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Motivational Training of Community Resource Persons (CRPs) - I

Binod Raj Dahal, Pragya Bajpai, Anurag Kumar

Community Resource Persons play a vital link and role in the developmental process; motivating and training them can help sustain projects and livelihood activities

Background

Pradan began its livelihoods work for the poor in Godda in 1987, initially, with tasar sericulture. Over time, the team has diversified into a variety of programmes. It now operates in eight blocks of the district. The major activities are tasar host trees plantations, tasar cocoon production, tasar yarn reeling, vermi-composting, dairy development, horticulture development, and promotion and nurturing of Self Help Groups (SHGs). Secondary-level organisations such as SHGs, clusters and Federation, and an agri-horticulture cooperative are also important components of the engagement.

Table 1: Operations in Godda and Pakur

No. of Districts	2	Godda and Pakur
No. of Blocks	6	Poraiyahat, Godda, Pathargama, Sundarpahari and Boarijore blocks in Godda district and Littipara block in Pakur district.
No. of Gram Panchayats	48	Poraiyahat-25, Godda-5, Pathargama-2, Sundarpahari-12, Boarijore- 1, and Littipara-2
No. of villages	235	
Total Families	6,528	(5,798 in SHGs and 730 non-SHG families)

Promotion of Community Resource Persons (CRPs)

A Pradan professional staff working in a given area is responsible for all the Pradan interventions in the area and not just of one particular activity. As the interventions scale up, the number and variety of tasks at the cluster, village and family levels increase. The focus of the professionals, therefore, is primarily to build the capabilities of the community so that its clarity on its roles and responsibilities is enhanced in order to take the interventions to a more sustainable level. One of the strategies that the Pradan team has evolved is to promote Community Resource Persons (CRPs) from the respective villages and to groom them to the extent that these CRPs are able to assist the groups to perform better in the operation of SHGs and also in their livelihood activities. For instance, after regular training, the CRPs can train and also monitor how the farmers prepare the nursery for the paddy seedlings and ensure that the seedlings are planted properly on time. This not only helps close monitoring but also makes it possible to reach and work with many more poor families. The principle behind this is that there are enough capable members in the community who can, if given a chance, provide assistance to others more effectively than a Pradan person can.

Who are CRPs?

CRPs are identified and recommended from within SHGs or the clusters, to assist in their work. Pradan professionals assist in the selection by running a few tests such as an

intellectual ability and literacy. The members of the community were clear that these CRPs would support them and that the CRPs are to be nested under the SHG or cluster in the long run. They were to be paid on the basis of tasks accomplished as per the standard operating schedules. Initially Pradan agreed to contribute 100 per cent service charge to them for various activities. From this year onwards, it has been decided that the community would also contribute partially for the services of the CRPs. This contribution would increase gradually. The agreement with the community is that the Pradan contribution will reduce progressively-25 per cent this year, 50 per cent next year and 100 per cent by the end of 2010. Initially, the idea of promoting CRPs was Pradan's. By sharing this idea with the community systematically, it accepted the idea gradually. The series of dialogues with the community helped clarify our own ideas and understanding about CRPs. What became clear to the community was that there were a large number of tasks that were routine yet important; there is no need to depend on a Pradan professional to carry out these tasks. We also found that by being able to clearly differentiate between tasks that can be done by the community and those that needed to be done by us at a given point of time, we were able to be more efficient. For example, structured tasks such as the distribution of paddy seeds and fertilizers and ensuring that proper practices are followed can be supervised by the CRPs whereas defining a system for them to carry out the tasks is the job of the Pradan person. The Pradan person also has to focus on changing paddy cultivation practices by adapting modern scientific ways that can be followed by the community and, second, to find ways to run the intervention without minimal assistance from Pradan. The CRPs are one of the components in this system of operation in

the long run. Other important components include the SHGs, clusters, Federation and the agro-horticulture co-operative, in all of which the CRPs will be nested.

Role of CRPs

The training and equipping of CRPs is a distinctly different from the earlier ways of doing things, in which the professionals were more concerned about task completion. Increasing responsibilities of an expanding project area on the one hand and a multitude of activities on the other in a way forced Pradan to find new ways to handle projects. This is when the team thought of the concept of CRPs. The team realised that a pool of CRPs was required to be trained on various aspects. It was essential to explore some areas with the CRPs. These include the CRPs reflecting on and understanding their own willingness to work in a social role, and developing a vision for the development of their villages, families and individuals. The team thought that a workshop on 'Motivation to work' would be helpful in this context.

Since CRPs are part of the entire work cycle in a particular village or at the SHG level, they have both process tasks and output tasks to carry out. The first set of tasks is more process-oriented. Facilitation here is crucial and will impact mobilisation whereas, in the second part, the focus is on the delivery or receipt of specific material. For example, if a group is not meeting regularly meeting, it cannot do any credit planning and is not aware about group norms, etc. These issues would be addressed by a well-trained CRP visiting the group, as and when required. The Pradan staff cannot attend all such meetings to address these issues because these can be solved by the group members themselves. The role of CRPs is to ensure the delivery of quality inputs (paddy, fertilizer, other pesticides, etc.)

to the farmers at their doorstep, the collection of money for the inputs, the collection of regular meeting transaction statements (RMTS), etc. We, therefore, thought that developing task clarity at the CRP level and grooming them with such an orientation would help them to understand and carry out tasks effectively.

Not only is it important for the CRP to carry out a particular task but also to understand why she is doing it. With respect to the SHGs, let us say, the task, for instance, is to fetch the cash book sheet from the village for computer consolidation and to give a printout back to the group. The CRP may do this even without knowing the importance of these pieces of papers to the members of the SHG. Understanding the task in its totality, however, would motivate the members, the SHG and the clusters to sustain the work on a long-term basis. The issue, therefore, is how to mitigate the gap between doing a task and an actual understanding of why it is happening. The gap was to be reduced not only through technical trainings to the CRPs but also through building a broader understanding and creating an interest in them to invest their energy and time for the people.

The Need for Motivational Training

The team realised that mere completion of tasks was not sufficient. It was important for the community to understand the importance of these tasks. Rather than engaging in only receiving the services, it was essential for the community to feel part of the entire process and realize its significance. This would then bring about a more efficient progress in the development processes that Pradan envisions. It is necessary to have a system, without any dependence on other external agencies, in order to take it forward in the long run. CRPs were an important part of the system of

sustenance. Hence, the team mooted the idea of having motivational training for CRPs. Thus, motivational training to CRPs emerged as an initial step for the system of sustenance in the larger canvas of the community-taking-charge intervention. The assumptions on the basis of which it was felt that motivational training to the CRPs was required are the following:

- CRPs are from the same villages where the SHGs and livelihood activities operate. Their attachment to the work does not limit them only with the task they perform, but the entire range of process of social mobilisation, the credibility of the decision, accountability to the members of the SHGs, clusters etc. Besides, whatever the task or intervention they are shouldering, they also initiate it in their own families. For example, a CRP who is planning, supervising, and monitoring the SRI paddy cultivation with 50 farmers of his village is also cultivating SRI in his own field.
- When dealing with people, it is least desirable to focus only on the task while ignoring the processes. So the task of the CRPs also involves mobilisation of the people with his/her own conviction to work.
- Unless the person who is engaged with the work is not excited with his daily engagements, he will either quit the work or not give due importance to it. CRPs need to think of the process of owning the system. CRPs need to be sufficiently motivated and interested to take up the challenge. Unless the CRPs are trained, their main focus will remain on the mere completion of a task and not the complete process.

The Two-day Training

A two-day motivational training for CRPs was organised on 19 and 20 November, 2007, in Godda. The training was attended by 38 CRPs from 4 blocks-Poraiyahat, Pathargama, Sunderpahari and Godda. The trainers were two Pradan professionals. The training was conducted after almost 8 months of the CRPs engagement in the field.

The objective of the training was thus to reinforce motivation and develop a sense of ownership in the participants towards their work and community. All the activities and exercises were aimed at enhancing learning from reflection on self and work, at visualising the future, and defining and designing the action plan.

The training module was designed to identify long-term goals, cover the current activities, and create a ground to support the activities for the long term. The training was focussed on identifying ways to deepen the present engagements of the CRPs with the community. The factors considered in the design were, for instance, the nature of engagements in a day, the motivating factors for working and the limiting factors, along with the ways to solve it. In the process of facilitation, it was expected that they would sort out the obstacles themselves and motivate each other to work with renewed vigour. We were afraid that the low remuneration they received would be highlighted as a major issue. It came as surprise that the issue was not raised by them at all. The limiting factors were not external factors; they were internal factors which could be solved by the CRPs themselves. The solution and action plan came from them when it was realized that the kind of development that we were discussing was not limited to any particular families but all rural poor and villages at large. The outcome was that the

CRPs who attended the training expressed readiness to shoulder bigger responsibilities and considered themselves as development agents of the village. Their role was not limited to any particular task they had to perform; they had a bigger role to play to bring about broader changes in their area.

We had invited CRPs engaged in the similar tasks to the training so that the similar nature of work would provide the ambience for sharing their experiences and assessing each other. The CRPs engaged with agriculture-based livelihood activities along with systematic nurturing of SHGs participated in the training. We hope to do more such events in future with different categories of CRPs.

Day 1 of the Training

The training started with a round of introductions. Since locations have their meetings and review systems at least once a month, interacting with individuals from the same location is higher compared to interactions of individuals from different locations. The next step saw the formation of four sub-groups. To ensure sharing between people of all the locations, the sub-groups were formed so that each person could mingle with the others even beyond the formal training sessions.

The engagements of the CRPs were more with the SHGs and their related operations from account training to McF updation. Agricultural livelihood activities such as SRI and improved paddy cultivation, planning, supervision, etc., were also linked to it. The first exercise was: 'Introduce yourself in your sub-group and share the best task you have accomplished'. The 'best task' was not clearly defined by the facilitator; rather it was deliberately left vague and open to the interpretation of the participants. Discussions of the tasks with the

performing benchmarks evolved in the process and led to the generation of many options and opportunities for self-assessment in relation to their work.

The reasoning behind the assessment of each person's 'best task' was significant. The process and methodology used was to ask '3 Whys' and then define a 'My - statement'. For instance, one of the CRPs was sharing that he considered group work as his best performed task. The reason he gave was that he found an opportunity to have direct interactions with the women of 15 families at a time. On exploring further, he understood that he felt content with this work as he helped each *didi* (SHG member) maintain her accounts and keep each hard-earned paise safe. Exploring further, he said that having a group with well-managed accounts and good circulation of money not only benefitted them with loans as per the needs of the members but also got returns by way of dividends at the end of the year. So the best-performed task or most interesting task (used interchangeably by CRPs in the same dimension), according to the individual, was his engagement with the groups. The process of asking 'Why?' helped group members to gain clarity about their roles in the task and identify areas for further reflection. Then, each member of the sub-group recorded the statement with their names, village and cluster (area of work) mentioned in small cards that were given to them, and pasted these on the walls for all to see.

The session proceeded with a reading of all the cards on the wall by the facilitator. The 'best-achieved tasks' were categorised into different sections such as SHG nurturing, income-generating activities, extending technical knowledge and support, and building unity in the village by the

facilitators. These were then presented to the group. There was no pre-determined categorisation of the tasks by the facilitators; it emerged from the discussion by the participants. Whatever they presented out of the understanding of the 'best work' they had performed in the last 8 months in their respective areas was classified. It was then evolved further. It emerged that some of the members did group meetings with the SHGs to repay bank loans successfully whereas some others made efforts not only to urge the group to conduct regular meetings but also to unify the village by forming groups that covered all the households. They also managed to form gram sabhas without any formal inputs by the professional. The discussion and debate gave a momentum to a broad-based development action. These best-achieved tasks in different areas (group performance, livelihood activities and social aspects) were consolidated by the participants, to define a vision for whole group of holistic development of each village. The exercise helped CRPs learn from each other and develop a long-term vision.

Following this, another subgroup activity was conducted. Once the vision statement, that is, "Uniting the village as a whole over the focus on the specific groups or hamlet to bring about the speedy change in the village", was framed, a self-viewing exercise was conducted. The task here was to discuss, "Where do I stand in relation to the vision statement?" The vision statement was about what should be done, but it was the actual work done by one of their peers. This was the real milestone for them. So each one of them put themselves in the ladder of the development and aimed to reach at the top level. All group members reflected on their work, identified the present status of their work and analysed their relative performance with the vision statement. The facilitator de-briefed the responses of all the

sub-group members and presented it on a chart paper in the plenary. Thus, the present status of the performance of the group was brought into picture. The exercise was very effective as the participants responded that they had realised that they needed to invest much more of themselves to reach the development destination they desired.

The last session of the day was designed to engage the participants in focusing more on the theme of the discussion. They were asked to prepare some plays depicting the tasks they do that focus on developmental issues in the villages. All the four sub-groups performed

their plays and through these they identified the following issues:

- The quality of education in their village schools
- The impact of paddy intervention in the village
- The ignorance of males in the village about the importance of SHGs disturbs the development process
- The externalisation of roles and responsibilities, rather than internalising these, affects the quantity and quality of the work

Beldong: Way to a Model Village

Debdas Mondal

With a unity of purpose and the belief that together they can achieve more through the SHGs, the villagers of Beldong are well on the way to empowerment and development

Introduction

Godda district is situated in the northeast of Jharkhand State. Godda is 350 km away from Ranchi. The total cultivable land of the district is 1311.40 sq km, which is 62.13 per cent of the total area with forest coverage of 17.62 per cent. The total irrigated land of the district is 21.43 per cent of the cultivable land. Pradhan works in five blocks of the district—Godda, Poraiyahat, Pathargama, Sunderpahadi and Boirojore.

Beldong is a village in Poraiyahat block. It is located about 13 km from the Poraiyahat block office and is connected to it by a tarred road. There are 180 households in Beldong. All the villagers belong to the Santhal community except for two families, who belong to the Maraiya community, the traditional blacksmiths.

People have their households on both sides of the tarred road that passes through the village. The village is about 1 km in length. It has two hamlets—Ranga tola and Sadak tola. The village administration in each hamlet is further defined. For instance, the Sadak tola hamlet is divided into four sub 'tolas', namely, Upar tola, Bich tola, Nich tola and Mohonabaran tola by the villagers. There is a headman, who is called 'member', in each tola. One from among the four members in the four tolas is the *Pradhan* (called *Manjhi Haram* by the Santhal community)—the leader of the village.

About 80 per cent of the villagers are farmers with predominantly small and marginal land

holdings. The land holdings are classified as uplands (locally called *tand* land and *bari*/homestead land), medium uplands (homestead land suitable for vegetable cultivation, pulses and oilseeds), medium lowlands (for short duration paddy and summer vegetable cultivation) and lowlands (mainly for kharif paddy cultivation). There are occupationally different types of people such as agricultural farmers, government servicemen and contractors (locally called *thekedars*), in the village. The main livelihood of the villagers is agriculture. People also engage in migration labour and wage labour. About 80 per cent of the people are engaged in agriculture; at the same time, many people are also wage labourers. About 8 to 10 per cent of the total population migrates for work and 2 to 3 per cent hold government jobs.

Apathy of basic services

The village has an *anganwadi* centre and a primary school. The quality of education is suspect as are the regularity of the teachers in the primary school and the quality and quantity of food in the Mid-Day Meal programme of the government. The building, supposed to serve as the Subsidiary Health Centre in the village, is used as a cattle shed. Barring on polio vaccination days, neither doctors nor the ANMs (Auxiliary Nurse Midwife) visit the village. Quacks usually take rounds of the village and provide minimal treatment to the villagers for a high fee. Such quacks charge anything between Rs 80 and 100 for a dextrose-glucose dose which, in reality, only costs about Rs 20 in the nearby government dispensary or health centre.

Often, quacks prescribe vitamin injections for Rs 40 or 50, available at the health centres for much less.

The government has intervened very little in this large village, considering its huge, fertile, cultivable land area. There are 10 hand pumps in the village to supply the drinking water. There are only 12 *pucca* wells, not of good quality, which provide very little water for the rabi crop and summer vegetation. Thirty families are beneficiaries of the Indira Awas Yojana, the rural housing scheme of the government. The village has no electricity. A big lift irrigation scheme was set up 10 to 12 years ago but all in vain; all that remains of it are an electric pole and a damaged intake well in the river.

Pradan in Beldong

Pradan began its interventions in this village in 1992-93 by forming an SHG of 14-15 members. At that time, the purpose, aim and vision of the group was not clear to Pradan or the villagers. There was a lack of vision, lack of follow-up systems and village-level conflicts, which affected the SHG. The villagers were unfamiliar with people coming from 'NGOs' to work in their village. The SHG stopped functioning after 6-7 months of its formation. After that, Pradan did not initiate any activity in this village for a long time.

In 2004, Pradan approached the villagers once again with a tasar programme, funded by the Central Silk Board (CSB). This involved the planting of Arjuna trees in the village. Beldong was considered for the activity because of the availability of large areas of fallow land (uplands) in the village of about 80-90 families. No SHGs were functioning in Beldong at that time. During the initial phase, we, the Pradan professionals, held a series of meetings with those families with whom we were

starting the tasar plantation activity. We informed the villagers how the tasar plantations would be beneficial to them as a source of livelihood. Tasar host trees (Arjuna plants, in this case) would need to be raised. Seedlings had to be raised in nurseries, land had to be measured, pits dug, and seedlings planted and maintained for tasar cultivation. The objective was to generate a livelihood option in the unused uplands through tasar rearing on the host trees, three years after planting them. Tasar plantation work was to be carried out in about 16 ha of land.

The villagers did not seem too convinced, initially. They had numerous doubts and queries in their minds related to the loan they would have to take after the plantation work, the ownership of the plantations, etc. Some of the villagers thought that they would have to take loans for the plantation work, and others thought that the land would be captured by the government later. Some were convinced that the government would take away the profits and they would get nothing out of the plantation or they would be provided with some minimal compensation. However, they also thought that planting of the plants would at least give them an opportunity to earn some wages, regardless of any subsequent problems. After much discussion and debate, the villagers finally agreed to engage in the activity.

In 2005 a Tasar Vikas Samiti (TVS) was formed by the tasar beneficiaries for the purpose of raising Arjuna plantations. Monthly meetings of the beneficiaries were also conducted for plantation purposes and facilitated by Pradan professionals. The TVS was also to monitor all plantation-related activities with the labour and to select land for the plantation. However, the villagers had doubts regarding the ownership of the plants and the plot used for

the plantation. Despite several meetings with the Pradan professionals, the villagers still had these fears and doubts in their minds.

My journey with Pradan

I joined Pradan in August 2005. On my first day, I visited Beldong with a senior Pradan professional. I observed the on-going plantation work and my learning in Pradan started from there. I participated in the monthly meetings of the TVS and observed the facilitation process by my senior colleague. The on-going plantation work and its progress were discussed; from the plans that they were making, I could see that they were taking action for further improvement. The decisions made were noted in the minute book. I visited the plot where the Arjuna nurseries were being raised from Arjuna seeds, and saw how pits had been dug with equal spacing from both directions, as per specifications. Seeing the villagers take accurate measurements for digging pits, and keeping meticulous records of accounts and payments was a learning experience for me. I saw that the community itself managed the whole process, after the members attended a few training programmes conducted by Pradan professionals.

From the community management point of view, I understood that the regular monthly TVS meetings to discuss different issues related to plantation work were important. These meetings helped to address their ongoing problems and to build a common understanding of issues. Discussions during these gatherings also helped them to keep a check on the quality of their work and motivate each other to aspire for more.

I did my Village Study in Beldong during my apprenticeship. I found that the TVS was not

functioning very well. It was active during the plantation work. Once that was over, the TVS meetings became irregular, with lesser visits by Pradan professionals. This affected the maintenance of the plants; grazing too was a big problem. One evening, I arranged for a meeting of beneficiaries in the village to discuss issues related to the plantations. While discussing the issue of the maintenance of plants, the villagers emphasized the need to regularize the duty of their cattle guard in the field, which would also require effective follow-up and supervision. The villagers selected Guruji Murmu as their cattle guard. According to him, the people did not know about the maintenance of the tasar plantation and were not sure how they would benefit by getting involved in the activity. A senior Pradan professional was working in Beldong. She had put in a lot of effort to promote an SHG in the village so that the community could manage and handle the development initiatives by itself, since the group formed earlier in 1992-93 had become defunct. During November 2005, an SHG with 15 members was formed in the village. Guruji Murmu played a facilitative role in getting the SHG started in his village. The group had undergone SHG awareness training and was performing at an average level. I was given the responsibility of 14 SHGs functioning in and around Beldong in October 2006. A new project, related to land and water development and funded by the Jharkhand government, was to be implemented.

Earlier Engagements in Beldong

The village was familiar to me as I had stayed here and interacted with the people during my Village Study. Beldong had a one-year-old SHG, which had not undergone formal membership training and had not opened a savings bank account. Guruji was the SHG

accountant at that time. I tried to find out what his understanding of SHGs was—what was the need and what are the benefits of such groups. He did not have much information about SHGs, NGOs or even Pradan. However, he was eager to know and learn new things so I planned to give him some orientation about Pradan's work, its strategy, the concept of SHGs and other relevant issues. We conducted a motivational training for our Service Providers (SPs) at the project level, which I asked Guruji to attend. I observed a sea change in him after the training. He appreciated the work and interventions that Pradan was initiating in his village, with a deeper understanding. Reflecting on the condition of his village, he realized that a lot needed to be done for its development. He took the initiative to individually interact with SHG members and share with them what he had learnt during the motivation training. He explained that the SHG was a window through which the village could develop, and Pradan is a facilitating agency, helping the villagers to reach this goal. More women came forward to form groups. Two more new SHGs, one with 20 members and the other with 16 members, were formed by July 2007. Membership training of the oldest group was conducted, improving the perception of the SHG members of their group and evident in its improved functioning. Timely inputs were given to all the new groups. TVS meetings, which focussed on maintenance issues such as intercultural operations and monitoring, were held regularly.

During August 2007, a 15-acre plot of land was selected for horticulture plantation. The beneficiaries were 23 members of the three SHGs of Beldong. The villagers had some concerns regarding the ownership of the plantation, the future of the plantation (they thought that the mango plants would not

survive in rocky and stony soils), the benefits of the plantation, etc. Initially, therefore, they did not show much interest. The Pradan professional conducted a series of meetings with them to clarify their doubts about the project and its objectives. It was impressed upon the villagers that the plantation was their activity and through it they could hope for a secure source of livelihood. It would give them an opportunity to earn a more sustainable income.

Slowly, the community took up the responsibility of raising and maintaining the plantations. The SHG members also played an active role. They helped with the earth work and through the process of planting. Within a few weeks, they completed the work. They were able to use labour from their own village. They selected two individuals from the village as SPs for the activity. The service charges to the SPs were paid by Pradan. The 23 beneficiaries and two SPs ensured regular follow-ups and on-time payments, and kept meticulous records of accounts. The regular meetings and sequential trainings conducted by Pradan helped them roll out the tasks more effectively. Money was required for the labour and for the Horticulture Vikas Samiti (HVS) members (promoted for implementation and maintenance of horticulture activity). Other activities, including the filling up of the muster roll by the Community Resource Persons such as Guruji, cash book maintenance, etc., demonstrated utmost transparency in the process.

During the plantation raising work, two local boys took up the responsibility of carrying out some tasks along with Guruji. The service charges of these boys were paid by Pradan. One arranged for the bamboo for fencing the plots, from in and around the village. He also managed the labour for fencing, filled up the

muster rolls and disbursed payments. The other boy monitored the watering of the plants, the timely spraying of medicine on the plants and looked into the payments for all these. Having seen other government schemes being implemented by contractors and other businessmen, the boys thought that this work would allow them to earn money through unscrupulous means. They had seen that whenever such schemes came to the village, there were ways by which the contractors were able to make extra money even without completing the entire task. When they completed the work, all they received were their service charges, according to the amount of work they had done as per the worksheet. The boys realized that the systems put in place by the women were done with utmost honesty and transparency and that they were wrong to think of earning money through corrupt means. They continued to work in the horticulture activity, welcoming their hard-earned money.

Two men from the village attended a two-day residential training to understand the concepts of SHG clusters and Federation. On completion of the training, the two men met the other villagers and began motivating others to work together for the development of their village. The Pradan professionals had a continuous follow-up system for this. After a few days, two new SHGs were formed in the village with 18 and 13 members, respectively. Within three months, that is, by November 2007, three additional SHGs got formed taking the total number of SHGs in that village to five.

Engaging in Wider Issues

The five SHGs formed a Gram Sabha in Beldong. They met once a month to discuss different aspects of the village, primarily about the progress of the land and water

development work funded by the Tribal Welfare Commissioner's Mining Area Development Agency (the TWC-MADA project), Government of Jharkhand, and the horticulture-related activities in the village. They discussed the measures to enhance the work in the area. The role of the Gram Sabha was to bring all the beneficiaries, SHG members, labourers on to a common platform so that they could take collective decisions on these issues and work on them. We, Pradan professionals, helped them identify the various issues and facilitated the exploration of possible solutions.

The SHG won a Swasthya Sahayika competition in the village. They had to select a young, educated woman of the village to work with the ANM and other health workers, to help facilitate the various health programmes in their area. The SHG members and their husbands held a meeting to discuss this. Through a democratic decision-making process, they selected their candidate. There were other candidates from political parties, who tried to influence the selection process. But the SHG members managed to have a fair and democratic selection of their village Swasthya Sahayika.

This whole event renewed their confidence of being able to participate in and decide on important village issues. Through the Gram Sabha, they are now addressing issues such as the Mid-Day-Meal Programme in their village school, the services of the *anganwadi* and health workers, the sub-health centre in the village, etc. The desire to help and support each other has grown through the functioning of the Gram Sabha. An SHG member was once in a critical condition. The Gram Sabha collected Rs 9,000 from the members of six SHGs for her medical expenses. The Gram Sabha also focusses on the effective

implementation of other government schemes such as the Janani Suraksha Yojana and the Indira Awas Yojana by creating awareness about these among the villagers.

Seeing these developments, other hamlets began thinking of forming groups and join the Gram Sabha. Since June 2008, ten SHGs have been functioning there; not a single family has been left out of the SHG programme. The other villagers are now clear about the functioning of SHGs, Gram Sabha and Pradan in their area. More and more people participate now in the processes of the Gram Sabha and help each other solve the issues of their villages. The Gram Sabha has gained much recognition and meaning in the villagers' minds. They now view the Gram Sabha as a platform for all, irrespective of caste class and political affiliations, to decide important developmental issues of their area. Because there are 10 SHGs in the village, it has been decided that the Gram Sabha will have three representatives from the SHG members and 2 male members from the village.

Building Capacities

Through village-level micro planning, work on creating huge irrigation infrastructure has begun in Beldong. This is being done under the prototype project of land and water development funded by the TWC-MADA. Three homestead wells, 7 lowland wells, one water harvesting tank and 1 ha land levelling work has begun in the village. The total investment for infrastructure creation in this village is about Rs 1,716,000 for 2007-2009. The villagers are very enthusiastic, coming forward to help each other in the work and taking a lot of interest in the activities. With the creation of these infrastructures, improved

technology in agricultural practices has been introduced here.

Pradan professionals have worked to mobilize meetings in the SHGs, clusters, Gram Sabhas, etc. A series of trainings for the villagers have been conducted on SHG and cluster formation, motivational training on different activities, technical training on horticulture, agriculture, lac, tasar, etc., along with exposure visits to build the capacities of the members. A system was put in place for regular follow-up to ensure that the decisions taken in the various meetings are implemented by all. There is a strong support from the Community Recourse Persons of the village, namely, Guruji Murmu, Nunulal Hembram and Subhash Tudu, who helped in the village-level micro planning, data collection, activity planning, input management to the field and follow-up of different activities.

Collective Efforts

After their sequential training, the villagers started adopting scientific methods, previously unknown to them, for agriculture in the kharif season of 2008. They cultivated peas, tomato, cucumber, bottle gourd, etc., which they had not cultivated ever before, and earned profits from it. Guruji introduced new techniques and new varieties of crops in Beldong. He experimented with these practices in his field first so that he would be able to explain these better to the rest of the villagers. Moreover, he used his fields as a demonstration ground, thereby giving the villagers an exposure to the new agricultural technologies and various crops. This would help the villagers understand the concepts better and motivate them to start their own in the next season.

Three farmers have ventured into mango plantations in a systematic manner at their own cost. Eighteen other have made similar plantations though in a small scale (4-5 saplings). Yet other villagers want to plant some plants in their own field with their own contribution. Training on lac cultivation has also been conducted with villagers showing interest in it.

One of the cluster leaders from this village is also in the process of being groomed for training SHG members on SHG awareness and membership along with the professionals. The villagers now view their village from a different developmental perspective. They envisage the SHG as the development gateway through which they can diversify into multidimensional development activities besides it being an entity for practising savings and credit. They see the cluster as a platform for all the SHG members to build a common vision for themselves and more so to deal with women-related issues. It also acts as a space for peer learning and as a pressure group. The villagers use this platform for cross-learning about issues related to the functioning of their SHG, its rules and norm-setting systems and the follow-up for those. The TVS and the HVS are forums to discuss and explore possibilities related to the specific activities. The Gram Sabha is a larger platform, from which the villagers view the different developmental aspects of the village, and review and monitor the other institutions managed by the women of the village.

There has also been a change in the villagers' perspectives on different aspects such as health and education. They understand the difference between the treatment one gets

in a hospital and from quacks; so they avail of hospital facilities for better treatment. They are taking initiatives to regularize the functioning of the sub health centre in the village and the ANM services. Six SHGs even loaned a woman member Rs 10,000 when she was giving birth to her child and was in a critical condition. Such instances demonstrate the unity among the villagers. They are now planning to initiate some work to improve the infrastructure of the primary school and appoint a teacher there.

As a development professional engaged with this community, it is refreshing to see the change in people's perspective about the need to educate their children. The villagers are also focussing on different well being-related issues and schemes. They want to approach different government departments to further the progress of the village. The cropping pattern in the village has changed significantly. Some have adopted improved techniques and technologies in agriculture for different cropping seasons through the year and have started earning more. Seeing their success, other villagers are showing interest in growing vegetables as cash crop. These changes are the result of the initiation of the different people's institutions in the village.

To conclude

Beldong has many ongoing projects, including for land and water development, horticulture, and tasar, and is on the path of holistic development. Around Rs 24 lakhs have been invested in these projects, and such huge investments in the village by external agencies have increased the villagers' interest significantly. These activities started soon after the formation of SHGs.

The real test, however, is to sustain these activities. The villagers must be able to vision a scenario of development for themselves and the village. There is need to build liaisons with government departments so that the villagers can avail of the services that the government provides. The functioning and management of the institutions such as the SHGs, clusters, HVS, TVS and the Gram Sabha need to be strengthened.

I am happy to be engaged with this community and to contribute my bit to their

well being. To strengthen and sustain the initiatives is a challenge that I have as accepted as a development professional. Work on irrigation infrastructures, horticulture plantation and tasar plantation are in the initial phase and the villagers are now starting on improved agricultural practices, lac intervention and so on. More work needs to be done on the linkages with multiple external stakeholders, markets, etc., for these initiatives to become sustainable. Beldong is on its way to becoming a model village.

Her Tears of Happiness

Sareen Panda

From utter deprivation and despair to sufficiency and empowerment, Buduni's life is representative of the changes that SHGs can bring about in the villages

Of Sorrow and Despair

She said, "You would not have seen me now standing here if the yield that you see in my field was not there." Hope filled the smile that crossed her face. That encounter with Buduni Balmuch remains in my heart forever.

Buduni Balmuch, a lady in her late thirties, is from Dhipa Sahi hamlet in Rengalbeda village under the Karanjia block of Mayurbhanj district. The village is hardly 20 km away from

the block town, but all the government facilities like roads, water, housing, etc. that are sent from the block town are exhausted midway; sadly, nothing is left for the tribals of Rengalbeda. The tribals lead their life in hope and anticipation; but nothing helped them lead a life of dignity. Buduni's too had been a similar fate.

Buduni spent her childhood in Badmahuldiha village in Thakurmunda block in Mayurbhanj

Box 1: Renaglbeda Village

Pradan started its intervention in Karanjia in 2000. Initially, it concentrated on forming and nurturing SHGs. It also engaged the villagers in livelihood activities, including improved agricultural practices, mushroom farming and setting up of poly-houses for the supply of quality seedlings for vegetable cultivation. From 2004, Pradan also started Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM)-based activities such as creating permanent irrigation structures. The team interacted with 170 SHGs in 50 villages across three blocks.

Rengalbeda, Buduni's village, is among the 11 villages in which the Karanjia team initiated the INRM-based activities. It is situated on the southern side of Karanjia block, on the border of Karanjia and Thakurmunda blocks. With a total of 93 families, Rengalbeda is divided into five hamlets, namely, Loha Sahi, Lupung Sahi, Guda Sahi, Naik Sahi and Dhipa Sahi. Almost all the hamlets have people belonging to the Kolha tribe barring in Naik Sahi, where the residents are mostly from the Naik tribe. Agriculture is the major source of livelihood for 87 of the families. Of the remaining six families, five are landless and one family's earning member is a serviceman. The major livelihood of the five families who are landless is leaf-plate making; for the other families, this activity is only a secondary source of income.

The Naik families, on an average, own less land as compared to the Kolha families. However, economically the Naiks are better off than the Kolhas because they are engaged in various businesses as well. The Kolhas are mostly dependent on agriculture and leaf-plate making.

The land in Rengalbeda is sandy loam. Most of it is uplands, then medium lands and the least of it is lowlands.

district. She lived with her parents, two sisters and one brother. Her father used to drink regularly and hardly contributed to the income of the family. Her mother was the sole earner in the family and most of the money was spent by her father to buy his liquor. Buduni and her siblings, thus, did not go to school. At a very young age, Buduni accompanied her mother to work as a wage labourer. Both of them also made leaf plates. In the rainy season, even this was not a viable option; so the only way to earning some money was to work as wage labourers. If they did not find work on any day, the family went to bed on empty stomachs.

At 17, Buduni got married to Birendra Balmuch of Rengalbeda. She had aspirations of leading a better life in her husband's house. She hoped to eat well, send her children to school and so on. However, Buduni and her husband had to take care of a family of eight, comprising three daughters and one son of Budni's, her father-in-law and mother-in-law besides themselves. Her in-laws were old and frail and her 15-year-old sister-in-law suffered from mental retardation.

In Karanjia, agriculture is mostly rain-fed. The rain though sufficient, is quite erratic. The family owned about 1.2 acres of land. However, the produce from this land was not sufficient for them to survive the year. In fact, it saw them through just 4 or 5 months of the year. Buduni struggled with the land to sustain her family. Birendra was forced to go to other places such as Bhadrak, Balasore, Cuttack and Bhubaneswar to look for other sources of income. He usually went in July for paddy transplantation and came back by the end of the month. He went again in November for two-and-a-half months during the paddy harvesting season. He would come

back before 14 January to celebrate the harvest festival, Makara, one of the biggest festivals of the Kolhas. In these two stints, he earned Rs 30 per day excluding food and shelter. By the end of January, he would leave once more for work in various construction sites as labour and would be out till June. At the construction site, he earned Rs 60 per day.

Buduni and her mother-in-law added to the income by making leaf plates and selling them to agents who came for collection to the village once a week. On an average, the two of them made 3,000 to 4,000 plates. This brought them about Rs 150 to Rs 200 because for 1,000 plates they got Rs 50. The price for 1,000 plates has risen recently to between Rs 120 and Rs 135. Buduni and her mother-in-law made leaf plates for about 8 months of a year.

The situation worsened when she had her first child. She could no longer afford to go out and work because she had to take care of her newborn child. In the meantime, her sister-in-law died due to the absence of proper medical attention. In a year's time, she had her second child. It then became much more difficult to sustain the family round the year. Her parents-in-law were old and weak and required regular medical help. She wanted her children to go to school. But Buduni could not afford any of these. The primary need was to manage at least two meals a day. She borrowed money from moneylenders and mortgaged her land. Buduni's husband's health too was deteriorating, and often he was unable to go out and look for work.

Hope for Change

In 2001, Pradan went to Rengalbeda to impact the lives of the people there. The initial idea

was to promote SHGs in the village, create a base, on which further work on their livelihood patterns could be carried out. Pradan professionals made regular visits to Rengalbeda to discuss and orient the villagers about the initiatives such as the formation of SHGs. In November 2001, an SHG called Erachin Do Sakam Sundari, meaning A Bright Future, was formed. Buduni too joined as a member. By 2004, Rengalbeda had five SHGs.

Buduni initially started with saving Rs 5 every week with the SHG. She later increased it to Rs 10 per week. Earlier, when she needed money, the only source was the moneylender, who had already taken possession of her cultivable land. With the formation of the SHG, Buduni was able to repay her previous loans to the moneylender and take new loans from her group to meet her requirements. She felt happy to be a member of a group because it allowed her the freedom and space to share her joys and sorrows with her peers. For the first time, she could take decisions on her own even though it only revolved around matters regarding her SHG. But being part of the process of decision-making in the SHG gave her the confidence to express her opinions in family matters. She took decisions regarding the credit requirement for her family and its repayment.

Buduni continued making leaf plates through which she was able to repay her previous loans. She then started taking smaller loans of Rs 100 and Rs 300 and began investing in her agricultural field. She grew confident about the decisions she was making because she was getting good returns now.

In Rengalbeda, most farmers do broadcasted paddy, with little bit of transplanted paddy. Pradan professionals encouraged the farmers

to use transplanted paddy. For the initial investment, the members mobilised funds for this from their SHGs. Buduni also took up the activity that ensured her 8 quintals of paddy. This would increase her food security to some extent. Previously, she got only 5 to 6 quintals of paddy each year.

The average rainfall in Karanjia was sufficient for at least of two crops annually if the water could be stored in some way. The hilly terrain and the high rainfall created the added difficulty of the top soil being washed away, thereby affecting the fertility of the soil. For the community, it was a double loss-soil erosion and decreased soil fertility. The Pradan team introduced the villagers to INRM, with the aim of getting the villagers to build structures to store water for irrigation.

In 2003-04, a project funded by India-Canada Environment Facility (ICEF) was initiated in Karanjia to implement INRM activities so that comprehensive land and water treatment could be done. When the project was initiated in Rengalbeda, the farmers were reluctant to allow a part of their land to be dug. They thought this would only mean that they would have lesser area for cultivation and, hence, there would be a fall in their income and food security. However, after a few discussions and orientation, the villagers understood that these structures would improve their yield on their land and, in turn, increase their income and food sufficiency. Planning meetings, facilitated by Pradan professionals, were held in which every family made their own plans, keeping in mind their current resources, sustainability and future needs.

Buduni too participated in the process. She, initially, planned a seepage pond for her medium lowland, and a vermin-compost pit.

This would also help her plan for the kharif paddy and winter vegetables along with a fishery and a 'duckery'. In December 2004, work started in her field, and by February 2005, the seepage pond was complete. During this time Pradan also introduced SRI paddy cultivation. The next agriculture season, Buduni opted for SRI and improved a medium lowland. She got a yield of 12 quintals from only 0.5 acre land. She also cultivated brinjals around the pond in winter and got a good return. She took a loan of Rs 700 from her SHG and put in another Rs 300 for these purposes.

My engagements

I joined the Karanjia team in November 2005 on transfer from Raigarh. I was engaged in Rengalbeda and the work that was being initiated there. I learnt that another six months of the project was left and the demands from the community were increasing for similar work. But they were falling short of funds. Rs 15 lakhs were needed and only around Rs 10 lakhs were available.

The work was being carried out in the five hamlets of Rengalbeda. Hamlet-level committees managed the work that was initiated there. Separate meetings of these five committees were held, which I attended regularly. I also made frequent visits to the fields. I met Buduni there. I observed that each family's lowland and upland were treated and they also had plans for treating their medium lands. I did not see any person implementing their plans well. Without that, they would never achieve the full potential of their resources. Moreover, in the absence of treatment of the medium land, the seepage tanks in lowland would not be utilized to their maximum potential. I deliberately focussed

more on the treatment of the medium land while all the other plans were being implemented simultaneously.

The issue of shortage of funds was discussed with the families. It was decided that the needs of the villagers had to be prioritized. They first analysed the needs of each family vis-à-vis the funds available, and allocated the funds to each family accordingly. A planning meeting was held in each hamlet, in which the families got together to prioritize the needs of each family, based on its economic conditions and emergent needs. The villagers themselves were in command of these discussions.

I kept myself in the background, allowing them to make their own decisions. The challenge for me was to help every villager and complete all the planning within the deadline.

In Buduni's hamlet-level meeting, the villagers met to plan for the requirements of 5 per cent model structures for her medium land paddy cultivation. She planned for six 5 per cent pits in her medium land. By early 2006, her 5 per cent pits were all in place. She is now happy with the produce from her field. It is not only giving her sufficient income and food security but the problem of irrigation has also been solved. For the last two years, her husband has stayed home and assisted her in the field rather than going out in search of work. She has also taken a loan of Rs 400 from her SHG and has started rearing ducks in her pond. In two months, she repaid her loan and earned a profit of Rs 2,000. She can now afford food to eat, access medical services and, to her utter joy, send her children to school. All of these have encouraged her to

hope for a better future for herself, her children and her family.

Three years after the project was initiated in the village, no family migrates for work any more. Almost all the families have irrigation structures for round-the-year agriculture. The villagers are now engaging for organic

agriculture. This started with 40 farmers taking up organic SRI in 2008. Witnessing such a change in the life of a woman like Buduni makes me proud to be a development professional. My experience and engagement with Rengalbeda village and women like Buduni has changed me from a mere professional to a developmental professional.

Enigmas of Professional Action

Neelima Khetan

The original mission of Pradan-integrating well-meaning professionals and the large body of development practitioners-is as relevant today as it was 20 years ago

When I was asked to write for NewsReach, I grabbed the opportunity because a part of me still feels it belongs to Pradan and feels at home with the people in Pradan. An opportunity to reconnect was very tempting. But when I actually sat down to write, I realised how difficult it was.

The years that I had spent in Pradan were wonderful years, heady years, years which were full of learning for me, of knowing some of the best people in development and of forming friendships, which till today give me joy (not to forget the fact that I found my husband through the Pradan network). But they were also painful and, often, lonely years. Today, when I sit down to write, I want to talk about both these aspects. However, memory is a strange thing and I fear that I may overemphasise the latter and underplay the former. If that happens, it is not intentional and not even what reality was like then.

First Encounter

Even before I finished IRMA'S course-work in 1984, I had decided to join a voluntary agency. Of the two that the institute could allow me to go to (because of the bond the students signed with IRMA), one was SEWA, Ahmedabad, and Anand Niketan Ashram (ANA), Rangpur. I chose the latter because it was located in a rural area.

When I reached home after travelling around a bit before joining, I found a letter from Deep Joshi of Ford Foundation asking me to meet him. Not knowing what to expect, I met both Vijay Mahajan and Deep in the latter's office. They wanted me to join Pradan, of which I knew nothing.

My first concern was that I had made a commitment to ANA, which I wanted to stand by. Second, I did not want to break the bond I had signed with IRMA. On both these counts, Vijay and Deep reassured me and told me of the additional advantages of being with a peer group such as Pradan. While I listened to all this, I honestly did not understand how or why one would need peer support of this kind to survive. But I was to understand the value of it soon after I joined ANA.

Joining Pradan

Despite not being fully convinced of the relative merits of this arrangement, I found myself agreeing to the proposal to join Pradan by the end of the meeting (over the years, of course, I learnt more about Vijay's powerful charisma). And so, Sankar Dutta and I went to ANA, wearing Pradan hats.

ANA was a difficult assignment, more so for someone like me. It was my first job, my first foray into development, and it was development mediated through an organisation and people who had already been doing it for the past 30 years. Looking back, with the wisdom of 19 years in development, I realise now the impossibility of the task we had taken on. Maybe not impossible, but impossible given our mental time-frames for professionalising an organisation in three years or so. Sankar and I lasted there for just about a year. I may not have lasted even that one year but for Sankar's constant support and for the knowledge that there was Pradan. It is, of course, a moot point whether we would have lasted longer even if we had gone with humbler objectives.

After leaving ANA, Sankar shifted to Kesla, Pradan's first direct action project. After ANA, Kesla seemed very tempting-all the work that needed to be done was yours for the doing with no irksome organisational baggage around. But for some purely personal reasons, I decided not to go to Kesla. I would have been part of the Kesla team and this article then would have been a very different one. Instead, I went to the Pradan Delhi office and hung around doing odd jobs till Seva Mandir came along.

Seva Mandir

I joined Seva Mandir at a difficult time. A leadership change involved and affected most staff members. Without even understanding what was happening around me, by sheer accident of being there, I too became involved in it. That was probably the most distressing period of my career. So much so, Vijay and I almost decided to pull out of Seva Mandir till things settled down somewhat. If I did survive that time, it was again because of Pradan and chiefly because of the constant support I got from Ved and Vijay. After that, of course, I just stayed on in Seva Mandir and, in 1992, decided to leave Pradan and join Seva Mandir full time.

The decision was not simple. By mid-1992, I had already been on prolonged maternity leave from Seva Mandir for two years, of which the last year was in Hoshangabad with Hardy (my husband) and my small son. More than from Pradan, there was pressure from both our families for me to now settle down in Hoshangabad and start living with Hardy. The Kesla Project was just next door and I was good friends with everyone there-Guru, Anup, Mustafa-so shifting to Hoshangabad was a viable option.

The practical difficulty in this was Pradan's style of working, which appeared to find it

difficult to accommodate the constraints of young mothers. But there was a bigger difficulty-this was the time that Pradan was changing and re-looking at its mission of supporting the entry and integration of professionals into voluntary agencies. The emphasis was now shifting to direct action projects.

I did not feel too much at home with this new mission and what made it more stifling was my own inability to talk to anyone in Pradan. I had anxieties on the personal front about how my small baby was and how I would fit into Pradan's work culture. I had professional anxieties, questions and doubts about the changing mission, and I did not find anyone I could reach out to. My participation in the 1992 Pradan Retreat was, I remember, extremely jarring and at the end of the Retreat, I decided to go back to what I knew and understood, namely, Seva Mandir.

Mission Still Relevant

The NGO world has changed a lot in the 19 years that I have been in it. But despite all the changes, and the awareness among and the entry of professionals into this work, I think that the original mission of Pradan is as relevant today as it was then. No doubt a larger number of professionals are now opting for voluntary agencies; yet, that alone was not Pradan's mission. The mission was about people and institutions with different strengths in our society-and bringing those strengths together.

Facilitating this mutual appreciation of strengths is difficult and triggers deep anxieties on all sides. Pradan's own efforts at bringing this about showed how difficult the task was. Appreciating someone's management or technical skills or the other's social skills is not the same as appreciating differences in perspectives and values. My understanding of

why Pradan stopped doing 'action consultancies' was because whereas the former kind of appreciation may have been happening, the latter did not happen very much, and the former without the latter cannot be as satisfying or enduring. Further, the latter also required much more effort, time, support, introspection and adaptation than the young, committed group was able to make.

Difficult to Adapt

Simultaneously, it is also true that it was difficult for institutions that had grown in a certain way to accept people with different values and skill sets. Established institutions have their own ethos, power structure and value basis. For them to accept a younger lot of people with high management skills and sense of purpose was something that needed a great deal of willingness to adapt.

Arguably, not many institutions had the self-confidence to bring about an inner transformation to accept the infusion of new talent and values. At the same time, in retrospect, I think Pradan may have, in its original mission statement, misjudged the depth of transformation needed to vitalise existing institutions.

When I was in Seva Mandir as a Pradan staff member, going to Pradan Retreats, after the first few years, was not a very pleasant occasion. Pradan had its own understanding of how to integrate professionals in NGOs, while working towards enhancing the overall efficacy of the interventions of these organisations. The pivot for bringing about these changes was a near non-negotiable—that the Pradan action consultant be given a line responsibility.

Somehow, in Seva Mandir, that never happened, at least not in the manner that Pradan expected it to. I used to understand

Seva Mandir's reasons for having the kind of structure it had but could never adequately convince my colleagues in Pradan about this logic. I did ask in some Retreats about if the nature of our association with the NGO was not getting over-determined by Pradan. Or, to put it more differently, had the agency accepted the professional? Was not that the most important first step? And if arriving at that mutual acceptance required that both parties modify their approach and thinking, should we not be open to it?

Somewhere I felt within Pradan a sense of 'knowing' how to do development better than our partners and clients (the NGO in question). Of course, we were always learning from the field, looking for innovative and successful experiments being carried out by our associate organisations; yet, our prism for looking at all these was only technical and managerial.

Socio-political Dimensions

I remember a Pradan Retreat (in MYRADA) when Vijay broke down after relating his Guna experience. He said that more than the pain of what actually happened in Guna, was the lack of understanding among Pradan colleagues about the socio-political issues in development. Even then I remember wondering about how this was to happen when we spoke mostly about the technical and management aspects of development. I think, we also never engaged with the social and political dimensions of our core mission—of professionals working with another kind of people in our society, that is, the locals, the middle class and the lower middle class. The latter are the people who make up the bulk of the voluntary sector in our country, and they are the people whom we wanted to make more effective, more professional. The action consultancy work was based on the premise that the professional would move on to other organisations after a few years of intensive

association with an organisation and after orienting the people in that organisation to good management and the technical ways of doing development.

If that were so, we would have, besides trying to understand how to do development, also tried to understand the people who were doing and would continue to do this development. What were the anxieties of the latter? What were their aspirations, their strengths, and their weaknesses? Not one Pradan Retreat dwelt on these aspects.

As an organisation looking for solutions to the problems of the non-farm sector, credit, irrigation, etc., this may be all right (although I am not convinced). However, as an organisation wanting to trigger off institutional and social change processes ultimately, this reluctance to relate with a class, which constitutes the bulk of our society (after the poor) and the bulk of the development actors, seems a somewhat limited approach.

Fractured Engagement

Why am I raising this issue of a fractured engagement today? After all, Pradan has moved on and its mandate is no longer that of action consultancies. However, I think the issue of a fuller engagement, of mutual trust and learning, is as relevant today in development, as it was then. For me, the two hats that I was constantly juggling with (that of a Pradan Professional and of a voluntary sector person) forced me to look at this issue.

I have dwelt on this issue even more after leaving Pradan. With the development sector now having grown (in terms of spread, visibility and importance), and a much larger number of professionals entering this work and occupying significant positions, the issue is becoming increasingly important. After

Pradan's attempts to bringing about this integration between well-meaning professionals and the large body of development practitioners, there have been many other similar attempts by CAPART, IGSSS, ARAVALI and even IRMA (although IRMA predates PRADAN). Most have not succeeded in the original objective.

Ground Shift

In that sense, Pradan's shift from attempting to integrate professionals into existing NGOs to concentrating on getting professionals to themselves work directly on the ground was probably a good shift. Pradan has been successful in what it chose to do. Its approach has resulted in significant benefits for poor communities. Its work in mushroom cultivation, poultry, watershed development, silk rearing, lift irrigation systems and micro credit provision are truly noteworthy.

What these interventions have failed to do, however, has been to address the challenge of professionalising local people and bringing about social and political transformation. The idea of social transformation was central to the vision of organisations inspired by the ideas of Gandhi, JP and leftist ideologies and the action consultancy approach would have necessitated engaging with these concerns. Whether an engagement with these institutions would have yielded dividends is a moot point.

My work with Seva Mandir has given me some insights into the kind of issues that Pradan's direct action approach to development obviated and the difficulties of going the action consultancy way. When I joined Seva Mandir, my colleagues were for most part locally recruited and they were engaged in mobilisation work. My orientation was to professionalise development services. They were resistant to the idea of becoming services

providers and enabling villagers to do the same.

Professionalising development seemed contrary to the idea of social change as it also threatened their identities as powerbrokers. The process of my being accepted by them and my accepting them as equals was long drawn. They felt that I did not share their social and cultural context and that, as an outsider, I could not empathise with them and likewise other deprived people.

For my part, it took me time to see their sterling qualities, disguised as these were by development rhetoric and values that were traditional and not always democratic and egalitarian. Our journey together over more than 18 years has changed us in significant ways. Seva Mandir in the mid-80s decided to concentrate on constructive work in the fields of health, land and water development, and education (a long-standing concern) alongside its work on organising poor peasants. My colleagues, as a result, have become professionals in their approach to work as foresters, health workers, educationists and field workers.

Working Together

I realise that professionalism without changing social, power and property relations is not development. Whereas progress on these agendas has been slow and tenuous, I have come to appreciate the value of getting people of different backgrounds to work together and

develop mutual respect for each other and at the same time address issues of social transformation.

As the discourse on development turns to meta theories of change such as the rights-based approach to development or the privileging of PRIs over other forms of development action, the time has come for the constructive work sector to dialogue on the actual experience of doing development work. It is important that the complexities of development work are not overlooked by generalisations.

Pradan, after two decades of outstanding work, has much to contribute to this dialogue. Its achievements and what it chose not to do by design are of great importance to the current discourse on development. It would be very good if Pradan could share its journey of development and reflect on the challenges that are yet to be adequately addressed.

It could revisit the original mission of Pradan and describe for others the experience and the gaps in it. Looking to the needs and greater maturity of the development sector, they can benefit from the original vision of Pradan of helping NGOs revitalise themselves. And, in turn, Pradan can adapt itself to play this role, keeping in view the challenges incumbent on such an enterprise.

This article was published earlier in September 2003.



PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action) is a voluntary organisation registered under the Societies' Registration Act in Delhi. We work in selected villages in 7 states through small teams based in the field. The focus of our work is to promote and strengthen livelihoods for the rural poor. It involves organising them, enhancing their capabilities, introducing ways to improve their incomes and linking them to banks, markets and other economic services. PRADAN comprises professionally trained people motivated to use their knowledge and skills to remove poverty by working directly with the poor. Engrossed in action, we often feel the need to reach out to each other in PRADAN as well as those in the wider development fraternity. NewsReach is one of the ways we seek to address this need. It is our forum for sharing thoughts and a platform to build solidarity and unity of purpose.



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