

From dependence to self-reliance through restoring human values: an experience with farmers' organisations

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Introduction

The human values of village communities, especially poor ones, are continuously eroded by government policies, projects, and the external environment, which look upon them as beneficiaries and handicap them in thinking about their own welfare. As a result, they become totally dependent on outside help for their well-being. Very often development workers have to face such situations and it becomes extremely difficult for them to work with communities, unless they are able to facilitate them to regain their human values. In this article we share our experiences with farmers' organisations in such a situation where a process which reinforces human values has helped farmers to keep themselves on the path of self-reliance, and has also enabled them to judge and pursue what is in the interest of themselves, their organisations, and society.

Background

India has around 0.73% of the world's sodic lands, and the state of Uttar Pradesh in India has around 1.2 million ha of the affected land. This covers 10% of the total cultivated area of the state.

The Uttar Pradesh Bhumi Sudhar Nigam (UPBSN) started the UP Sodic Land Reclamation Project in 1993. The project was supported by the World Bank and involved 10 districts of Uttar Pradesh. Eighty-five per cent of the beneficiaries were small and marginal farmers. UPBSN initiated the project through the formation of farmer organisations at village level and the project was implemented in collaboration with local NGOs.

The process included:

- installation of minor irrigation infrastructures;
- building of drainage networks;
- use of chemical amendments;
- crop and horticulture production; and,
- development of local leadership.

Under the project, 64,414 ha of affected lands have been reclaimed, covering 150,000 families. Farming families and local organisations have been involved since the beginning in the planning and implementation phases, and later in the evaluation process. In each village, group leaders of

farmers' organisations, Mitra Kisan (MK), Mahila Mitra Kisan (MMK), and animators were appointed through a series of capacity-building interventions involving local training institutions, NGOs, and UPBSN. These trained farmers (called master trainers) then worked as resource persons at village level, training other farmers, and conducting demonstrations at their fields. A unique experiment of farmer-led extension was tried out in Pratapgarh district (see Box 1).

Box 1 Pratapghar experience

In 1998, a senior project officer attended a training workshop on farmer-led extension, and as a follow-up to this training, master trainers of about 20 villages in Pratapgarh district organised themselves into a farmer field school and were given training. The school set the following goals:

- work for raising farm production
- work for a reduction in input costs
- promotion of indigenous know-how
- popularisation of organic composting in order to enhance soil fertility and preserve the environment

To achieve the above goals, a work plan for conducting seasonal trainings in the above 20 villages was prepared by the school. Master trainers started to train farmers on a voluntary basis. After seeing the effectiveness of these master trainers, the project authorities thought of using them as resource persons to give training to farmers' group leaders. Accordingly, the responsibility of organising awareness training for group leaders of some villages where the reclamation activity had not yet started, was entrusted to this school. After completion of the training, a comparison of the outcomes of the villagers trained at the school and those reached by villagers who attended the local training institute was made. Results were totally in favour of farmers and the field school. Slowly, more and more training of group leaders was given at this school. Training fees, which used to be paid to the training institute through project funds, started flowing to the school. Farmers, NGOs, and the village headman also made donations in kind and cash. The village headman allotted a piece of communal land to the school, and a three room building was constructed, which was used for meetings and training for farmers.

During the project implementation period, project field and NGO staff performed extension activities. After the project withdrawal, there was going to be total vacuum as village-level extension staff of the Agriculture Department had already been withdrawn due to the implementation of the *Panchayat Raj Act* (self-governance act). Also, the

village-level farmers' organisations were no longer functional, as the purpose they were formed for – reclamation – had already been achieved. Since the project was nearing its completion, an exit policy for sustaining project outputs was urgently needed.

The model of the Pratapgarh farmer field school immediately struck project personnel as a mechanism to ensure sustainability. Accordingly, a series of sensitisation workshops and exposure visits to the Pratapgarh farmer field school for master trainers, animators, and progressive farmers, was organised in the project area. This resulted in the formation of six farmer field schools and 41 farmer clubs, covering 740 villages. Efforts were also made to establish linkages between these newly created institutions and line departments, so that necessary inputs such as credit, seed, and fertiliser, could be supplied.

The problem

During field visits and interactions with the resource persons of the schools and clubs and field staff, it was quickly realised that there were a number of problems which threatened the sustainability of the new organisations.

- Schools or clubs had no vision. Project staff had tried to implant sustainability requirements but without success.
- Farmers were expecting subsidies or grants through the newly created institutions.
- The focus was on getting outside help instead of capitalising on their strengths.
- Influential farmers were trying to become resource persons of the institutions in the hope of receiving cash from outside.
- Some influential farmers were acting as the project's brokers.
- There was no feeling of ownership among the community.
- Cohesiveness among members was missing.
- Self-help feeling was totally absent.
- The project staff were taking the leading role.
- Project and NGO field staff were reinforcing dependency syndrome.
- In most cases there was no workplan. Even where there was, no action was being initiated.

The methodology

It looked to be a difficult task to bring about changes in the attitudes, perceptions, and vision of farmers and staff in such a short time, as the project was about to be completed. Sensitising field staff to the above problems did not help much as, after working for seven years in the project, they were finding it difficult to look at the project through different eyes. An 180 degree turn in the attitudes of members of the schools and clubs was needed, from dependency to self-reliance, external

motivation to internal motivation, being led to leading, from taker to give, and from project objective to purpose of life.

We decided to capitalise on our experience of changing personal attitudes, human values, enhancing self-worth, and synchronising personal goals with organisational objectives, and this led to the organisation of workshops with farmers of these schools and clubs. Project personnel were also invited. A passive role was assigned to them so that their attitudes or perceptions did not dominate. The whole methodology was participatory and involved individual and group exercises, followed by a plenary session for reflection. Stories based on human values, quotations, proverbs, and self-discovery tools were essential elements of the approach.

After formal introductions and ice-breaking sessions, we presented the objective of the workshop: to strengthen the farmers' schools and clubs. Our approach was to build on individual human values and then to build up a vision for the schools or clubs. We started by asking farmers to ask themselves the following questions:

1. How do I wish to be remembered after death?
2. What is the dream/vision of my life?
3. Where am I? (or what have I received from my parents or family e.g. assets, liabilities, education, health, recognition, productivity, production, etc.?)
4. If the present situation continues, where will it lead to me? (or what will I leave to my children?)
5. Compare 3 and 4. Am I leaving more/less than I received?
6. What are my/my family's achievements and strengths?
7. What are our school/club's achievements and strengths?
8. What is the dream/vision of our school/club?
9. What will be of personal benefit to me if the dream/vision of the school/club is fulfilled?
10. What will be of benefit to the community if the dream/vision of the school/ club is fulfilled?

Some responses to the questions are shown in Boxes 2, 3, and 4.

Box 2 How do I wish to be remembered after death?

- self-made person
- simple and honest person who felt love and concern for others too
- a person who showed the way to others by becoming a model
- gave more than I received from society
- innovative farmer
- hard working and committed person
- benevolent person
- a person who worked with available resources for the well-being of society without expecting outside help
- a torchbearer for community development

Box 3 What will be of personal benefit to me if the vision/dream for the school/club is achieved?

- I will be recognised in the society
- people will honour me
- I will get satisfaction, happiness and peace
- my knowledge will get enhanced
- productivity of my field will increase
- total production will increase leading to increased income
- the living standard of my family will increase
- my children will be able to get good quality education
- my capacity will increase
- my children or family will feel proud of me
- I will be remembered even after my death
- I will be able to return a part of what I got from society
- I will be able to fulfil my social responsibilities

Box 4 Achievements and strengths of the school/club

Achievements:

- introduction of Soyabean crop during Rabi season for the first time
- installed a clock, which is getting energy from cow dung instead of battery
- successfully pursued the case of a poor farmer whose house was burnt by fire, and got a grant of Rs. 6000 from the sub-divisional magistrate
- successfully argued and convinced the deputy director to allot a room in the office of the sub-divisional agriculture extension officer for conducting the school's meeting and training
- organised vaccination camp for livestock and vaccinated 252 animals
- all master trainers have adopted Nadep composting method
- school has organised field day for wheat crop
- there was no attack on paddy crop from insects and diseases due to the adoption of IPM practices
- resource person of the school has learnt rapid testing of fertilisers and, as a result, adulteration in fertiliser was avoided
- continuous cropping in reclaimed area

Strengths:

- school has its own byelaws
- functioning is democratic and transparent
- farmers of 16 villages have confidence that the school can get their day-to-day problems solved
- all master trainers/resource persons of the school are demo (model) farmers
- most of master trainers/resource persons have been selected as Mitra Kisan (contact farmers) of agriculture department
- women are equal partners
- resource people have a very good profile in the farming community
- resource people have innovative ideas
- school meeting place is in the office of the sub-divisional agricultural extension officer
- school is disseminating indigenous technical knowledge (ITKs)

Once all farmers agreed a vision for the school/club, they developed SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timebound) goals/objectives. Activities to attain objectives and capitalise on their achievements and strengths were then discussed, and indicators of success for each activity developed. Some farmers talked about problems that they were facing and also expressed their concerns about problems they might encounter in meeting their objectives. They reframed the problem statement as an opportunity statement and then drew an action plan to grab the opportunity.

The exercise resulted in an action plan for the school/club showing what would be done, when, where, and by whom, and giving measurable indicators. One most notable feature of this plan was that all sustainability requirements, which project staff had unsuccessfully tried to encourage farmers to adopt, were already covered in the work plan. After finalisation of the work plan, it was decided to start implementing the most important activity listed – selecting a resource person for the school using paired ranking. The selection criteria developed by the farmers are shown in Box 6.

Box 6 Selection criteria for school/club resource person

- sympathy for the school/club vision and objectives
- best practitioner in the respective fields
- good personal image within the community
- acceptable to the majority of members of the community
- able to give sufficient time for others
- good influencing ability to convince others
- strong desire to do something better
- high-level urge to learn and share with others
- functionally literate

Reflections

The reflections of farmers were full of feelings and emotions. They were difficult to put into words but an attempt is made below.

- The question 'How do we wish to be remembered after death?' has opened the eyes of farmers and this will be helpful in keeping ourselves on the right track.
- Farmers realise they are not insignificant.
- They realise they are strong and have self-worth.
- Becoming independent or self-reliant gives real happiness and peace.
- Most of our personal dreams can be achieved if we pursue the school/clubs dream.
- Dependence on outside help will cripple us totally.
- Achievement of school/club's dream will be our mission as it also fulfils the purpose of our lives.
- Workshop had helped to remind and engrave in our minds the values we had forgotten or were ignoring.
- An outsider can only facilitate; we ourselves have to think, plan and act.

- Workshop has helped us understand how we can plan, set indicators of success and continuously pursue the school/club dream.

old, one year old, and nascent farmers' organization. We strive to encourage farmers towards the path of self-reliance and have found this methodology to be highly effective.

Towards self-reliance

Following the workshops, all the schools and clubs have been moving towards self-reliance:

- These farmers' institutions have internalised the self-help philosophy and accordingly they have acted upon various ventures for their betterment based upon resources available within their reach.
- All these farmers' institutions have developed small funds through voluntary contributions from member farmers and other willing farmers to meet day-to-day organisational expenses.
- These institutions were proactive in approaching knowledge resources like KVKs (Farm Science Center)/State Agriculture Universities in order to conduct varietal trials at their fields and knowledge exchange through interactions with scientists. Seeds of successful varieties after these trials are being multiplied and distributed to farmers at affordable cost.
- As a result of the large-scale adoption of IPM (Integrated Pest Management) for paddy, negligible incidences of Brown Plant Hopper were observed.
- Large-scale adoption of sprinkler irrigation and polythene pipes for surface transportation of irrigation water has resulted in an increased net irrigated area.
- Change in taste, flavours, as well as quality of grain, pulses, and vegetables due to practice of organic farming through NADEP composting. This has also reduced cost of cultivation as a result of low use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides.
- Cultivation of other crops like sugar cane, pigeon pea, and other vegetable crops in place of routine wheat paddy rotation, has increased the income level and also met family consumption needs.

The Uttar Pradesh Diversified Agriculture Support Project (UPDASP), another World Bank-funded project, also saw the onward journey of these farmers' institutions for self-reliance, and consequently adopted this concept in their operational area (32 districts) for sustainable agriculture. The state's Agriculture Department has also accepted this approach in principle throughout the state for sustainable agriculture extension.

The above methodology, which aims at building human values and ultimately enabling farmers to judge situations, opportunities, and consequences based upon their values, has been tried by us in different settings – in two years

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