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**Ranjit Kumar Mohanty**

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# Cadre Building to Strengthen Grass Root Governance

R. K. Mohanty

Programme Co-ordinator, Centre for Environment Education, Thaltej Tekkra, Thaltej, Ahmedabad –  
380054, Gujarat, India

**Abstract.** The long drawn-out debate over the very survival of the planet has stimulated people worldwide to think about the role of education in achieving sustainable development (SD). Over the years, the public in general and policy makers in particular have realised the value of education in achieving SD. The journey from “Education about Sustainable Development” to “Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)” has been an achievement worthy of recognition. The global focus on education as a key tool for achieving SD has brought a degree of clarity of understanding to the problem of sustainability, which is perceived as being quite complex. It has helped people in general to understand where to begin addressing concerns about the end of the world, should it come more rapidly than they imagined.

This paper describes an experiment that uses an approach of developing a cadre of young entrepreneurs called Community Entrepreneurs (CEs) to facilitate the process of SD in tribal areas of Gujarat. The concept which has a historical and Gandhian affiliation looks at Humans as the core of any change process and how education plays an important role in bringing sustainability in terms of social, environmental, socio-cultural and economic aspects. The transformation is not only limited to aspects mentioned above but elucidates various changes brought in the community as a process of empowerment. The paper describes the journey from awareness, to action, to empowerment, to decision making. The paper also discusses the road ahead for such an intervention to be sustainable.

**Keywords.** Cadre building, sustainable development, policy, education, entrepreneurship, environment, economics, India, Samvardhan, grass-root governance.

## 1 Introduction

*Samvardhan*, meaning “Nurturing”, is an effort to create a grass root cadre of young people to facilitate and strengthen grass root governance leading to sustainable and equitable development.

The UNDP Human Development Report ranked India 115<sup>th</sup> in 2003 and 126<sup>th</sup> in 2006. Although the economy is booming, a harsh reality in the struggle for survival is being experienced by a growing number of people – and this reality is worse in the tribal areas of the country that have been constantly neglected by successive governments despite being the source of rich natural resources.

To be pragmatic and realistic, there is a sense of feeling that something has gone wrong. For example, India is self-

sufficient in agriculture, producing enough food grains for 1.2 billion people. However around 35 million sleep without a meal and another 35 million have only one meal a day. In India we have the highest number of mobile phones globally, but do not have decent schools on every block. An organised retail sector and the booming mall culture are boosting consumption, however, these consume energy that could have electrified an entire village (100 households). Insurance is a booming industry, but the fact remains that 75% of the people affected by accidents or natural calamities remain uninsured. Lack of access to basic rights and entitlements, coupled with poor education, has kept these areas poor and left people with an unacceptably low quality of life. Additional conditions are listed below:

- In India, the majority of the population is bio-dependent. Sustainability of the natural resources is not a question of life style, rather it is life itself. At the core of this are choices of livelihood based on local, natural, social, cultural and human assets. The need therefore is to have simple, feasible and practical options that can maintain a balance between economic aspirations and environmental sustainability. However a crucial question remains as to who will initiate and facilitate this process, especially with the deprived class of people?

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Correspondence to: Ranjit Kumar Mohanty<sup>1</sup>  
(ranjit\_2rk@yahoo.co.in)

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<sup>1</sup>The author Mr. Ranjit Kumar Mohanty is currently affiliated with the Centre for Environment Education (CEE), Ahmedabad as Programme Co-ordinator, Rural Cadre Development. He holds a Post Graduate Diploma in Management of NGOs (PGDMN) from Entrepreneurship Development Institute of India (EDII), Gandhinagar in the year 2001-02. Before completion of PGDMN he also completed in Master of Social Work (MSW) in the academic year 1998-2000

- The structure and role of the elected government (both at state and national levels) as principal service provider is shrinking owing to different institutional pressures. This is particularly evident in the field of the environment and development.
- Sustainable Development (SD) is a global and widely used term today. However there appears to be little understanding, willingness and ability to operationalise it in a rural context. There is a lack of multidisciplinary young cadre of people at various levels and especially at the grass root level that can create systems which will ensure development of an equitable society.

This situation suggests fundamental mistakes in the process of education and orientation towards a larger section of society who are deprived and marginalised. Situations such as these are one of the main reasons why the UN General Assembly adopted by consensus on December, 2002, a resolution establishing the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). Hence there is a need for an alternative approach to development. Since people form the core of development and social inclusion is the key to any successful undertaking, it is necessary to build a cadre of people who will build bridges between economic and social empowerment and attain sustainability.

## 2 The Initiative

*Samvardhan* endeavours to operationalise SD by bringing environmental understanding to the stakeholders, and introducing the concept of Sustainable Natural Resource Management (SNRM) at the grassroots level. It aims to do this by training a cadre of Community Entrepreneurs (CEs), focusing on safe drinking water, natural resource productivity, animal husbandry practices, income generation opportunities, and access to, and effectiveness of, primary education. The cross-cutting aspect being to bring transparency and strengthen grass root governance.

*Samvardhan* phase 1 (August 1998 to July 2001) started with a workshop organized by the Centre for Environment Education (CEE) with teachers from Rural Higher Education Institutes (RHEIs<sup>1</sup>) of Gujarat. The workshop discussed the importance of rural developmental activities in the context of the environment and also linked them with the RHEI syllabus. The workshop concluded by asking CEE to guide and fund the RHEIs in conducting similar workshops, and thus emerged the idea of starting *Samvardhan* by CEE and the Field Studies Council (FSC) UK.

*Samvardhan* II (July 2003 to June 2007) began with an internal reflection on *Samvardhan* I. It emerged from the RHEI's, and continues to expand. A large number of young

people who have one or both of two characteristics – the dream of rural reconstruction or their capacity to convert and implement an idea – have joined the initiative. The programme was implemented in 24 tribal villages coming under 4 blocks of 3 districts (Valsad, Dangs and Tapi) in the southern part of Gujarat state.

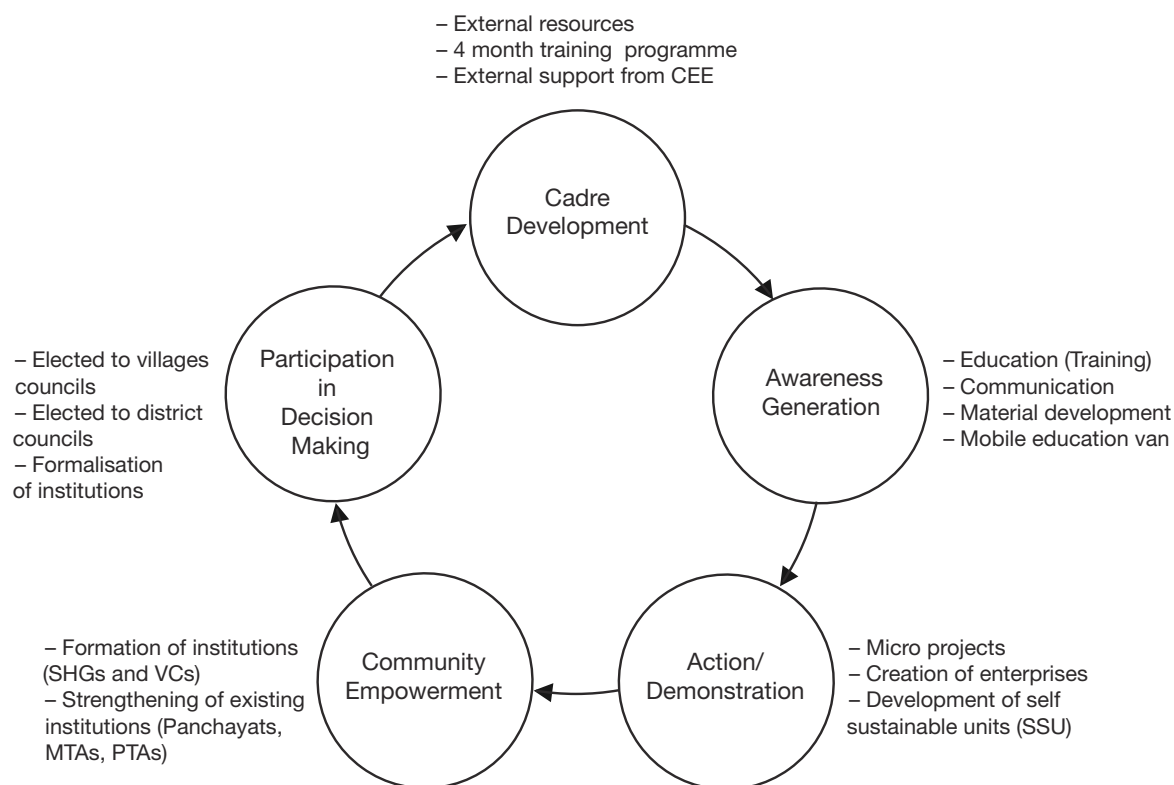
The main philosophy of *Samvardhan* reflected in its approach is to facilitate the process of achieving SD with the community in which it is working. The facilitation happened primarily through educational processes. However, education does not function in isolation. It is important to address both apparent and strategic needs and then link these to education to make it more meaningful and accepted by the community. Through this process, education was effectively used for attainment of SD, hence the entire initiative was termed “Education for Sustainable Development” (ESD).

### 2.1 *Samvardhan* approach

ESD is not a new programme, but a call for a process to reorient educational policies, programmes and practices so that education plays its part in building the capacities of all members of society to work together to build a sustainable future. The initiatives of the *Samvardhan* project directly bear on achieving the objectives of ESD, as spelt out below.

- **Cadre development** – the development of a rural cadre is essential in a neo-liberal policy climate. This is evident in the scenario where the role of the government as principal service provider (health, education, public distribution system etc) in developing countries is increasingly converging in different countries. These services are either becoming gradually privatised or the stake of governments in providing them is diminishing. In such a scenario, this cadre of rural youth can play a major role. It will generate strong awareness among communities regarding their rights as citizens and the responsibilities of the government. It will also play the role of a moderator who will help people in the areas of operation to seek alternative ways to fulfil their needs. The major role of the cadre is to increase awareness within the community to initiate further action.
- **Awareness generation** – It is widely felt that the effectiveness of knowledge can be enhanced by imparting knowledge more effectively and innovatively. In this scenario it is important for educators and community members to be sensitive and well equipped to understand and communicate knowledge. They must understand the interrelation between environment and development, lives and livelihoods, and the fact that the poor are the most vulnerable to environmental degradation. Educators must feel the necessity to go deep down to the roots of the problem and analyse the long term impact of any particular form of knowledge or information rather than only focussing on its peripheral aspects. The major strategy for awareness generation are:

<sup>1</sup>The Rural Higher Education Institutes (RHEIs) are unique to the state of Gujarat, having originated from the Gandhian philosophy of village reconstruction, dignity of labour and education rooted in the reality of rural life. The RHEIs use the distinct methodology of mixing theoretical understanding and practical training, involving a variety of area-specific need-based community projects. Over 500 students graduate from the RHEIs every year.



- **Education & communication** – to sustain any developmental initiative, it is crucial to have a proper education and communication strategy coupled with effective implementation. Education for development intervention is essential to sustain the development. In most interventions, there is little focus on the education aspect of the intervention; and if it is in-built, it often fails to convey correct information because of poor communication.
- **Developing need-based educational material** – ideas are very short-lived. Unless they are documented and communicated, their essence is lost. Along with the development of educational material, the mode of its dissemination is also important. Therefore locale-specific communication material disseminated through local medium and symbolism is essential to facilitate desired change.
- **Action/Demonstration** – Development today is increasingly becoming confined to the economic sector rather than socio-political factors. However *Samvardhan* took a holistic perspective of development, paying equal attention to socio-political and economic factors. The participative approach for the action programmes focused on the necessity to prioritise, develop, demonstrate and disseminate the operational model of SD rather than testing it at merely a pilot scale. The core values and essence of some potentially successful models are lost in transition from piloting to scaling up. It took into account from the beginning the factors affecting programme values and ethics during scaling up which are part of the pilot programme.
- **Community Empowerment** – the major focus of the approach is to empower the community which will result in active participation in decision making. The process of empowerment which was continued throughout led to creation and strengthening of institutions like Self Help Groups (SHGs) and Village Committees (VCs). This also encouraged democratic value systems through discussion and shared learning. The focus was also to strengthen the existing institutions: Village Councils, Mother Teachers' Associations (MTAs) and Parent Teachers' Associations (PTAs). The principal change that occurred through creation of these institutions was creation of a platform for people to express their views and opinions related to their lives and livelihood. Formation of institutions along with inputs on the Right to Information Act (RTI) and Forest Rights Act, 2005, led to a sense of urgency to play a bigger role in the decision making process.
- **Participation in decision making process** – formation of institutions and the process of empowerment led to participation in the decision making process. The constant process of providing input, and having exposure and interaction led to the belief that being part of the larger decision making system is an effective way to strengthen grass root governance. Members of the SHGs, VCs, MTAs and PTAs participated in elections and entered village, block and district councils. Through their presence in decision making bodies, effective decision for strengthening favourable policies for the villagers could be initiated. In the first place, resources were allocated for need-based interventions, and effective monitoring systems were devised. In a classic case,

the institutions continued playing the role of social auditors which brought peer pressure on the people elected to function properly.

The factors discussed above were incorporated in the *Samvardhan* project and specific details worked out to ensure a comprehensive effort for SD of the area. The entire initiative was planned to increase the awareness of the people with regards to the crucial and critical issues of the area. It tried to build a linkage between the communities and the resource centres. One of the major factors – i.e. cadre building – is discussed in detail below.

### 3 CEs – The Pivots of *Samvardhan*

The keystone of the *Samvardhan* project is the CE<sup>2</sup>. CE makes or breaks the project. Even if community mobilization is at the core of the initiative, it is the CE that facilitates this mobilisation. The purpose of the CEs is to act as a medium for change. In this way they are similar to the Gandhian idea of change makers working with communities and bringing in change. Gandhiji often requested people to visit and take over the challenge of working with either rural communities in a particular area or on critical issues that required attention. This emphasis of the *Samvardhan* context was quite easily accepted by the CEs since they were graduates from the RHEIs – in themselves, Gandhian institutes.

The idea thus was not wholly new but was being implemented in a completely new context. *Samvardhan* is therefore an attempt to link up the Gandhian ideal with a more modern approach to development. The use of the word entrepreneur here is also interesting, as being a more modern way of looking at the idea of community support. Thus, the support to communities need not be driven completely by charity as in the past, as this often led to unsustainable dependence. The idea of the community contribution emerging from development experiences has been brought into the design as an important element of the idea of *Social Entrepreneurship* rather than *Business Entrepreneurship*.

However, building this cadre is not an easy task as the project envisaged some specific qualities among the team members. Abilities like communication, training, documentation and project management skills, ability to work independently in the field, generate and manage funds, develop rapport and build trust in the villages, and above all, knowledge about

water management and conservation, natural resource management, agriculture and animal husbandry, and income-generation alternatives are essential in order to implement need-specific micro projects in the villages.

The design, development and delivery of the four-month training (September to December 2003) were a meticulous effort to raise a cadre of young individuals with the development orientation necessary for CEs. This helped the cadre to graduate to a level from which they could start their journey as CEs.

This initiative began with careful selection of BRS/MRS/MSW<sup>3</sup> graduates with the heart and the mind for development work, and capacity building them to achieve the time-bound objectives of the project.

In view of the project requirements, the training was tailored to individuals who could take up the challenge and steer the project through all its phases. As the training was objective-oriented and multidisciplinary, various methods were used as appropriate. To deliver the above listed modules, experts in the respective fields were invited to share their knowledge and experiences. A variety of approaches – participatory, self-learning, experiential learning, thought provoking, need based and skill based – were adopted.

In order to put this understanding into practice, it was important to provide a space for CEs to critically understand, analyse and develop a plan to address the issues of the project area. To this end, assignments and exercises were a regular feature of the training programme.

### 4 The Project Implications

#### 4.1 Social

Being extremely participative in nature, the processes and mechanisms of *Samvardhan* fostered a feeling of togetherness among the village communities. When they met during the meetings and events organized under the project, and shared their experiences and opinions, they realized that they had common problems. This led to a willingness to come together and cooperate to address such problems, as they understood the benefit it had for them. Collective involvement in activities over a long period of time instilled a feeling of oneness, and their successful completion made the village communities realize that they were more effective when united. When an activity failed to give desired results, the ‘group’ feeling of shared responsibility lessened the feeling of disappointment, and enabled them to make fresh attempts. Thus, meeting each other and exchanging views resulted in enhanced social relations (lacking earlier), essential to build a social movement of any kind.

A noticeable manifestation of the strength of collective action was improved responses of government functionaries to local issues. The *Gram Panchayats* also started taking greater cognizance of needs of the communities – which were now more frequently and confidently voiced – and became more cooperative.

<sup>2</sup>Manisha H. Patel (a CE) belongs to Mehsana district in central Gujarat. She is working in Valsad district and looking after interventions in primary education and facilitation of SHGs. She holds a Master in Social Work, and adopted tribal areas as her home district. She has great command and skill in primary education and institution building. She has learnt the local language fast to communicate effectively. Manisha encountered difficulties in her personal life in regard to her marriage. However she bravely overcame the turmoil with single-minded focus on making a difference in society. She is brave and very creative in whatever she does.

In her view, SD is a situation in which villagers take a joint initiative for the progress of individuals, groups and village society. This can be done by building up local leadership that has the capacity to evolve suitable solutions, taking into account social, economic and environmental aspects, and bringing about the desired changes through efficient and sustainable utilisation of natural resources.

<sup>3</sup>The degrees like BRS – Bachelor in Rural Studies, MRS – Master in Rural Studies, and MSW – Master in Social Work, are offered by various social work and RHEIs of Gujarat and in other parts of India.



## 4.2 Environmental

The rationale for SNRM has to be understood by those who manage it, before they are provided with the knowledge and skills for such management. The rural poor who depend heavily on natural resources need to be aware that they are most vulnerable to environmental degradation.

The initiative to create sustainable alternative livelihood options for the resident populations had immense environmental implications. Looking at the hardship of the area, diversification was made in the livelihood options which served to reduce the pressure on the natural resources (land and forest). Though most livelihood activities undertaken by SHGs were farm-based, they were imbued with sustainable-agriculture principles and practices. Interventions like green manure, organic farming, arrangement of premium pricing for organic products through innovative marketing strategies, was seen as an effective way to introduce and propagate the value of environmental conservation and at the same time efficient use of the resources available to earn earnings which are sufficient and not necessarily force villagers to remain in poverty.

## 4.3 Socio-cultural

The programme in general and the CEs in particular felt that people formed the core of any intervention. Their in-depth involvement was especially important to address the social concerns, because these cannot be addressed by any external input or agency independently. The dynamics that make the social fabric of a place are governed by the people, and, therefore, cannot be altered without their active involvement. The participatory processes, besides fostering the spirit of unity and cooperation, broke some biases that certain communities had about other communities, reducing chances of conflict between them. While people gained confidence in themselves through actually doing things, they also gained confidence in each other, and realized that a support system existed.

The principle of having a woman president for every Village Committee, and the special efforts for encouraging education of girls (A hostel for girl drop-outs – the *Van Chetna Kanya Chaatralaya* – was set-up in Dabkhal village of Kaparada cluster), had strong socio-cultural implications.

## 4.4 Economic

An activity for earning income, though carried out with skill and hard work, may not be successful if there is lack of sound economic decision-taking ability. The primary focus of livelihood initiatives was augmenting the income of households, but the emphasis on ‘learning by doing’ approach and the consultative processes involved led to the creation of economic prudence among SHG members. When they calculated the expenditure and other variables for the livelihood activity undertaken, they understood the inter-relations between the variables that helped them develop the judgment ability regarding decisions of economic nature.

The members were given passbooks and other documents, and were able to maintain records of economic transactions,

with guidance from the CEs. They operated bank accounts on their own, after being properly instructed. They can now open and operate accounts efficiently in the future.

Creation of sustainable livelihood options improved the economic status of village communities by increasing their income. Providing market linkages for sale of produce, wherever possible, motivated the SHG members to scale-up their activity, thereby fostering entrepreneurship.

## 4.5 Implications as transformative education

Affecting a change in behaviour is a major goal of education. An education that does not reflect how people do things is not meaningful education. Perceivable transformations in attitudes, mind-sets and behaviours indicate that much of the education imparted has been internalized.

Being involved in activities from the planning stage, and sharing all information about the activity, the stakeholders developed a healthy sense of inquiry. In the later years of the project, they displayed considerable curiosity in asking questions and seeking information.

Furthermore, when empowerment happens, decisions and practices are questioned. With the backing of reasonable awareness and confidence, the reluctance to demand explanations for acts that do not seem right is also reduced. For example, a marked transformation in behaviour was seen when villagers began questioning the long-existing bribery practices prevalent in the region.

## 4.6 Implications as Learning Process

*Samvardhan* sought to be a mutual learning and learning to learn process. The learning happened by gaining insights into the local issues through meetings and discussions with village communities. People often provided inputs of indigenous knowledge during consultation, which proved to be quite useful for implementation.

More importantly, learning happened when reasons for failures were examined. An important lesson was that implementing maximum number of experimental projects that could have given the members of the SHG a chance to learn by doing (which was not done) could have fetched better results. A major learning outcome was the realization that success of an activity, to a great extent, depended on what the beneficiaries wanted, and that if initiatives that are suitable for them had to be undertaken, it was extremely important to have their consent.

## 5 The road ahead

The entire journey has been eventful and marked with clear and tangible achievements. In the beginning a clear transition policy was laid out, in which the ideology would be transferred to larger number of villages with two approaches. First, the CEs are free to work individually in the project area or can go back to their own villages to start doing similar activities. The focus is to spread ideology without any geographical limits. Secondly, a forum of the CEs is planned which can be registered as an institution, and they continue working in the project area.

However in both cases, CEs need external facilitation for another two to three years. They need to be equipped with specific skills to enable them to link external resource agencies with villages and understand different policies of the government. Their interventions will not merely focus on creating infrastructure in the village; rather, on building the capacity of the local people vis-à-vis local-level institutions.

Through experience, CEE has learned that to sustain such an initiative, external input and encouragement is necessary. But to build upon the institutional mechanisms, dependency should be progressively reduced, and the stakeholders' willingness and ability to scale up the initiative should be enhanced. The project has evolved such an organic relationship, and it is expected to prosper and further progress. The level of involvement of CEE and FSC will change; and while they will gradually retreat to the sidelines, scaling up will continue.

In conclusion, the efforts have led to a proliferation of SD ideas and options in the villages. *Samvardhan* will be an alternative approach for sustainable rural development, with CEs as its cornerstone. The programme is poised at a critical juncture, from which it must be sustained by further effort. This requires both assistance and creating a platform from which people can take the idea forward on their own. The need of the hour is to collectively strive towards creating a cadre for sustainable rural development.