of the social development, another important factor to be aware of is that the project is based on a live partnership between agencies coming from multiple vantage points. It requires high amount of sophistication and sensitivity to facilitate a smooth relationship, helping each partner envision the larger picture and not get stuck on daily quibbles. The PMU needs to be led by persons of high social and emotional maturity.

Most advanced technology for gathering and analysing information and timely decision making is an important area that the PMU needs to invest in. Use of an appropriately designed decision support system can enhance the quality of decisions and will help conserve resources.

An important role of the PMU will be policy formulation by working closely with the departments. Government orders and policy guidelines would need to be issued on a very regular basis to deal with various issues or bottlenecks faced by the implementing partners. By putting in place an effective feedback loop, the PMU must be able to convert field signals to appropriate policy guidelines.

In summary the roles of the PMU could be delineated as:

- Providing overall operational leadership to the partnership in order to achieve project objectives and maximize impact
- Setting up standard systems, processes and norms for planning, budgeting, coordination and monitoring and reporting
- Coordinating and facilitating all capacity building events for the NGOs and the Government
- Knowledge management and dissemination
- Facilitating and maintaining an enriching relationships among the stakeholders
- Ensuring necessary flow of communications between State Government and NGO partners
- Ensuring timely issue of circulars and government orders and access at all levels
- Trouble-shooting and problem solving support to NGO partners
- Ensuring proper closure.

PRADAN is formally inducted as the Project Secretariat, which is like a PMU in the Project APC and in the Usharmukti PRADAN is a lead NGO but also informally plays some of the roles of the PMU. One of the most prominent results of this close engagement at the level of the senior leadership is ensuring quick promulgation of government orders and guidelines. In Usharmukti one of the significant circulars was that the Usharmukti plans will receive priority in the Project blocks and 70 percent of the projects by amount had to be from these plans. There is a focus in Usharmukti on building livelihood assets. Thus, the circulars try to create focus on livelihood assets for individual beneficiaries, like farm pond, other water harvesting structures, plantations etc. One of the orders have specially banned land levelling as an activity, as across the state, land levelling is a popular activity to show fake labour and swindle resources. Similarly, in the APC Project the focus is on convergence and a lot of powers have been devolved to the District Collector to facilitate convergence of schemes in the district. An elaborate set of project guidelines which give primacy to community-based planning processes for convergence, are under

preparation. The project is regularly monitored from the level of the Principal Secretary and immediate instructions are issued in case of policy bottlenecks or procedural delays.

PRADAN plays a crucial role in the training of the partners NGO staffs that they in turn are equipped to build capacities and facilitate implementation by the department/Block or Panchayat functionaries. PRADAN as the lead organisation in capacity building prepares the training modules, formats, and protocols and provides them to the cutting-edge staff. Quality assurance is an essential task that PRADAN delivers, by vetting the plans and also providing hand holding support to the field level functionaries. MIS maintenance is another important role delivered by PRADAN. In the Usharmukti and Project APC there are dedicated MIS officers and data collection protocol. PRADAN in its nodal role ensures accurate and timely data flow so that appropriate reports are generated that can help keep track of progress.

## MAJOR CONCERNS AND WAY FORWARD

### Institutionalisation of partnership

A major threat to the hitherto encouraging experience is the apprehension of what will happen after the key officer leaves the current post due to promotion or transfer? There are umpteen examples of very promising partnership initiatives that have fallen by the way side because the officer who initiated the partnership moved on. Both the Usharmukti and the project APC are currently doing well, but are in the initial phase. The euphoria and excitement of the early days are still alive and all the main protagonists who were instrumental in setting up the project are still around. It is time to think of how the programme can be institutionalised. It was heartening to note that this matter has not escaped the attention of key actors in the partnership at both places.

One of the key steps being taken is to create adequate documentation of the arrangements,

through MoUs, written communications and so on, so that there is transparency and record for posterity of the process of how the partnership has been given shape to. There are active social media groups which has everyone as members and active dialoguing. This in addition to building the dialogue is a permanent record of transactions. These processes create the institutional memory. Similarly, the policy guidelines, advisories and orders that are issued from time to time are compiled in one place and placed in the public domain.

Another important step is to create enough public interest and appreciation. Regular publication of interesting human-interest stories in the media is an active mandate for the programme secretariat and the department. Thus, there are regular articles getting published in newspapers even though there is room for improvement. The quality and depth of the articles can further be improved. More researched papers can be generated. Active presence in social media spaces such as Twitter and Facebook, increase the spread of information and build stakeholders.

Increasing the base of stakeholders is also important. So, there is a move to bring in many more departments than just one or two, so that more people have stake in the success of the programme. In Odisha, in addition to the Agriculture Ministry, the Ministry of Rural Development ministry (now Livelihoods Mission; efforts on to bring in MGNREGA) is already there. Attempts are being made to bring in the Forest Department and Tribal Affairs Ministry. More private sector market players are also being invited to participate in the consortium. Similarly, in West Bengal also other ministries and departments are being roped in.

Creating interest at the level of the political leadership is also important for long term sustenance. Deliberate efforts are made to ensure that the political executive of the state is aware and appreciative of the good work that is happening in the partnership. Important events such as the launch or agreement-signing are attended by Ministers and higher-up's in the bureaucracy to ensure it is the radar of the senior leadership of the state and they remain committed.

Dedicated web-sites that are active and store-house of information for all types of audience, is also must for such programmes. Thanks to the foresight of the leadership, both the programmes have active web pages. The successes from the field and the learning material emerging are all put up for public viewership.

Concurrent monitoring and learning and research are also advisable activities much of which is not happening now. Roping in a high-quality research agency right at the beginning who would accompany the programme and create evidence for programme improvement and policy advocacy would be desirable.

### More partnerships

There is never a perfect result. There are always possibilities for improvement. Detailed in the Chapter are experiences from two active experiments. There are already results emerging

and more lessons will emerge as the projects progress. If we are convinced that partnerships are the way ahead, we should be able to already take on board the lessons and get ready to roll-out more partnerships. The challenges of tomorrow require new approaches and initiatives. The citizens through their own organisations and the civil-society must engage as equals with the state agencies and the market institutions in order to ensure holistic develop all around. Gone are the days in which citizens from the poorer sections were passive recipients of largesse and were shy of the markets. Today the citizen wants to participate; engage; lead. Institutional mechanisms that respond to those aspirations have to be given shape to so that we can really witness people-centric development envisioned by the founding fathers of our democracy. The need is to innovate new ways of engagement and roll out more new experiments.