

Family Based Livelihoods Planning to Address Grass Roots Concerns

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Moving from participatory approaches to family based livelihoods planning is an attempt to make development interventions more meaningful and significant by taking into account the aspirations and problems of each individual and increasing ownership.

The development sector, mainly comprising the NGOs working at the grass roots, has evolved in the past decades in its working style, both in terms of implementation and planning. From charity based organizations to organizations following bottom-up approaches, the journey has been enriching. Organizations have explored the varied dimensions and aspects of the lives the poor lead. Over the years, the participatory approach has been widely accepted and has given satisfying results. The participatory approach, it is believed, makes up for the 'reductionism of formal surveys', and the 'biases of typical field visits'.

However, the participatory approach, which focuses on the community of a concerned village as a whole for planning and implementation (as in watershed, land development, etc.), somewhere diminishes the very essence of 'participation' in certain respects. This is because participation is never uniform; even within a group or community there are different levels of interest. The community we are referring to here—also the ones with which Pradan works—is divided on the grounds of poverty, concerns and issues. Even though there may be a commonness or homogeneity among households, the problems faced by each household are unique. Participatory methods, at times, overlook this element of uniqueness in a hurried attempt to arrive at a 'holistic' picture. Development agencies, therefore, may be failing to take into account the dissimilarities in aspirations and the problems faced by each and every household. This article looks more specifically at such dilemmas faced by professionals in the field.

Pradan's journey in Mandla (earlier a part of the Dindori team) started in Mohgaon block. SHGs and then livelihoods—it was all moving swiftly and smoothly. In the second year, Mandla became an independent team and Mohgaon came under it. As part of the new team, we were supposed to build a perspective plan, which included the objectives and the activities of our operations for the coming years. Our initial meeting was facilitated by our Team Leader of Dindori. His first question to us was, "How satisfied are you with the work you have been engaged in till

now?" We answered in percentages: 60%, 70%, 80% and so on and so forth. To which he responded, "I don't know...I can't gauge this because I don't have a 'denominator' to do it."

His statement struck me. We were actually working without a denominator. The denominator, ideally speaking, is the vision the people have, the sights they have set, the changes they want to see in their lives, and the problems that they are facing and want to get rid of at the earliest. The question made it imperative that we assess the satisfaction we derive from our work vis-à-vis the aspirations of the households with which we work. Perhaps the only way to arrive at an authentic percentage of our work satisfaction was by treating our effort (analogically, the numerator) as a ratio of the expectations and aspirations of the people (the denominator). This basic understanding gave birth to Family Based Livelihoods Planning (FBLP) in Mandla, and the need to measure our success and job satisfaction on the basis of a household's assessment of its own well being. Today, in the kharif season, assisting people in their own plans (673 people in Mohgaon block) to capture their aspirations gives me the utmost satisfaction and the team a significant thrust to its efforts.

This thought, of course, had to be followed through with some validation in the field by identifying the various issues prevalent in the community and whether they actually vary from family to family. This proved to be true; for instance, when talking with Lodhi *bhaiya* (a farmer) in Andiyadhar village of Mohgaon, we realized that his problems are not typically

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what we could consider to be problems of the entire village or group. His main problems were, "First, my son's job; he is doing MA and he is still not sure of any job nor where he will find one. Second, I want to grow sugarcane this time because I think it will fetch me good money but I don't have the right knowledge for it." Also when asked about who buys and who takes the decision to buy things at his

house, he replied, "It is always me or my son even if it is small thing such as a soap." Then, with a hint of pride, he added, "It's a man's job to get his clothes dirty and to buy soap, and woman's job to wash them clean."

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Similarly, some families faced food insufficiency (that is, from their own fields). For instance, Bhag Singh from Sakri, Mohgaon, owned 1.5 acres of land; however this yielded food for six months only, resulting in him having to work as labour elsewhere. The intervention, in his case, would be to identify the right practices to obtain the maximum yield from his land such that there is food sufficiency and he need not work as labour elsewhere. In some other families that were mainly dependent on labour, there was little or almost negligible knowledge of NREGA and their rights under the Act. There was a need, therefore, to work on rights and entitlements with such sub-groups or individual households and create greater awareness among them.

The issues, varied and multifarious, emerged only because we were willing to accord specific attention to each household rather than dismiss any one of them as being no different from the rest of the group or the community to which it belonged. Had we zeroed into a single problem such as youth employment, even if it were widespread, the fact of the matter is that it would have been irrelevant for a significant other. This aspect gathers added importance owing to the fact that Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRAs) are somewhat public events in character and, on many an occasion, select groups/individuals do not have the skill and authority to present their interests in a mass gathering. Besides, PRAs are criticized on the grounds that the suggestions expressed publicly are more likely to be manufactured ones.

We found that even with two households that were keen on growing tomatoes, the kind of support required varied significantly. In other words, the technical input an agency delivers cannot digress from the unique and individual situation of a given household. Even within a single issue such as food sufficiency, the reasons that go into making the problem are different for different families—whereas it was the sheer lack of labour in an aging household in one case, it was a mental block to adopt new practices in another.

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adequately. In participatory exercises, a few would dominate despite the best efforts by the facilitating agency, and thus determine the final course of action. There was also the need to refine our own tools and techniques to be able to understand the microcosm of a family better.

This was a welcome change because many of us within the team had begun to feel dejected with the role we had been performing. We had begun to function like an agricultural extension agency, and even where participatory methods were concerned, we would choose the topics and summarize lessons according to project criteria. Despite the emphasis on participatory methods, the 'needs' seemed to be significantly shaped by perceptions of what we could/would deliver. This confused most of us: were the issues we were working on, the issues the villagers faced?

Our activities, for example, the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) had led to an increase in the yield of many a farmer. The average yield nearly doubled last year for almost 300 farmers across 32 villages; however, we cannot say whether this was all or the only thing they desired. Moreover, we were never really sure if the farmers adopted the technique because they really wanted to or had they adopted it merely for the lack of options, especially since Pradan as an external agency had nothing else to offer. Our bundle of options, rather, our bag of services, comprised SRI alone; so where was the opportunity for a farmer to exercise a 'choice'. Such a scenario had forced us to exclude many landless households for which SRI was not an option.

When we revisited the households that had had taken up SRI, we found three trends: (a) there were farmers for whom SRI was just the right match, mostly those with substantial land but low yields (b) farmers who have achieved the desired level of food sufficiency by bringing only part of their lands under SRI; they enhanced their cash earning by bringing the rest of their lands under vegetable cultivation, and (c) marginal farmers, whose small land holdings could not really justify the adoption of SRI and when adopted, the net yield increased only marginally, and the landless. For the last category, SRI was of little relevance.

Thus there was an urgent need to redefine the unit from community to family for better participation, knowledge transfer and enhanced realization of the problems faced by a family. This approach could lead to better customized solutions for the poor and would also ultimately result in a better and faster adaptability of new techniques and activities because we would be lending ourselves to a family's plans rather than seeking their 'participation' in the fulfillment of our plans. The core of the concept lies in the fact that every family has its own plan and, as development agents, we need to work on those plans.

To summarize: (a) the intention is not to dismiss the importance of PRA exercises; only that with the required focus on FBLP, PRA exercises can be made more meaningful in the long run (b) an NGO agency is seldom able to address each and every livelihood need of a household, and FBLP does not insist

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on something as incredulous. What it emphasizes is the need for a facilitating agency to create/evolve a suitable bag of services on the basis of each household's responses while making sure that the broadened options fall within the overall mandate of an intervening organization (in this case, Pradan), (c) FBLP is not about having as many different approaches and

processes as the number of household needs that emerge from the exercise. FBLP entails a certain degree of aggregation and consolidation; only the aggregation of people's needs and concerns comes from one-on-one interaction with households rather than the community or group itself (as commonly adhered to under PRA exercises). Thus, if it is found that women and livelihoods is a recurrent concern, a common process would be designed to address it, making sure that the process remains accommodative and sensitive to the uniqueness of each family, and finally (d) FBLP does not preclude social interaction; instead, it tries to understand the dilemma of a household vis-à-vis its interaction with other households, as part of a composite social group.

A GLIMPSE INTO FBLP PROCESSES IN 2009

This year, we planned to work on five programmes, which came up from the initial survey we conducted among different family types, on the basis of members, caste and landholdings. The five programmes are:

1. Ensuring food sufficiency
2. Enhancing cash income (for emergencies and savings)
3. Enhancing participation in NREGS
4. Identifying opportunities for youth

5. Ensuring equal participation of women in decision-making through gender sensitization, as much as addressing issues such as education of girl child, alcoholism and domestic violence.

Needless to say, the five areas of intervention were zeroed in after thorough interactions at the household level. The family based plans for each of the households were prepared in collaboration with the Community Resource Persons (CRPs) identified by Pradan earlier on. CRPs mostly include village youth, who are proactive and astute where developmental processes at the village level are concerned, and willing to partner with Pradan in enhancing the livelihoods of their respective communities. CRPs were first oriented to the basics of FBLP on primarily how to prepare plans, keeping a household's resources, skills, opportunities and aspirations in mind. Most important, CRPs were trained in how they should inspire hope among households and ensure that a household comes to own its plans rather than perceive the plans as something that is imposed upon it at the hands of external agency. Efforts were made to club CRPs from the SHGs of one cluster in one training event. Other Pradan staff members were also included in the training, with the intention of making them aware of the role of the CRPs. The first training was facilitated by an external resource person; subsequently, all others were conducted by team members. By the end of 2009, about 144 CRPs were trained in the Mohgaon block of Mandla alone.

The CRPs were then made to interact with members of the SHGs formed by Pradan. All interactions were guided with questionnaires that sought to capture the information, aspirations and expectations of the households of each of the SHG members. In

order to ease the process of data collection, the CRPs were paired with one or two SHG members from each group during interactions, to increase their acceptance by the other group members. The CRPs were paired with members, who have been active in the past, are respected by other members of the group and are somewhat aware of livelihood opportunities.

Much depends on the personal motivation of the CRPs. Some CRPs try to convey the importance of family based planning to the respondent households; this makes it easier to collect data and encourages the families to share their aspirations a little more openly. They help the respondents to envision an 'ideal situation' and also give them the required faith and hope to make the journey. Others adhere to the formats provided, which are very open-ended, to try and capture the desired state of the family and on how they are going to reach it. The significant part was that even when the interaction was format-oriented, the households had a central role to play and thus took it seriously. In due course, the CRPs and the SHG members brought the newly prepared plans back to the office. Their enthusiasm was obvious.

The plans were then consolidated at the team level and shared with Pradan's Village Level Committees, which gave direction to the SHGs in a given village over the next two months (before June kharif 2009). The major focus was to make people realize that they had to work on their plans to reach the desired state.

For example, in the Man Ambe SHG of village Nidhani, Sudama Bai and Rajkumar's plans were to grow paddy, brinjal and tomato, and her desired state was to earn around Rs 10,000 and get a yield of 15 bags of grain.

If this happened she and her family would consider the season a success. Our endeavour was to make this family see if there are any gaps between the desired state and the processes they were going to adopt to reach to it. Did they see a viable chance of reaching the desired state with the techniques they had so far been practising? When SRI fitted into their plans, it had an acceptance far higher than there was in the past. Our sole plan that kharif season was to see that the 673 plans of the people reach their desired state.

This approach is analogous to the customized (services) processes of the corporate sector, which has been setting new and successful operational lines to provide the right services for the differing needs of the customers. The need of development agencies is to seek the

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real needs of a poor family and work out possible services to their livelihood plan; this may differ from family to family and does not assume the possibility of similar situations or aspiration levels in each poor family. Thus, it remains the plan, desired state and aspirations of individual families; we help them to adopt the most appropriate technology and path to achieve their plans.

In a way, the concept is akin to what Paulo Freire's 'conscientization', that is, taking development to the individual (although, we talk about family, eventually it will focus on the individual). Ironical, though it may sound, even though participatory approaches emerged from the shortcomings of the 'reductionism of formal surveys', FBLP can enhance participation if applied properly and in conjunction with PRA exercises.