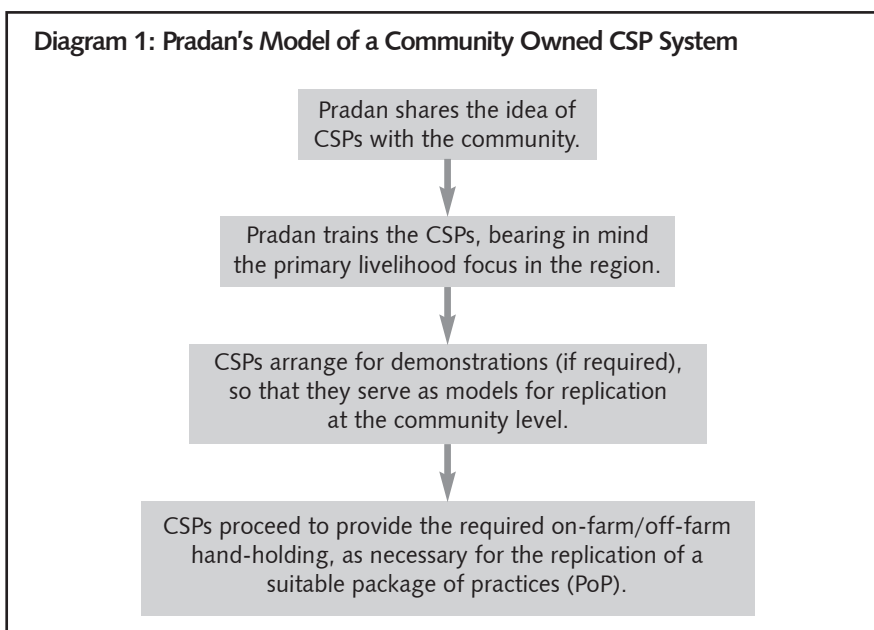# Community Owned CSP System

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Choosing a service provider from within a community and getting the community to own the CSP is slowly gaining acceptance despite some initial reservations and hesitation.

Community Service Providers (CSPs) are village youth, who are trained to render logistic and technical support to the community, especially with a view to assist in the implementation of livelihood activities. CSPs are expected to provide livelihood support in a manner that will enable the local community members to fulfill their aspirations for better livelihoods and lives. CSPs are identified from within the community itself; it is believed that community members will be more willing to learn and take assistance from a CSP, who is one of their own. Furthermore, to ensure accountability as part of the system, part of a CSP's wage is borne by the community—the ultimate beneficiary of the services provided by the CSP.

The CSP is expected to act in a capacity no less than that of an entrepreneur, wielding expertise in some specific area or sphere that will contribute to the livelihood(s) of his concerned community. Pradan not only identifies the need for CSPs in a given community but also plays the vital role of training them so that they can satisfy the aspirations of the community members. The means by which CSPs are trained and deployed in the community is shown in the following diagram.

Diagram 1: Pradan's Model of a Community Owned CSP System

Pradan shares the idea of CSPs with the community.

Pradan trains the CSPs, bearing in mind the primary livelihood focus in the region.

CSPs arrange for demonstrations (if required), so that they serve as models for replication at the community level.

CSPs proceed to provide the required on-farm/off-farm hand-holding, as necessary for the replication of a suitable package of practices (PoP).

With the above understanding, Pradan has been trying to achieve these objectives in the field. However, the realities experienced by the Vidisha team over the last two years provide a greater insight into what may otherwise appear to be a simple activity.

In Vidisha, the communities were not interested in approaching the CSPs. For instance, if there was a pest attack in their fields, they would rather approach a shopkeeper and purchase pesticides, being fully aware that often the pesticides do not work and that they would have to buy another pack, thus investing double the budgeted amount for the purpose. This is also despite the fact that a CSP can suggest an alternative that is both cheaper and organic. Why then do communities not approach the CSP even when he/she is available and willing to help? The answer is simple: they have little or no confidence in a CSP. There are many farmers who will turn away from a CSP, fearing that she/he will try and convince them of a practice or approach that they are not ready to accept or cannot understand. At times, they may avoid the CSP believing that the alternatives she/he is likely to suggest will be more expensive than the 'tried-and-tested' practices.

Some drawbacks have emerged in the acceptance of CSPs by the community and in the functioning of the CSPs. The CSPs work well when the Pradan staff is with them but are slack and inactive when left to work alone. They think that their suggestions have a far higher chance of being taken seriously in the presence of a Pradan field staff member. Also true may be the fact that because the CSPs belong to the same community they serve, the community members tend to take them less seriously,

The Pradan team in Vidisha started its operations in April 2001 from Sironj block. In 2006, it started working in Lateri block too. The villages are multi-caste, each having people belonging to 13–15 castes. The Banjaras (nomads) from Rajasthan have settled in some of the regions. Scheduled Castes (SCs) form approximately 25% of the population, and mainly comprise Harijans. Mobilizing the community is a complex task. The very strong presence of traders in the area makes it difficult for the villagers to organize themselves. The major activities that the Pradan team has been engaged in are optimizing irrigation, enhancing crop productivity, promoting a Producer Company, goat rearing and promoting women's self help groups (SHGs). Pradan has reached out to about 5,000 families spread across 100 villages through programmes such as the Madhya Pradesh–District Poverty Initiatives Programme (MP-DPIP) and the Poorest Areas Civil Society Programme (PACS). In more recent times, the team is working in collaboration with the District Administration through programmes such as the Agricultural Technology Management Agency (ATMA) and the Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojna (RKVY), which reaches out to about 3,000 households.

except when they are accompanied by Pradan staff. On occasion, the CSPs take shortcuts to fulfill the tasks assigned to them. At times, they resort to fabricating the data and prepare their reports from the comfort of their homes. Sometimes, they work for a few handful of families and use the data for everybody and produce fake data to obtain the part of their wages paid by Pradan.

The CSP has a very important role to play in reaching out to each family, to realize the desired level of change. The changes so desired by the community members in Vidisha are mostly concerned with their livelihoods. Improved livelihoods are perceived as the means by which they will be able to improve their overall standard of living. Better education and health facilities are also perceived as critical and important for the overall well being of the community. Pradan has sought to ensure, through proper orientation and training, that the CSP's role is wedded to the aspirations of the people. A CSP plays the critical link between the people and their aspirations; non-performance by the CSP can slow down village development processes to a large extent. The team in Vidisha has been grappling with this problem for the last two years. To analyze this further, let us look at all three actors contributing to the situation here—the community; the CSP and the Pradanites.

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THE COMMUNITY

Pradan team members often make unsolicited visits to the villages, and this raises a lot of expectations in the community. The community develops the idea that the Pradan team is there because it has something material to give them, without their having to work for it. The community then starts demanding that they be provided with various facilities. The members of the team tell the villages that they may be able to help the villagers access various benefits but that the villagers have to be united and work together as group to avail of these benefits. Pradan is often confused as a giver of subsidies. This belief became entrenched in the mind of the community when on one occasion Pradan succeeded in leveraging a substantial amount of funds under MP-DPIP. The community members hope to rope in on cash benefits from the government through the facilitating agency. Very often, the SHGs rely on the services of the CSPs but are less than willing to bear even 10% of a CSP's wages. They expect that this will be given by the government.

Recently, in an SHG cluster meeting at Churakheri village, a woman spoke about the CSP of that village who had taught her how to treat seeds very well. When she was asked what she had paid the CSP in return, she smiled and said that she had paid nothing. She was asked whether, at that moment, she thought that she should pay him. She responded affirmatively but said that she expected that the payment should be made by Pradan because she was too poor to pay. She was then asked how much she thought the payment should be. She said Rs 10 at least. We asked her how much soybean she needed to give him, that would equal Rs 10. She said half a kilogram. We then asked her how much soybean she had harvested last year from her plot. Her answer was 2 tonnes!

Without any doubt, the woman farmer is paying for many things. For instance, she pays fees to the doctor, pays for hiring the tractor and pays a high interest to the moneylender. She pays the bus fare when she travels by bus; she pays the labour she hires. She also pays for purchasing all

her personal effects; she pays for the electricity bills, for recharge vouchers of her mobile phone and so on. However, surprisingly, she does not believe that she needs to pay for the CSP's services.

Sometimes, community members do not want to pay for CSPs because the service is not so important to them or because they do not trust the CSP's level of expertise. They may also be tempted to think that the CSPs suggestions may really not bring about a change; they may prefer to follow the alternatives being adopted by some of their peers. But none of these held good in the example mentioned earlier. The CSP had provided the best service money could pay for, he had established his credibility by offering the right guidance and had still gone unrewarded.

THE CSP

The CSP is a kind of business person. She/he sells his expertise to earn money. This means she/he should have two basic qualities: (a) she/he should possess some unique expertise, and (b) she/he should be willing to sell her/his expertise. The latter quality is essential because she/he will be able to create a livelihood for himself; forging a livelihood on the expertise will ensure that she/he provides the best service, to remain in demand always.

When Pradan doles out payments to the CSPs, she/he does just as much as is necessary—nothing more, nothing less. She/he delivers only to such an extent as may be essential to ensure her/his sustenance. In a sense, it does not matter to her/him if real transformation takes place or not. This is primarily because there is no apparent difference between the client and the payers (both are Pradan). Therefore, the

CSP is not expected to nor is she/he needed to harbour a strong extension motivation. She/he gets paid for a service that she/he is required to deliver. To an extent, some community control is expected, and it is for these very reasons that it is best if a significant part of a CSP's fee is borne by the community itself.

THE PRADANITES

Apart from the institutional arrangements, there are norms, taboos, stigmas and other social restrictions that curb Pradan's intention to reach out. In such a complicated situation, the challenge lies in changing the mind-set of not only the target community, namely, the SHG women, but also half-a-dozen other players, mentioned earlier. The same is true for the CSP system. The need to institute a CSP system begins, as Pradanites, in our own minds because the desire to bring about a change in the community springs from our own minds and hearts.

Once we are ourselves convinced of the need of the system, we try to percolate it down to the community. We try to arouse the need for a CSP to cater to the community's need. In the meeting in which we seed the concept of this system, we begin by orienting the community members to better practices that can be adapted so much more easily with the aid of CSPs. For instance, if farmers practise the use of a judicious dose of fertilizers on their crop land, they will need somebody who knows about the correct fertilizer, doses, application process and so on to support them. The usefulness of CSPs is conveyed by asking the members frequently if it would be easier for them to raise loans with the help of a CSP. In other words, we refer to instances that make the

communities reflect on the true need for a CSP, thereby ushering in the idea of a CSP in the discussions. This question is usually received with an overwhelming response, so much so that, in one village called Salri, the villagers were willing to give up to 5% of their loan amount for the services of a CSP. It is very important to analyze whether the proposed system actually fits into the expectations of the community that we are interacting with.

Other important aspects are how we inculcate the qualities of honesty and enterprise in the CSPs, how they can be engaged through the year, and how they can earn well. One way of streamlining the process has been to have decentralized weekly CSP meetings, in place of the common practice of arranging meetings in the office. About 10 CSPs form one cluster, and meetings are organized in a central place in the villages. This ensures both accountability and transparency on the part of the CSPs in the long run. Their performance is then reviewed in the presence of the villagers; this may possibly convince the villagers of the need to support the CSPs and the good work they are doing. This has already been initiated in Sironj block with reasonable success, and we will shortly be extending it to Lateri. To strengthen the system further, the money contributed by Pradan is transferred to the community account, and the community is empowered to pay to the CSP. Likewise, a peer review system of CSP is to be initiated so that any CSP found lacking in the desired attitude

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and performance may be identified and asked to leave.

The following is a list of 'to dos' that can greatly optimize the CSP system:

- The real area of support of the community has to be identified as it has been done in Vidisha. The community needs to be convinced of the need for a CSP; and then oriented on how to identify one from amongst themselves
- Pradan has to orient and train the CSP. The training curriculum should be developed, bearing in mind the needs and aspirations articulated by the community members. Training should be participatory in design, with the community playing an overall role. The training needs should cover both technical and behavioural aspects.
- Pradan should help the community establish/evolve mechanisms that will enable it to elicit accountability on the part of the CSPs. The decentralized meetings, a system of payments that are routed through community based institutions and peer review are effective mechanisms in this sense.