

United Nations
Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)
Expert Group Meeting on
“Empowerment of women throughout the life cycle
as a transformative strategy for poverty eradication”
26 – 29 November 2001
New Delhi, India

Topic 2: Empowerment of women as a transformative strategy for poverty eradication

***“The Core Methodology of Social Mobilisation in
Women’s Empowerment as a Transformative Strategy
For Poverty Eradication”***

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1. THE EGM'S FRAME

The Aide Memoire situates the EGM's frame as a particular focus in the UN Commission on the Status of Women's work programme's priority themes for the period 2002 – 2006. This frame is derived from several reinforcing and interpenetrating strategic themes:

- i) Women and poverty, and the “ empowerment of women is a critical factor in the eradication of poverty” (Platform for Action, Beijing Conference on Women).
- ii) Mainstreaming a gender perspective into the planning and implementation of policies, strategies and programmes on poverty eradication (General Assembly Resolution 52/193 of 1997).
- iii) Impact of globalization on women's work (World Survey on the Role of Women in Development , 1999).
- iv) To promote gender equality and empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease in development, which is truly sustainable in halving of world poverty by 2015 (Millenium Declaration).
- v) Linking women's empowerment to good governance and gender equality within a framework of human rights and social justice (UN Inter Agency Meeting on Women, 2001, with OECD/DAC. Working Party on Gender Equality Workshop).

2. THE SPECIFIC FOCUS

The EGM has an explicit focus stated as follows:

- i) Poverty in a globalizing world at different stages of women's life cycle.
- ii) Transformative strategies of empowerment through institutional and policy change at micro, meso and macro levels and within a rights-based perspective.

This inter-linked dual focus should produce recommendations directed towards key actors like governments, the UN system, inter-governmental and regional bodies and civil society.

There are specific challenges and compulsions which underpin the dual focus referred to. They are:

- i) “ Women’s empowerment ” being a protean concept with many meanings. Hence, it is a compulsion to clarify the notion of women’s empowerment focusing on its transformative nature.
- ii) It is essential to identify the key elements and principles of empowerment strategy that would ensure that women of all ages have equal access to entitlements and capabilities that would enable them to overcome poverty in a sustainable way.
- iii) The third compulsion is the need for a rights-based approach to eradicating poverty.

It is these challenges and compulsions which are the distinguishing features of this Meeting. It is emphatically not business as usual or an exercise in women’s empowerment rhetoric. It is very specific. Three cutting edge questions are posed – how do you make empowerment strategy truly transformative: what are the core attributes of such a strategy: and finally how do you make the strategy rights-based? These are new questions requiring innovative answers.

3. OBJECTIVE OF THE PAPER

The objective of the paper is to claim that we in South Asia have a core methodology of Social Mobilisation which has proved its validity on the ground over a quarter century period. Its distinctive character is that it can successfully address the above three challenges and compulsions head-on at one and the same time. The core methodology is amply supported by a theory and practice in every country in South Asia. In fact, it a core component of an emerging school of thought on Participatory Development.

What is more, the core methodology of Social Mobilisation telescopes both aspects of the dual focus stated above. Poverty in a globalizing world at different stages in the life cycle of women **is** the reality which the core methodology is addressing in order to transform it, in the instances where it is being applied today. To put it another way, the holism integral to the core methodology encompasses the complexity and the structural aspects of ‘ feminized poverty ’ or poverty specifically and differently experienced by poor women. We might explain that the content of the problem being addressed by the poor women in a particular micro location will be determined by no one else than the poor women themselves.

4. A DETOUR – THE CRISIS OF PARADIGMS

It is our premise that our world is faced with a crisis of paradigms. There is a major contradiction working its way out between the Conventional Paradigm of delivered development and the Participatory Paradigm, which is counter-posed to the former.

What is popularly called Globalization today, is in our view, only one form of globalization, derived from the industrialized first world. It is a homogenized mono culture. Coca Cola and Kentucky Fried Chicken, which look and taste the same the world over, symbolizes its one-dimensionality. Perceptually this Globalization constitutes a Unitary Vision.

But there are many other equally valid globalizations in our world. They are based on Plural Visions and are as diverse as the cultures and civilizations abounding in the world. Look at the Tribal Cultures of South Asia. Look at the cultures of the Poor Peasants and Farmers, and especially the knowledge systems of Poor Rural Women, which have been written about by Vandana Shiva and many others. Look at the manner in which, the Crisis of Paradigms is contending in Latin America with the return of Cosmo Visions and cosmology of the Indian Peasants.¹ The point is that all these cultures have a way of life, an epistemology, an ethics, a science and technology, values, cosmology and spiritually, unique to them indeed – the staff of Plural Visions.

Therefore, let us note that there are two basic responses being enacted on the ground in South Asia today vis-à-vis the hegemonic Globalization First, is the fact of the peoples of the Plural Visions **resisting** the invasiveness of predatory Globalization on an expanding scale, and in the process, re-defining their lives and visions with recourse to a new Participatory Paradigm. Second is the counter response of Fundamentalism, which is the opposite counterpart of Globalization, in that it is equally one-dimensional reductive and oppressive.

We made this short detour into the Crisis of Paradigms in order to situate ourselves more concretely – both intellectually and practically – within the global resistance to the one-dimensional form of globalization and within the multiple alternative spaces of Plural Visions and globalizations being engaged in, in our world today. It is not as if the Poor have no choices. They have.

5. A SCHOOL OF THOUGHT AND MAINSTREAMING

SAPNA is the acronym of the South Asian Perspectives Network Association. SAPNA means vision, dream, perspective in all South Asian languages. For over 25 years. SAPNA has

¹ See *The Spirit of Regeneration - Andean Cultures Confronting Western Nations of Development* – ed. by Frederique Apfel-Marglin with PRATEC, ZED, London, 1998

sought to network South Asian action researchers, scholars, statesmen, activists and community leaders to focus on South Asian problems by going straight to the ground, participatory action research being its chosen methodology.² It has consciously avoided being a priori. Poverty has often been its entry point to investigating South Asian reality in its varied forms. But it has been solidly multi-disciplinary and looking at issues both at micro and macro levels.³ Its avowed aim was and is to form a School of Thought on Participatory Development in South Asia.

In 1992, where many members of the network came together in the Independent South Asian Commission for Poverty Alleviation appointed by the South Asian Heads of State, SAPNA was able to **mainstream** its ideas in its unanimous Report titled Meeting the Challenge (1992)⁴. The Report was an intellectually path-breaking synthesis document which drew the strategic lessons from the first generation (70s and 80s) of best practices in poverty eradication in the South Asian region and came up with the strategic option that Social Mobilisation was the needed core regional strategy to confront the poverty issue. It also stated that while Social Mobilisation was the core strategy, it had to be complemented by several sectoral thrusts like food security, labour intensive industrialization, decentralization and devolution, human development and gender sensitivity. It formulated the concept of **pro poor growth** for the first time in the discourse. The Report was unanimously endorsed by the Heads of State and the result was the Dhaka Declaration to eradicate the worst forms of poverty in South Asia by 2002, leaving only residual numbers to be carried by safety nets.

Unfortunately, its potential promise has not been followed up nor systematically pursued by the official establishments. However SAPNA has continued to follow-up on its perspective through independent networking. As a result, the discourse has evolved and produced some valuable results like a sub-network of training institutes in rigorous social mobilisation, several participatory action research locations, numerous policy dialogues – sub nationally, nationally and internationally, publications and audio-visual material.⁵

² See SAPNA Progress Report No. 7 for the year 2000.

³ **Towards a Theory Of Rural Development** By G.V.S. De Silva, Wahid-ul-Haque, Niranjana Mehtha Anisur Rahman, Ponna Wignaraja(eds) Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, Sweden 1977 and Progressive Publishers, Pakistan – 1988

The Challenge in South Asia: Development, Democracy and Regional Cooperation - By: Ponna Wignaraja , Akmal Hussain(eds)Sage Publications, India – 1989

Women, Poverty and Resources By Ponna Wignaraja Sage Publications, India, 1990

Participatory Development: Learning from South Asia By: Ponna Wignaraja, Akmal Hussain, Harsh Sethi, Ganeshan Wignaraja (eds) Oxford University Press & United Nations University Press – 1991

New Social Movements in the South: Empowering the People By Ponna Wignaraja ZED Books, U.K. & Sage Publications, India – 1993

Readings on Pro-Poor Planning Through Social Mobilisation in South Asia: The Strategic Option for Poverty Eradication (Vol. 1) By: Ponna Wignaraja & Susil Sirivardana (eds) Vikas Publications, India – 1998

⁴ **Meeting the Challenge, Report of the Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation, SAARC Secretariate, Kathmandu, 1992.**

⁵ Please see the SAPNA Progress Reports – published annually, the last being No. 7 for 2000.

It is this over 25 year quest which has now entered the mainstream discourse. In the process, one important outcome has been the graduation of a Core Methodology of Social Mobilisation with acceptable variations.

6. GENDER EQUITY AND SAPNA'S WORK

Gender equity has been a priority and core concern throughout SAPNA's quest.

This was a compulsion given both the reality on the ground where the voices of poor women and the Women's Movement have been unmistakably assertive and the holistic perspective of the approach which facilitated the listening to and learning from those voices. The listening and learning crystallized into SAPNA's publication titled **Women, Poverty and Resources (1990)**, authored by Ponna Wignaraja and published by SAGE. Among the South Asian cases investigated in the study, were the following – Grameen Bank, BRAC, PCRW of Nepal, Working Women's Forum and Working Women's Forum Credit Society of India, SEWA, the Fund for Poor Women in India and the Baldia Home Schools in the Kachhi Abadies of Karachi. There were also cases from Africa and Latin America.

7. A CORE METHODOLOGY – THE CRITERIA AND PRINCIPLES

The concept of a core methodology presupposes a long period of critical experimentation on the ground where the process of learning has matured and graduated to the level of distilling a 'core methodology'. In this respect, we thought it would be useful to identify the criteria and principles, which distinguish such a methodology.

- i) Capacitating groups and communities of poor women to use the methodology as a means and a right in their struggle to critically understand their reality and the causes creating structural poverty making them objects, and at the same time, helping them to transform and reconstruct their reality in conditions of autonomy, making them subjects.
- ii) It must be functional and usable irrespective of the particular entry point to development.
- iii) It is premised on the use by groups and communities of poor women and not on the isolated individual.
- iv) It assumes a level of internalization and psychological satisfaction, which is deep enough to make them owners of the mobilisation process, which is also a precondition for sustainability.

- v) It presupposes a level of empowerment which liberates poor women from all dependencies and which confers them with new autonomous identities as part of mainstream civil society.
- vi) The empowering and liberating process is primarily value-driven and underpinned by an awareness of spirituality, ethics and culture.
- vii) Gender equity and equality are an essential dimension.
- viii) It is premised on building up knowledge bases by poor women based on positive elements in their own knowledge system and access to the many pools of modern knowledge.
- ix) It should be cost effective and nationally affordable.
- x) It should be a learnable and trainable ensemble of key elements with permissible variations to suit local conditions and should not reduce itself to become mechanistic dogma.

8. THE CORE METHODOLOGY – STEPS, SEQUENCING AND ELEMENTS

A preliminary comment is relevant here regarding a gendered approach to social mobilisation. The proven and preferred pattern in Sri Lanka is for women to lead the process and have their own organisations in which only women have membership. But while women follow a self-reliant and independent path in their primary, secondary and tertiary groups, the whole family is the unit of decision-making and action. At a recent meeting the women members present put it like this.

They were also empowered in terms of gender-equity but they told us that their understanding of gender-equity was very different from Colombo's projection of it. Theirs was an inclusive concept which was woven round the whole family – wife, husband, son and daughter. It was clearly not wife versus husband. They admitted of differences, but that difference was within a larger integrated whole.⁶

Many variations to this normative pattern are found. I accept that this issue of separating women and men in their dialogues is very much culture and situation specific.

⁶ *The Poor Speak Back – Closing remarks made by the author at the National Poverty Conference held on 22 – 23 October in Colombo.*

Some of these elements will be visually illustrated through transparencies.

- i) Availability of trained External Facilitator. Who goes to live among the Poor with “ empty pockets “.
- ii) The External Facilitator enters the village and engages with the poorest of the poor.
- iii) In dialogue with poor groups, collectively and jointly begin a process of investigating the social reality of the village, which means analytical studying of consumption patterns, production relations, contradictions, knowledge systems, values, culture.
- iv) Small collective actions, followed by collective reflection – a graduating process, which continues through all the points below:
- v) Group Savings starts with formation of small groups and goes on until they begin to understand the new dynamics of being ‘ savers ‘. Somewhat later, the groups may start giving small sums of credit with their own savings. Later still, they will graduate to form links with the banking system. [Note: through all these steps and stages, the poor are negotiating with a new awareness with the constituencies in the Support System, meaning central and local government, technocrats, private sector, banks, co-operatives, NGOs, etc.]
- vi) As production process becomes more liberative, changes in knowledge take place through exposure to new technologies and addresses new challenges like marketing (to retain people’s surplus in people’s hands).
- vii) When the time is opportune, the poor being to form organisations of the poor. This too is a process and over time, organisations may be formed at different levels – often primary, secondary and apex. This is the building up of countervailing power.
- viii) Participatory monitoring and evaluation is done by the poor groups themselves. [Illustrate }.
- ix) External Facilitator engages relevant individuals in the Support System and begins a process of re-orientation.
- x) Internal Facilitators emerge from process and assume various responsibilities of an increasing division of labour : External Facilitator can begin to distance himself/herself.

- xi) Human development processes – health, education, housing. Local government, environmental, gender-equity, etc., are catalysed over time.
- xii) Asset bases improve and increase all round.
- xiii) Multiplication of the process into new areas. Donor support becomes useful.
- xiv) Over time, the poor enter the mainstream and demonstrate a capacity to negotiate with it as equals.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are suggested on the premise that the core methodology idea is accepted without dilution.

The primary target group will be two categories of poor women, namely the Poorest of the Poor Women and Less Poor women. Depending on the socio-political and culture- specific conditions, the objective should be to offer the programmes to Poor Men also.

Broad actor groups are suggested. Also, short and medium term time frames. Much further refinement is needed in the small group discussions. These recommendations also need to be synergised with other recommendations.

The recommendations need to be further revised to encompass all three challenges and compulsions with the necessary balance and complementarity.

Short Term

- i) All national and international agencies to review their existing poverty policy frameworks and strategy papers and incorporate the concept of a Core Methodology of Social Mobilisation in them. This includes the current global exercise by the World Bank of formulating Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers or PRSPs for each member country.
- ii) Similarly review existing national and internationally supported Poverty Eradication Programmes and incorporate the concept and practice of a Core Methodology of Social Mobilisation into them.
- iii) Immediately, governments and funding agencies should create separate Funds where they are not there at all, or augment existing Funds where they are already

there, for meeting the costs of expanded programmes of Social Mobilisation as a fundamental component in the structure of the programmes.

- iv) Immediately identify institutional and other capacities for training trainers in the Core Methodology of Social Mobilisation and start expanded training programmes for trainers of social mobilisation. The necessary preparatory work will have to be thoroughly and rigorously done, if this exercise is to yield productive results; it cannot be technocratically or bureaucratically done.

Medium Term

- i) A carefully selected inter-regional critical mass of thinker-practitioners of Social Mobilisation and Participatory Development should be commissioned to do two connected assignments. First, a series of regional State of the Art in Social Mobilisation studies with special reference to poor women, for the regions of South Asia, Africa, Latin America, Middle East, South East Asia and Eastern Europe. This will be immediately followed up by a synthesis study for a Global State of the Art in Social Mobilisation. In each case, the objective is to look at success cases on the ground and come up with the strategic policy and programme option for the Core Methodology in each region. Please note that a great deal of primary source material for these studies already exist.

The question as to how this should be got going has to be arrived at after further consultation.

- ii) In response to the outcomes of the regional studies in i) above, set up regional programmes on Social Mobilisation as was done by the International Labour Organization from 1977 – 1990 when they had the programme called The Participation of the Rural Poor in Development under Muhammad Anisur Rahman.