

## 4

# Exposure and Dialogue Programmes at SEWA

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This article describes the Exposure and Dialogue Programmes organised by SEWA, an organisation of self-employed women workers in India. SEWA members act as hosts to the EDP participants, who are drawn from a range of organisations, including donors, international NGOs, and government departments. The EDPs focus on themes which are of interest both to the participants' organisations and to SEWA. They enable the participants to examine their decisions from the perspective of their hosts and frame policy decisions with a lived experience of the voice, views, and situation of the poor. Commitment to poverty reduction is strengthened as poverty becomes a personal concern. Participants are also able to obtain a practical idea of the impact of various programmes for the poor, and identify policy changes that are needed.

## Introduction

The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is an Indian member-based organisation of poor self-employed women workers in the informal economy. SEWA follows the Gandhian philosophy of truth, non-violence, respect for all religions, and the dignity of labour.

Currently, SEWA's membership is 963,000 women workers from the informal economy. These members work in markets,

homes, fields – others' and their own – forests, deserts, and riverbanks. Our members are categorised as:

- home-based workers;
- vendors or hawkers;
- manual labourers and service providers; and
- producers.

Eighty percent of SEWA staff (organisers) are drawn from our membership. These organisers have responsibility for facilitating the management and implementation of various activities and programmes.

At SEWA we believe that to work with the poor, one has to accept voluntary poverty. Unless we understand what it means to be poor, as an organiser it will be difficult to understand the life and working conditions of our members. Being a women's organisation, all our members and organisers are women. At SEWA we have two principles.

- Everyone at SEWA is addressed as '*ben*', meaning sister. It signifies equality and sisterhood among the members.
- The remuneration of all organisers has to be in the ratio of 1:3. No organiser should earn more than three times what members earn. This brings mutual accountability.

Karl Osner, founder of the Association for the Promotion of North-South Dialogue, first introduced Exposure and Dialogue Programmes (EDPs) to SEWA around

1991.<sup>1</sup> EDPs are organised both for other agencies (e.g. NGOs, government, and donors) and for SEWA staff members as a form of capacity building. This article focuses on EDPs for other organisations. EDPs for SEWA staff are discussed further in Shroff, Part I, Section 4.

### The design of the EDP

Essentially, EDPs aim to personalise the abstract, disconnected relationship between 'donor' and 'beneficiary' by bringing staff from donor agencies and international NGOs (the participants) into direct contact with their clients (the hosts). This enables the participants to examine their decisions from the perspective of their hosts and frame policy decisions with a lived experience of the voice, views, and situation of the poor. Commitment to poverty reduction is strengthened as poverty becomes a personal concern. Participants may also be government officials. In such cases, EDPs help government officials obtain a practical idea of the impact of various programmes for the poor, and identify policy changes that are needed.

The model of EDP used by SEWA has three phases:

- Exposure
- Reflection
- Dialogue

**Exposure** is the phase of meeting and getting together with the host and her family. The experience of the participants during their exposure visit determines the content of the two following phases, **reflection** and **dialogue**. The ideal duration of an EDP does not exceed 5 or 6 days, and if needed it can be condensed to 4 days. Normally, the host women are the poorest of the poor so for them to be a host for a longer duration becomes a burden. Also, the houses of these women are very small.

### Preparations for the EDP

Before organising an immersion programme, we first have to understand the needs and priorities of the participants and their profiles. We then propose trades/issues that we feel will be of mutual interest to the participating institution and SEWA, and may also contribute to a policy change. After a series of discussions and personal meetings, themes are selected. SEWA's interest in the themes depends on the major issues that its members and committees are experiencing as policy constraints.

For example, in November 2003, SEWA organised an EDP for ten senior officials from the World Bank, KfW, and BMZ.<sup>2,3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Association is now known as the Exposure and Dialogue Programme Association. See Hilgers, this section.

<sup>2</sup> KfW (Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau) means Reconstruction Credit Institute. This is a German development bank owned by the German Government, now known as the KfW Development Bank.

<sup>3</sup> Bundesministerium Für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit (German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development).

The participants were engaged in global policy-related agendas at their respective organisations. Areas included poverty reduction, women's empowerment, gender issues, and social development. The EDP theme was finalised through a series of meetings between the World Bank and SEWA. This EDP aimed at deepening policy makers' understanding of the insidious nature of poverty and, as a result, contributing to more effective development policies.

Once the theme is finalised, we identify senior and new organisers who need to be oriented and trained. The team orientation is done by the SEWA Academy, and covers the following topics:<sup>4</sup>

- relevance of the theme to participating organisations' work, current or future, e.g. targeting the poorest of the poor or local governance;
- profile of the participating organisation/institution; and
- profile of the participants.

At the same time, SEWA orients its organisers on the trades chosen. Organisers, in turn, will identify the host women. Care is taken to ensure that hosts represent different trades. Organisers and host women are together given a 3-day orientation on the objectives of the immersion. The host women are also briefed about the EDP methodology, which enables them to decide whether they want to be a host family. The decision is not easy. The responsibilities of the host women are to invite the guests, provide them with meals and sanitation facilities, fetch water for the guests, and allow them to get involved in their work and life. SEWA provides financial and material support to hosts, and assistance from SEWA organisers in preparing for the EDP and throughout the visit. However, if women feel the responsibilities would be too burdensome or overwhelming, we do not cajole or force them. There may also be other reasons for not wanting to host, such as illness in the family, heavy work responsibilities, or timing, e.g. during the peak agricultural season.

Once teams and host families are identified, SEWA district teams simulate an EDP. A team stays at the host's house for 3 days and nights. This gives the women a sense of how it will be to host the guests (participants), and to feel more at ease with them.

### The EDP Process

#### Participant preparation

The EDP process starts with an intensive preparatory stage

<sup>4</sup> The SEWA Academy is the focal point for all SEWA's capacity building and research efforts. It is the organisational wing responsible for basic membership education and for capacity building, leadership training, communications, and research.

**Participants from past EDPs helping the members with their day-to-day activities.**



Photos: SEWA

for participants. A handout is distributed to the participants beforehand, which gives an introduction to the host woman, her family, and her work. Practical tips are also included in this handout. Part of the participants' preparation consists of developing an understanding of the situation in which the host women live. Participants also reflect on the process they are about to undergo, feelings they may experience, and the effect they themselves may have on the host family.

### Exposure

During the exposure phase of the EDP, participants live for 2 to 3 days with their host, a poor woman who is struggling to overcome poverty. Participants are immersed in the life experience of their hosts and for a short period they take part in their daily tasks and work. The EDP offers participants a window into the worries, needs, achievements, hopes, and fears of the poor. It is an opportunity to learn from their life stories. This glimpse, however brief, provides participants with a more personal understanding of the complexities of poverty, and the vulnerability of the poor.

### Reflection

Following the stay with their host, participants return to SEWA headquarters for 2 days of reflection and dialogue (talking about the experience). Participants will often begin personal reflection on their own as it takes time to process their experience before being shared. They try to understand it in the context of their work and identify key themes or words.

### Dialogue

Next is the dialogue, which brings together participant, host, organiser, and senior management of SEWA. They discuss the broad implications of participants' experience and suggest

possible avenues of action. The underlying belief is that this cycle of direct experience followed by reflection, questioning, and exchange of ideas better enables participants to evaluate their experience with respect to their policies and development strategies, which in turn leads to change and action.

## Experience with EDPs

### From the viewpoint of the participants

During the reflection and dialogue phase of the EDP, participants take time to make sense of their experience and relate it to themselves and their work. For instance, participants from the December 2004 EDP hosted by SEWA for IFAD (International Fund for Agriculture Development) and the Government of Gujarat discussed how this experience could help them become more effective and strengthen their interventions in the field.

The EDP can help reduce the distance from the field and provide participants with a way of evaluating how their decisions and actions will help an individual to fight poverty. The question, then, becomes: 'How do my decision and actions improve my host's life, or that of an individual poor person?' As Robert Chambers, a participant in a SEWA-World Bank EDP in 2003, commented:

*This was a reality check, and more than a reality check. It has left a lasting frame about what poverty is like and what is happening, against which questions and issues can be tested and which can inform judgement. I think we all need something like this on a regular basis. I do anyway.*

EDPs also offer an alternative perspective through which to evaluate development interventions and monitor progress.

By living with a poor family and learning their life story, participants can learn more about what is important to the poor themselves – how they define ill-being, well-being, and progress. EDPs can give participants a ground-level view of how projects and policies impact the poor, and are used and judged by the poor. This can guide them towards new ways of evaluating projects and new measures of progress that are more in line with the priorities of the poor themselves.

EDP alumni periodically return to participate in another EDP, either with the same or a different host. For instance, a participant from a SEWA-World Bank EDP, Praful Patel, stayed with the same host woman a couple of years after his first EDP. This helped him follow the changes in the life of the host woman (see Patel, Section 3).

For other accounts of participants' experiences and learning from SEWA-organised EDPs, see Ravi Kanbur's account in Chapter 11, Section 2 and Gary Fields in Section 3.

### From the viewpoint of the host women

For SEWA members the EDP is an opportunity to share their daily life – their routine, their story, challenges, and hopes. In the reflection and dialogue session, members focus on the significance of this opportunity, recounting in detail the activities with which participants helped them, and conversations they had. As Raziaben, an incense stick roller from Bapunagar, commented:

*It was an honour to have served my guests. They shared my routine, my life and also heard my story. My children were also inspired by them; they now understood the importance of studying to help them go further in life like my guests.*

One of the most significant aspects of the EDP is that outsiders take an interest in their lives and work. As Savitaben, an agricultural labourer from Zanzansar, said, 'They came to see how much we work'. These women are rarely the focus of such attention and typically have limited opportunities to voice their thoughts and be heard. The EDP becomes a unique opportunity for them to express their individuality.

The women's poverty often prevents them from analysing

their situation and life story – where they started from, where they have reached, what they have done to reach this far, and how much further they still wish to go. The EDP is an opportunity for them to review their life, re-examine their conditions, identify needs, and decide on future plans. There is no obligation for the participants to follow up on these needs but SEWA stays in regular contact with the hosts, who are also SEWA members.

The hosts are always selected from the poorest of the poor in their communities, and are often marginalised from those communities. For most of them, the EDP is the first time they have formally hosted guests. EDP guests often lead to other 'guests' and visits from curious members of the community, and in many cases the *sarpanch* (elected head) of the village also visits the home of the host. Seetaben, a salt worker from Degam, has this to share:

*When the guests came to my place, the whole village gathered. Even my mother-in-law joined in; you see no one wants to come to a poor household... The whole village came to my house. 'Good' people generally do not come to poor people's houses.*

Through the EDP, the host's standing with the rest of the community changes, even if temporarily. She has an opportunity to interact with members of the community with whom normally she would have little or no contact.

### Future activities and ways forward

SEWA plans to set up an EDP unit within the organisation. This will have several tasks.

- Increase the number of EDPs run to 3 to 4 per year, each with a maximum of ten participants.
- Assist in replicating the EDP methodology at other NGOs and membership organisations.
- Contribute to courses for external bodies. SEWA has already signed an agreement with the Institute for Social Study, The Hague, to conduct an annual course for their students, and an EDP will be one of the components.

The increased number of EDPs should enable the costs of the unit to be covered.

### CONTACT DETAILS

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