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# How SEWA uses Exposure and Dialogue Programmes for internal capacity building

by POONAM SHROFF

**As we saw in Section 1, The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has been a key player in the history of immersions. It has been hosting EDPs for the staff of other organisations since 1991, but in 1998 started organising them for its own internal purposes as well. SEWA regards EDPs as a reality check – a way of keeping the movement rooted in the lives of its women members, and of monitoring the impact of its work by assessing changes in those women's lives.**

## Internal EDPs at SEWA

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has over a decade of experience hosting Exposure and Dialogue Programmes (EDPs). The programmes are organised for staff from development agencies and government officials, as well as for academics. SEWA conducted its first Exposure Dialogue Programme (EDP) in 1991 for participants from Germany.

In 1999, SEWA began using EDPs internally. Staying with members and learning from them about their daily life and needs is, in SEWA's experience, a powerful means of keeping the movement rooted in the women's life cycle needs. It is an opportunity for SEWA staff to get to know their members,

appreciate their strengths, and understand the strategies they use to overcome problems.

It is a principle at SEWA that its organisers are mainly recruited from its membership. As a result, 80% of SEWA's organisers are from the cadre of grassroots members and only 20% have professional backgrounds. SEWA provides its grassroots leaders with intensive training to enable them to take on roles which require professional skills. For instance, the present general secretary of SEWA was a tobacco worker and a member of SEWA.

Those organisers were once simply members who have lived in poverty and know very well what it is. SEWA professionals, on the other hand, are unlikely to have experienced poverty, although they voluntarily share part of this poverty by working with SEWA and by accepting lower remuneration.

We have found EDPs to be a very useful way of getting members, grassroots leaders, and professionals to know each other. The EDPs help to deepen relationships at all levels of the organisation: members, organisers, staff (old and new), management, and leaders.

SEWA is also expanding its membership rapidly, both geographically and activity-wise. So regular capacity building has become essential for members and staff.

**What happens during internal EDPs?**

Internal EDPs are held once a year. They are specifically geared towards our district-level coordinators, new and young organisers, and those in responsible positions. Each host (a SEWA member) accommodates two participants (SEWA staff members), accompanied by a facilitator (a senior SEWA staff member).

During the EDP, a SEWA staff member attempts to engage with the life of a member. Rather than trying to kindle some kind of change, or follow her own agenda or work plan as she would for a field visit, she instead conforms to the member's agenda and work plan. The aim is to observe and understand, not to motivate change or action on the member's part.

Through the EDP, a staff member can take a step back from her typical role of organiser and, instead, focus on learning from the member – her life story, what keeps her in poverty, and what she is doing to cope with and move out of poverty. The EDP is a moment for them to try to understand the environment and conditions they are seeking to change, in a more holistic manner. The process can act as a reality check or update of their understanding of members' situations and the strategies for poverty reduction they are promoting. EDPs are also a means of identifying new strategies that emerge from members themselves.

**Impact of EDPs**

SEWA's experience has shown that EDPs are a useful tool for its own staff members who regularly work at the grassroots level. The experience of living with a SEWA member for 2 or 3 days observing her daily life and walking in her footsteps for a short while brings SEWA's staff closer in touch with their members. It helps them to build and strengthen personal relationships with members, which ultimately makes them more aware of and responsive to members' needs and demands. It helps them to understand their members' goals and provides a personalised frame of reference for their work.

The EDP also allows staff to gain a broader picture of the condition of the poor and impact of their work beyond the framework of a specific activity or project. The EDP takes the staff member out of her sphere of activity and broadens her

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perspective by revealing all aspects of poverty that the member experiences in her life. When staff members make field visits, they are focused on the progress and impact of the particular activity on which they are working. During the EDP, the facilitator is not making a targeted field visit but is rather looking holistically at the life of one individual member and the impact on her life of the interplay of the multiple interventions of SEWA, and how each activity impacts and relates to the others.

Working with SEWA and primarily for its poor members is difficult. Professionals may find it even more difficult as they have to accept a low remuneration and forego the luxury of corporate environment. At times, frustration prevails among the staff. However, these internal EDPs help in motivating the staff and making them more optimistic about their work. EDPs also provide a means of building teams and ensuring effective team work. Staff discover how to work together for the benefit of the members.

EDPs also allow SEWA organisers to plan activities better. For example, after having participated in an EDP and seen the day-to-day activities of members, the district teams decided to avoid meetings or trainings for members during the peak season of salt mining or agriculture as this is a hindrance to their work.

When used regularly, the EDP can serve as a qualitative performance assessment and progress check for SEWA, too. Through the EDP, SEWA staff can assess the impact of their work through the eyes of their members – to whom they are ultimately accountable. By living with a member for 2 or 3 days, SEWA staff can assess changes in the life conditions of that member, jointly, and provide a qualitative measure of performance. This in turn can shape a realignment of goals and priorities as necessary to remain continually responsive to the situation and needs of members.

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