

CSO Partnership in South Odisha: Renewed Stance

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Learning to step back from a 'leadership' role, learning to partner without an agenda, learning to encourage the partner organization explore its potential and share its skills and knowledge is seeming to be a journey that PRADAN in Odisha is attempting.

PROLOGUE

Partnership with civil society organizations (CSOs) is a much deliberated agenda at PRADAN. We have had different kinds of CSO partnership experiences in different places, over the years. In Koraput, we have had our share of learning, de-learning and re-learning. This article describes some of our experiences in our partnership in Koraput in the recent years. The objective of sharing this is, first, to have more people on board about the current endeavour and, thus, to draw inputs to further sharpen our steps towards partnership building with CSOs; and, second, the experience itself may motivate other teams to take up initiatives on similar lines.

RETROSPECTION

We started working with other CSOs in Koraput, in 2012, with the emergence of the Orissa Tribal Employment and Livelihood Programme (OTELP) Plus project. During that period, the OTELP project was at its peak under the leadership of Mr. Sushanta Nanda, the former Programme Director (PD) of the project; PRADAN too was in the limelight after its good performance in Balliguda. Therefore, the idea of doing an OTELP Plus programme in consortium mode, wherein organizations such as PRADAN will guide four or five other organizations in implementation, came about.

This opportunity was discussed at the South Odisha Development Initiative (SODI), a network established for the development of South Odisha. Interested NGOs such as Harsha Trust, Chetana Organic Farmers' Association, PRAGATI, Livolink Foundation and PRADAN came together to form a consortium to take up the project in Koraput. The NGOs asked PRADAN to be the lead NGO and hold the secretariat for the consortium, to which PRADAN agreed. Through this partnership, PRADAN hoped to build associations with other CSOs and, through them, reach a larger number of families in Koraput district, who would then, be directly or indirectly benefitted.

Therefore, to strengthen the spirit of partnership, in the beginning itself, it was discussed that all partners would hold equal importance, have an equal say in consortium affairs, and contribute to the growth of the consortium. All of them will remain accountable to each other. Nonetheless, it was easier said than done. The implementation of the time-bound project took centre-stage and precedence over the grooming of partnerships. Partner organizations treated it as just another project and engaged contractual staff for implementation. Time and again, the aspects of partnership were discussed; yet, maybe because of the genesis of the association, implementation of the OTELP Plus project overshadowed the whole process. The organizations were more interested in the short-term goals of the project at hand than in nurturing the partnership with each other.

In hindsight, PRADAN was also not an exception. We were also bogged down often by the pressure of meeting targets and overlooked instances when we could have helped strengthen the partnership. For example, there were times when our partner organizations invited us to events beyond the OTELP Plus project boundary and we turned down the invitation not understanding the importance of attending such events to strengthen each other's inclusion. Similarly, our expectation for quality, transparency and integrity in handling the project was too exacting for the NGOs to handle, and further alienated us from them. In addition, at times the feeling of being superior crept in. For example, we believed that PRADAN's way of community mobilization was the best and that the others should follow it. The constant pursuance of that line of thought may have irked some people, and augmented the alienation factor. Therefore, the partnership did not blossom the

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way we would have liked it to. In short, the difference between the lead NGO and member NGOs remained. And because PRADAN wore two hats, one of a co-traveller and one of a monitor, the NGOs received confusing signals; this further hindered the partnership grooming process.

By the time we identified the above factors and acted upon them, the PD of the OTELP Plus programme was transferred and a new PD took over. The new person did not seem to find much value in such a consortium arrangement and, to our dismay, he started dismantling it. The arrangement came to an end by mid-2015.

The consortium partners then met to chalk out the future of the group. Two major things came up as a common agenda for the association—the promotion of vibrant community institutions and staff development. As an action step, Harsha Trust took charge of designing a study, which would generate a baseline regarding the status of various forms of institutions promoted by three of the participating organizations. However, due to some sudden crisis situation at Harsha Trust, things didn't move at all for almost for three or four months.

A NEW BEGINNING

With all these rich experiences in the bag, the concept of bringing all the prominent NGOs of Koraput to a common platform to speed up the process of establishing a just and equitable society, without any project bindings, emerged. The basic idea was to facilitate a group of NGOs to come together without any project mandates, and deliberate on the needs of Koraput, the existing opportunities, and how organizations could help and strengthen

each other to bring discernible positive change in the Koraput region.

To start with, a meeting of the NGOs in Lamtaput block was convened in January 2016. PRADAN, Society for Promoting Rural Education and Development (SPREAD), and Asha Kiran Society participated and tried to map the various CSOs

of the district, who could act complementarily for the holistic development of the area. CSOs (as enlisted by the participants of the first meeting) were then consulted with, regarding the relevance of such a forum for the district, and the response was a positive one.

Subsequently, a district-level meeting was convened in May 2016, in which organization heads or district heads of many prominent NGOs in Koraput such as Centre for Youth and Social Development (CYSD), Dhan Foundation, SPREAD, Foundation for Ecological Society (FES), Koraput Farmers Association, Harsha Trust, Chetna Organic Farmers Association (COFA), Asha Kiran Society and PRADAN participated. The need for such a forum was discussed at length. Because all NGOs have some expertise, experience, knowledge of the area and have been working on different themes related to development, there was ample scope of sharing these with each other and of playing a complementary and supporting role with each other for the larger well-being of Koraput district. This would be promoted as a learning forum, to which everyone is welcome to join and learn. There will be no compulsion on a person who has participated in an event, to deliver something in return. Some NGOs may want to take up particular issues whereas others may not choose to do so; there will be complete freedom.

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THE JOURNEY SO FAR

The issue first discussed in the forum was the rampant malnutrition in Koraput district and the use of millets in reviving the situation. Dhan Foundation was identified as the agency with end-to-end expertise on millet cultivation. It had extensive experience in seed selection, preservation, improved millet

cultivation, storage, processing, value addition and marketing. Therefore, it was entrusted with the responsibility of taking the lead in training all other CSOs on millet cultivation. Subsequently, the first-phase training was organized by Dhan Foundation, which encompassed both class room and field training. The field staff of all the organizations participated. Of the eight participating agencies, four could do scale demonstration in their respective field areas whereas other CSOs shared their inability to do much in this regard. Unlike, during the earlier association, there was no discomfort or discontent, and all the organizations were comfortable with working together.

In the second meeting, the discussion was on how the WADI programme could be implemented in some of the villages of Lamtaput or Nandapur under the Focused Area Development Programme (FADP) programme by CYSD. Based on that discussion, the programme was implemented in two villages of Lamtaput block and CYSD's staff took the prime role to actualize it with the help of PRADAN. It was encouraging to see that the CYSD staff commuted from Koraput to PRADAN's field area in Lamtaput to ensure timely interventions at-least five to six times, even when it was raining heavily.

The third meeting of the learning group was held on 9th of August 2016 at SPREAD's office, Koraput. Asha Kiran Society's agro-forestry model, the opportunities in Orissa Agro Industries Corporation (OAIC), Orissa Lift Irrigation Corporation (OLIC) schemes for irrigation and the insurance schemes implemented by Dhan Foundation were discussed at length. The district officials of OAIC were also invited to this meeting. Based on the deliberations, a few action plans were worked out.

As per the action plan, a training programme was organized by Asha Kiran Society, where the model was elaborately discussed and shown to the participants through field visits. The model appealed to all and the responsibility for preparing a note, creating a model estimation, and influencing the district administration to take up the model under MGNREGA has been entrusted to SPREAD, Harsha Trust, CYSD and PRADAN.

Exposure Visit to The Integrated Farming Model, Promoted by Asha Kiran

SPREAD also held a meeting on the National Food Security Act, which all the CSOs attended enthusiastically.

The agenda for the next meeting is how the CSOs of Koraput can help villagers get what is rightfully theirs under MGNREGA. In addition, as per the plan of the third learning group meeting, one exposure-cum-training event will be conducted at Bangurpoda village, Lamtaput, in which the OAIC river lift scheme will be installed, mainly through a community driven approach. This event will be facilitated by the JE OAIC.

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NO FUNDING WORRIES

The best part of such an arrangement is that it does not require any outside funding and, therefore, there is no pressure of delivering something through a top-down approach. Meetings are held in the office of each NGO by turn; on an average,

each NGO has to convene one meeting a year. The convening organization bears the boarding cost for that meeting. In case of training, the respective organizations bear the boarding cost whereas the convening organization arranges for the venue and, if required, the night stay.

To sum up, unlike the earlier association, the following things are happening differently:

1. Learning from each other and, thus, contributing to the local area development in a better way, seems to be the central agenda.
2. Each of the organizations is inviting the others for their internal events. This culture was almost missing in our earlier consortium arrangement.
3. The group had started without any pre-set agenda; the member organizations are coming forward to share their ideas with more spontaneity.
4. Organizations are taking the responsibility to train others unlike the earlier arrangement, wherein it was mainly PRADAN's headache.

EPILOGUE

Although this journey is in its nascent stage, it seems quite promising. During this journey, a sharing from one of our partner NGOs summarizes the essence of this new initiative:

Dear Fellow Sojourners,

Thank you for visiting Asha Kiran Society and being part of the learning journey. While all of you were here, a thought came to my mind which I reflected upon for a little longer and thought of following it up with a mail.

You are aware that we are running a hospital for nearly 25 years now and are able to offer secondary-level health care for people of this region. We would like you to consider this hospital as a place where you also have a stake. We would like to serve your contacts/beneficiaries that are in need of medical care which we can provide. If they are poor and need subsidized treatment, it will be our

privilege to offer the same to them. As we are empanelled under the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana -Below Poverty Line (RSBY BPL), the patients can avail in-patient treatment, free of cost. We have specialty clinics for ante-natal check-ups, sickle cell disease and lifestyle diseases such as diabetes and hypertension. In case you want to enquire more about this, do drop in a mail. In case you want to refer a patient, please send them with a text message to either me or Frederick. We would like to be of service to you and to the people whom you serve.

Hoping to hear from you in this regard,

Mathew