

# PRADAN is Thirty

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*Celebrating the journey, the challenges and the successes of PRADAN as a leader in promoting rural livelihoods for three decades, the author focuses on the way ahead.*

PRADAN will be 30 years old on April 18 this year. This article traces the recent history of PRADAN, articulates the personal understanding of the author about where it stands today, touches briefly upon important issues and suggests that PRADAN reorganized itself for greater relevance.

## **PRADAN 2015:VISION AND NEW STANCE**

In November 2004, PRADAN launched a visioning exercise—a formal initiative to identify the challenges and the opportunities in 2015, and the ways in which it could grow very fast to meet these challenges. The visioning exercise was aimed at looking 10 years ahead, namely, 2015. The Vision for 2015, arrived at in November 2005, articulated that PRADAN would be working with 1.5 million poor rural families in 100 districts in the operational areas of seven states while also exploring some adjoining areas and states.

During the visioning exercise, there was a clear shift in PRADAN's stance of engaging with the world. PRADAN will proactively seek out partners with common areas of interest, in the context of its development task, that is, interventions of PRADAN with families in villages. PRADAN will orchestrate its web of partners, keeping the needs of the poor people in focus. It will enter into a relationship of give and take, of helping 'others' in order to achieve the common developmental task. Strategies to achieve this will include working directly with poor communities (as was being done earlier), non-direct action (later renamed as 'partnership action'), policy advocacy, generating awareness of rural issues through the media and engaging in a transformational relationship with other stakeholders.

## REVIEW OF EXPERIENCE SINCE 2007

In March 2007, PRADAN was in active touch with a little more than one lakh families. Four years later, that is, in March 2011, these numbers doubled.

PRADAN's plan for 2011–12, if fully achieved, will take the number of families to 310,000. The above figures refer to families reached directly by PRADAN teams and do not include those involved through its partnership with other NGOs. In the last four years, PRADAN entered into partnership with other NGOs in a number of states. The usual mode of organizing partnership action has been through the formation of NGO forums. PRADAN has established a working relationship with about 70 NGOs for partnership action.

A conscious attempt was made to reach out to interior and poorer areas during this period as PRADAN continued withdrawing from areas that had better economic growth. Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM), with evolved methodologies, became an organization-wide activity. Improved cultivation of food crops, vegetables and orchards as cash crops struck roots in many areas facilitated by a large number of teams. Tasar rearing developed into a robust livelihood activity spreading across many states. Small-holder broiler poultry farming established its presence in the sector through an array of interconnected organizations.

Interventions were made on other well-being issues beyond livelihoods, in line with needs spelt out in the 'Vision 2015' document. The education intervention and model village project in Purulia, the rights-based initiatives in Kesla and Hazaribag, and the water-sanitation initiative in Koderma are examples. However, these initiatives continue to remain only a

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handful and are yet to be taken up across PRADAN on a larger scale. The newly initiated, multi-location project 'Facilitating Women in Endemic Poverty Regions of India to Access, Actualize and Sustain Provisions

on Women Empowerment' promises spreading the 'well-being agenda' (the term, in PRADAN, implies improved state of health, education, sense of security, etc.) across PRADAN.

Significant progress was made in realizing the dream of launching a Masters-level programme to educate people interested in taking up transformative grass-roots practice as a career. A two-year M. Phil Programme in Transformative Development Practice is to be launched during the next academic year, that is, August 2012 by Ambedkar University, Delhi, in collaboration with PRADAN.

As PRADAN stands today, we have built a large professional development institution with integrity, with the formal say of PRADAN professionals in matters relating to the larger development task. The organizational structure, systems, processes and work culture support its professionals to engage with communities over a long term. PRADAN has been a leader in promoting rural livelihoods in both farm and non-farm sectors in India. Many of PRADAN's initiatives have influenced mainstream actions in poverty alleviation. Over 1,300 development professionals have undergone PRADAN's structured training and grass-roots immersion experience till date; 80 per cent of them continue to engage in some way or the other in eradicating poverty even if they are not currently in PRADAN.

There have been many achievements and there have been many debates and concerns as well.

Whereas the area-saturation approach (that is, reaching out to as many poor families as possible in a contiguous geographical area, as opposed to spreading out far and wide, touching only a few families in various pockets) and working through women's self-help groups (SHGs), initiated in the early nineties, continue as PRADAN's basic grass-roots engagement strategies, questions were raised during the Vision 2015 exercise on whether only working for livelihoods, whatever be the excellence of that process, would automatically lead to the well-being of the families. The subsequent discussions gave rise to a changed strategy, in which a 'livelihoods-plus' approach incorporating actions on health, education, basic services as well as rights and entitlements was underlined.

PRADAN is currently discussing the issue of self-efficacy. According to the psychologist Albert Bandura, known as the originator of the concept of self-efficacy, it is "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations." In other words, self-efficacy is a person's belief in his or her ability to succeed in a particular situation. Bandura described these beliefs as determinants of how people think, behave, and feel. Even though there have been major successes around livelihoods, and the assets and incomes of thousands of families have significantly increased, the question is, has that enhanced the self-efficacy of the individual family members? If not, are they sufficiently enabled and can the results sustain? Will the livelihood gains lead to enhanced 'agency' (in sociology, agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices) of the individuals, which is being cited as the ultimate 'developmental output' of PRADAN?

There is no system to measure self-efficacy or to measure its progression yet and, therefore, it is not possible to measure whether interventions so far have indeed brought about changes or whether these changes could have been faster. Facilitating positive changes in the families' 'income and assets' to 'doing abilities' (simply put, to knowledge and skills) to 'self view and being abilities' (in other words, how one sees oneself, confidence) has been the progression of PRADAN's thoughts about its developmental outcomes that evolved over the past decades.

During the discussions and debates around the quality of the developmental outputs of PRADAN, counter-questions have been raised. One thought is that the livelihood gains of families and PRADAN's way of facilitating have indeed enhanced the 'doing' and the 'being' abilities of individuals, which are evident through their interactions with the mainstream. The enhanced wherewithal through livelihood gains is a great facilitator—a facilitator for them to handle other well-being issues and for negotiating with the mainstream, that is, the market, government institutions, commercial establishments, the upper caste, the economically well-off, etc.

PRADAN, through its intense engagement on livelihoods, has progressed significantly in mastering the art and science of livelihoods promotion for the poor in isolated and excluded communities and its expertise in this field is unmatched today. There is, however, need for further enhancement of expertise in this field and many paths remain to be discovered. Whereas any additional agenda must not dilute its focus on livelihoods, PRADAN can always find more efficacious ways to intervene.

Concerns have been mounting in PRADAN about the condition of women, even though women's groups have been the bedrock of its interventions. It is apparent that the condition of women has not improved commensurately even though the livelihoods conditions of families have improved. Various episodic improvements notwithstanding, women are yet to be equal in various decision-making spaces within their family and community.

The General Council, GC, (comprising of all executives who have been with PRADAN for four or more years) in its meeting held in December 2010 observed that the movement towards the new stance had been sporadic even though it developed into synergetic action in some cases. PRADAN adopted the new stance with a perspective towards the development of self efficacy primarily with existing stakeholders and mostly because of invitations from them. PRADAN has not yet fully owned the new stance and not deliberated much on what is at stake in the changing context. There is lack of confidence to act and no clear-cut strategy for aligning stakeholders. PRADAN professionals have a tendency to confine themselves to known territories and seem to fear engaging with unexplored themes that may not yield much. Sometimes, the notion of being the best prevents them from acting in new directions.

As of today, PRADAN is a large implementing organization, engaged mainly in direct action with communities. Whereas a large organization does have complexities of differentiation and integration and imposes stricter boundaries for its constituents thereby restricting expression, more significant questions arise from there

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for us as a development organization. Is the current structure of PRADAN conducive for development action? How big does PRADAN need to be organizationally to create its desired institutional significance? How many more numbers are necessary to influence the norms of the society, or conversely, does adding more numbers become a burden on PRADAN thereby diverting its attention from its influencing role. Are

there ways by which the spread could be faster and its effect deeper? How do we create a paradigm shift—transiting from a large-scale implementing organization to an institution having significant influence and impact? There are currently about 90 professionals, who have spent four years or more, excluding their period of apprenticeship. Twenty-two of them have worked for 15 years or more in PRADAN. How do we find different ways of harnessing their experience and potential to create a bigger and deeper impact while retaining the basic identity of PRADAN through active community contact?

As PRADAN increases in size, we need to bring in more hierarchies. PRADAN still has a reasonably flat structure but the layers are increasing, even if informally. A controlling structure has to be established for efficiency as well as for working as a guard against vulnerabilities. Costs also increase howsoever frugal we may be. Whereas all these are necessary for programme delivery (and bigger organizations indeed have more leveraging power), what do these do to developmental effectiveness?

In school, I was told that education is the manifestation of perfection already in man and all must express this in their unique ways

to realize their potential. I also heard, "Man making is my mission," not understanding what that meant. As we attempt progression from 'income and assets' to 'doing abilities' to 'being abilities', I see a resemblance between what I heard in childhood and what we are learning organizationally. At the core, developmental intervention remains an educational act, and an essential element of that act is to help a person one comes into contact with to manifest herself, to realize her full potential, rather like a gardener nurturing a plant to flower. This act can be performed by teaching, by creating a context, facilitating an enabling environment; it can be performed by a group in which members help each other and so on. We need to examine if the constraints imposed by a hierarchical programme implementation structure, with control woven in at various nodes for efficiency and vulnerability reduction, and sanctioning processes overpowering influence by practice even if immediate necessity can really lead to developmental effectiveness, which through our organizational learning we profess to accentuate.

If this examination makes us uneasy, how do we examine other possibilities for PRADAN? Whereas there can be several possible ways, I attempt to describe one option that I see as holding great potential for effectiveness and impact. This is around the GC of PRADAN.

PRADAN created the GC in 2008 as a part of its restructuring process, subsequent to the Vision 2015 exercise. Till date, nobody has refused membership and, therefore, it

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has 92 members. The GC is supposed to uphold PRADAN's mission and values and guide the formulation of policies relating to PRADAN's development task. During various times in the past, we have described PRADAN as a collective of development professionals, a membership-based organization for public service and a partnership. We have also said that unlike a conventional organization, the PRADAN professional is not a functionary of PRADAN. Rather, "Development is essentially a personal bond between two individuals. In this, each PRADAN-ite is both a trustee and an architect. Therefore, all structures, systems and processes uphold and nurture this spirit."

Given the evolved understanding of our development task and the large pool of experienced human resources, our construct of PRADAN as a collective of development professionals on the one hand and the structural incongruence with our objective on the other, my question is should be restructure or reorganize PRADAN?

In my understanding, we should. The advent of the GC and its representative body, the 'Stewardship Council', in the intervening period should have given impetus to that thinking. By the years of experience with PRADAN, a professional is sufficiently immersed in development, has good understanding and skills, and has also formed her/his special interest around particular themes or areas that she/he would like to further work on. This is the time she/he joins the GC and by doing so, she/he becomes a partner in PRADAN.

What is her/his contribution to PRADAN and how does PRADAN help her/him manifest herself/himself? As of today, this is a token gesture. Even though she/he is in the GC, that by itself does not enhance in any way her/his decision-making opportunities. Neither does any differentiation in responsibility take place nor are any special privileges bestowed. In an alternative scenario, could we have looked at an option by which PRADAN facilitated her/him to join a group of partners, who do similar things that she/he has in mind? Or could some partners have been encouraged to form groups for new themes or areas? Whereas nobody would have had to leave PRADAN by joining a group of partners, the groups could have been formalized as organizations, pursuing autonomous goals within PRADAN's mission and a broad framework of policies and approaches. This would have made the partners more accountable for their actions, an important necessity to get the required decision-making space and eventually follow an autonomous path. Groups of partners could collaborate with each other on complementary issues just as they would with entities outside the PRADAN system. They could also access, acquire and nurture a broader pool of human

resources, which the current structure of PRADAN is reluctant to host or utilize.

Most important, this will give the groups of partners an impetus to think independently, make wider choices and develop a broader canvas to work. I believe that this structural reorganization will unleash the energies of experienced PRADAN professionals and PRADAN will manifest this in many more ways, creating much greater impact.

How will the groups of partners contribute to PRADAN? In my understanding, they will have the scope and the responsibility to contribute in many more ways than they can as employees of PRADAN. Grooming development apprentices, hosting young professionals to raising funds for PRADAN and elucidating PRADAN's mission are some of the broad spectrum of contributions, systems and processes. This will have to be worked out in detail if the idea evolves.

This proposition raises many more questions than it has attempted to answer. We should will be able to answer them collectively only if we think this touches our hearts in some way.