

“Oru Nellum Oru Meenum”

Existential Struggle of Empowering for Empowerment

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Abstract

Experiences of empowerment can be the anticipated impact of the community initiatives so that the people become independent, contributing, enthusiastic, and contented. This blissful existence is not a natural upshot of the stress and strain of a provided life situations or pleasure of everyday enjoyments. It is also not the additions of the time to the infrastructural and material assets of the individuals, groups or even the selected communities. It can't be the restricted possibilities and provisions for the selected few. This brilliant situation of 'empowered people and community' is a dream of all those who are working in the development sector and will be pervasive with the individual, familial and community contexts at local, national and international dimensions. It is possible through the integration of the physical, psychological, social and spiritual interventions in the form of personal developments and social capital augmentation. Further the domino effect of the initiatives will be sustainable and effective in actual fact if this process engages the shared and participatory procedures and strategies. Participation of all stakeholders including the benefactors, beneficiaries, change agents and the nation builders at all-inclusive dimensions in the context of empowerment praxis is the most beautiful experience and expectation – 'Empowering for Empowerment'.

Introduction

Empowerment has real meaning and application only when it is practiced by the ordinary people of the society in their day to day living state of affairs.

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We can very well pronounce that the development is effective as the catalyst of the empowerment, when that experience along with the desired outcomes are equitably owned and shared by the desolate in the peripheries along with the chosen of the main stream. Empowerment can be a condition of the populace which facilitate them to access and enjoy the due share of the risks and results of augmentation efforts. Experiences of empowerment can also be the anticipated impact of the enhancement initiatives so that the people become independent, contributing, enthusiastic, and contented. This blissful existence is not a natural upshot of the stress and strain of a provided life situations or pleasure of everyday enjoyments. It is also not the additions of the time to the infrastructural and material assets of the individuals, groups or even the selected communities. It can't be the restricted possibilities and provisions for the selected few. This feeling of delight and wellness is the desired impact of planned and strategic interventions by the total team comprising the providers and receivers in a right based and dignified humanitarian community contexts. This brilliant situation of 'empowered people and community' is a dream of all those who are working in the development sector and will be pervasive with the individual, familial and community contexts at local, national and international dimensions. It is possible through the integration of the physical, psychological, social and spiritual interventions in the form of personal developments and social capital augmentation. Further the domino effect of the initiatives will be sustainable and effective in actual fact if this process engages the shared and participatory procedures and strategies. Participation of all stakeholders including the benefactors, beneficiaries, change agents and the nation builders at all-inclusive dimensions in the context of empowerment praxis is the most beautiful experience and expectation – 'Empowering for Empowerment'.

SPED-III

Project SPED-III is a five year grass root level development and participatory empowerment program for the neighborhood individuals, groups and communities put into operation in India by Save A Family Plan (SAFP) as an endeavor in partnership with CIDA/CPB, from January, 2011 to March 31, 2016. It has focused on crafting a systematized process of competence enhancement, which in turn equips communities solving their poverty-related

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issues by themselves through the participatory and evidence based practices. SAFP Canada has supported this plan through 'Save A Family Plan India' and 27 regionally-based civil society partners in 10 states of India. The SPED III scheme was steered by participatory need analysis, stakeholder discussions, and a scheduled modus operandi of linking all segments of the village communities in taster and villages, collaborating NGOs, and SAFP India and Canada through the coordinated activities and programmes. The local partners of the SPED-III initiative of the global Developmental organization, 'Save a Family Programme Canada' along with 'Save a Family Plan Trust (India) at Aiswaryagram Parappuram' have initiated such wonderful models of locally designed and implemented programmes. Every such program contributes a lot to the pedagogy of development and also is highly researchable. The following is a case of such initiative by the WIN society under the programmes of the SPED III initiated by the Save a Family Plan India and Canada in collaboration.

Women Initiative Network (WIN) Society

Women Initiative Network, (WIN) Society is a development non Governmental Organization working in the Ernakulam and Alappuzha Districts of Kerala. It is managed by the secular sisters and is contributing a lot of the collective efforts of the rural women in the area and is more driven with the philosophy of collective action for social justice and empowerment. The community around the area is well organised through the efforts of the development interventions. At present the organization is strategically offering educational, economic, cultural and political directions and leadership to the rural community. The network has made its remarkable impact on the rural development through the community organization practices.

The Backdrop

Neendakara village is one of the twenty villages selected for the SPED-III programme of WIN. It is 15th ward of Ezhupunna Grama Panchayath. More than 2000 acres of paddy fields is situated between the Neendakara in the west and Ezhupunna in the East and has been used for continuous prawn cultivation for more than 20 years. The paddy fields are filled with saline water throughout the year. This has led to serious environmental problems like

decreased water quality, increased salinity of drinking water and it also made the native paddy and vegetable cultivation, duck rearing etc., virtually vanish. As a result of the full time prawn cultivation local farmers and fishermen also lost their livelihood. Another problem was the dilapidation of the buildings due to salinity. Most of the houses are built with the help of the bank loans so the irreparable damage of the houses made the situation of the inhabitants even worse.

Twenty years back all the fields were used only for the cultivation of paddy namely 'pokkali cultivation' which is a very rare and highly nutritious variety of paddy which can grow only in the back water fields. The farmers followed 'Oru Poo' cultivation -this cultivation depended on the rainy season and was only once in a year. The remaining 6 months these fields were free for the habitat of various varieties of fishes, frogs, snakes, prawns etc., making it a perfect ecosystem. People saw that year by year prawns increased in these fields. Finding that prawns can be cultivated in these fields the land owners together gave their fields for lease to the contractors who commercially started prawn cultivation in these fields. At first it was started as a source of income only for six months. But later realizing that, the prawn cultivation is more profitable than paddy cultivation, owners naturally preferred full time prawn cultivation avoiding paddy cultivation and creating serious environmental problems.

Savvy the Dilemma

Prawn cultivation changed Neendakara and its people a lot. Full time prawn cultivation was violating the people's right to livelihood and drinking water due to increased salinity of water sources. Because of the increased salinity in soil, houses began to deteriorate. Local fishermen and farmers and other local people depended only on cultivation lost their source of income. Realizing this dangerous situation, from 1996 onwards some of people in the village submitted several memorandums and petitions to different government departments but no action was taken by the government. At this juncture WIN took over the issue through its men's SHGs functioning in the area. In 2009 Men's SHGs under WIN joined together and formed a people's action committee called 'Jenakeeya samithy' (people's group). Jenakeeya Samithy organized a meeting in the Cheekutty Master Memorial ground. In this meet-

ing leaders of different political parties expressed their views about the issue. Everyone was of the opinion that the prawn cultivation has to be limited to six months and the remaining half year there could be agriculture farming. This people's movement was called – “Oru Nellum Oru Meenum” means One Paddy and One Fish. After this Jenakeeya samithy collaborated with the Residence Association with the leadership of SPED-III assistant coordinator Anitha Benny and WIN Director Rev. Sr. Alice Lukose and on February 20th, 2010 a Demonstration by the Jenakeeya Samithy was made to Ezhupunna pachayathu. It was inaugurated by Ernakulam District Residence Association apex council vice president Abdul Resheed Haji. It was the first strike against the full time prawn cultivation. As a result of all this in 2011 April with the approval of Ezhupunna Grama Panchayathu bund was built and till the next rainy season it was maintained.

Comeback as a Course of Action

In 2011 with the help of SPED-III VAT committee was formed and it became a part of Jenakeeya Samithy. Every time any kind of protest against the full time prawn cultivation was organized Jenakeeya Samithy supported by VAT was always active. On June 6th 2011 a bike rally to Chellam Panchayathu Office was organized to protect the rights of fishermen. The rally was inaugurated by Block Panchayathu Member Usha Antony. At the end of the bike rally they also gave memorandums to Chellanam Village office, Ezhupunna Panchayathu, Ezhupunna Krishibhavan and Ezhupunna Village office. As a result of the initiative taken by Jenakeeya Samithy and VAT in Neendakara the neighboring panchayaths in Ernakulam and Alapppy districts also took up the issue. The organisation had to fight several court cases against the rich prawn cultivation lobby. Even there was threatening to life for the Jenakeeya Samithy and VAT members.

In 2012 Jenakeeya Samithy, VAT, Residence Association, a club- Voice of Neendakara together formed “Pokkali Samrekshana Samithy”. After this several strikes and protests took place. On 5.11.2012 a collectorate march was organized and Cengara agitation leader Laha Gopalan inaugurated the march. The collector P. Venugopalan visited Neendakara and took initiative in solving the problem. Several meetings were organized with the district collector. And

later he ordered to stop full time prawn cultivation. At this time fishermen were organized under the association called UTUC and gave support for the strike. This also helped a lot. But as a reaction, the landlords obtained stay order from the court and samithy filed an appeal against that. After that collector called for a meeting and in that meeting it was decided to restart paddy cultivation. All the legal support to this movement was given by the legal advisor Adv. Rajesh of WIN society supported by SPED- III program. The legal battle was won by the Jenakeeys Samithy with the great support of district collectors in Alappuzha district. Though the prawn cultivation lobby tried to influence the collector through political pressures they did not succeed. Even the Panchayath tried their best not to implement this program of paddy cultivation for six months by not allocating funds which was already promised by the district collector. The Jenakeeya Samithy was very determined to go ahead in implementing this program of Oru Nellum Oru Meenum. WIN centre, WIN SHGs, VAT, and Pokkali Samrekshana Samithy mobilized money for this and seeds were collected and cultivation was inaugurated by District Collector N. Pathmakumar on 30.06.2013. On 14.07.2013 WIN Director distributed seeds and cultivation started. Now the fields are golden in color with the paddy ready for the harvest. The harvest is decided to start from November 3rd 2013 onwards.

The Erudition

Mr. Shaiju, one of the villagers opinioned that -"This is the success of team work, cooperation and above all the determination to Protect the Environment. Everyone fought against the wealthy land owners without thinking about themselves. That's the reason why this was a success. Now people got back our fields and safe guarded our livelihoods. There by community can continue the legacy of Neendakara." "The four and half years of strike against full time prawn cultivation are now part of history. Every single person in the Neendakara was part of it. The strike was not just a protest against prawn cultivation but it was a struggle for existence. People fought for their right to live. That's the reason why this strike got support from many centers outside Neendakara. Now the people have regained the golden culture of Neendakara. Local Farmers and the fishermen got back their old source of income. Now the water quality is slowly increasing and hope that buildings will also be safe"

- said Mr. Michel Convener of Pokkali Samrekshana Samithy.

It is not only the success story of one village but it ended up in forcing the government to issue the ordinance for protecting Pokkali cultivation all along the back waters of Ernakulam and Alleppey region. People were already experiencing the environmental changes here namely the salinity of water has come down and they hope that the damage to the houses eventually will also be under control. This is a unique type of initiative by an organization of women under the charismatic leadership of the director to make the community especially the women folk come out of their traditional slumber to the active social movement for their existence and cultural tradition. The strategic initiative of the society under the SPED-III programme is also commendable. The techniques and process they applied in bringing the consciousness of the community towards the traditional culture of paddy cultivation and also to struggle against the powerful prawn cultivation lobby was very effective. They could conduct different meetings and thereby making the community active, focused and motivated to face all the difficulties in the struggle. The organizers also made it a point that the governmental and non-governmental organizations and power centers including the political and cultural leadership along with the religious partners were well co-opted to the movement.

The determination and commitment of the WIN society, community leaders, partnering organizations, women groups in the locality and the SPED-III initiatives is worth mentioning here. The case very clearly exhibits the fact that if the community is determined all deconstructive powers can be brought down and the development of the community could be made efficiently effected. The success story from the WIN society is not merely a struggle against the prawn cultivation but a struggle for the cultural tradition and the livelihood of the people in the locality.

This case very clearly explains that community development for empowering the people is a critical task, which many development workers are scared to take up. The assumption is that the oppressed and deprived people need to be empowered, so that they may improve the quality of their life and bring social transformation in the society. These processes gradually lead to sensitization of the community on the reasons and cause the oppression which

goes beyond their control. Developing local leadership to take responsibility of social change was a challenge for the group leaders as well as other partners in development. As the community became aware about the problems in their daily life they started to deliberate on them and further chalked out developmental initiative to settle these structural as well as functional issues in their way of development with the support of the local partnering organizations and global funding partners. They developed issue based strategies with the expert guidance and trainings from the SPED-III programme of the social work agency and implemented them with meticulous monitoring and evaluations. This definitely changed their living conditions in the grass roots and paved the way of sustainable development. Hence it may be concluded that Development is possible if there is good will and support of the community.

Conclusion

Empowerment of people from all walks in their respective contextual existence is always a stern concern of the development organizations and civil societies in India all the way through the ages. Usually the local initiatives taken by the grass root level organizations are very well supported and motivated by the national level organizations and many a times they are also financially and technically propped up by the international funding organizations. These collaborations of the benign international donors with the national partners are further extended to the contextualized community development structures of the partnering NGOs. They always play a vital role in the empowerment live outs and initiatives. Basically the strategies adopted by the local community inventiveness are participatory and sustainable. They identify the local developmental needs and address them through the contextually designed intervention programmes and activities. Every such activity and programme is unique in its design and also applies very innovative strategies and functional approaches.

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