

MAHILA SAMAKHYA

EDUCATION FOR WOMEN'S EQUALITY

NATIONAL OVERVIEW REPORT

SEPTEMBER, 1991

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FOREWORD

This overview report has been based on the field experiences of the National Project Office. An effort has been made to bring out the broad trends in the project, identify the main problem areas and give a birds eye view of the programme.

This overview has been prepared for the Second Indo-Dutch Review, and has to be read along with the statewise reports and the audiovisual documentation.

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Project Director [MS]

1 PROGRAM LAUNCHING IN THE THREE STATES

1.1 Mahila Samakhya is an unusual program to be implemented by any government. The first reaction is invariably one of surprise and disbelief for the main focus of Mahila Samakhya is to enable poor women to fight and demand a place in decision making processes both within their own family/community and with the administrative, developmental and educational structure they encounter every day.

1.2 Launching the program was a challenge and Mahila Samakhya had to adapt and mold itself to the conditions prevailing in each state. While the broad strategy to be followed was common, the success of the program depended on its ability to adapt to different situations. The project was formally approved by Government of India in September 1988 and the Indo Dutch agreement concluded in July 1989. In the pre-project phase the main focus was on discussing the MS concept with both government and non government organizations and getting together a core group of women who will steer the program in the state. The MS unit in Delhi was primarily involved in doing the spade work for the registration of the MS Society, drafting the memorandum for the society, preparing the necessary financial and administrative rules to ensure flexibility and identifying women who could steer the program in the states. Networking with women's organization and other voluntary organizations, liaise with the State government to make the MS Society a reality, ensuring support and networking within the official machinery to elicit interest and cooperation was a major preoccupation of the National Office in 1988-90.

1.3 Mahila Samakhya Societies in Karnataka and Gujarat were registered and operationalised in April 1989. The two state governments registered the society and appointed the State Program Directors by April 1, 1989. Government of Gujarat appointed Ms Kusum Chauhan as Officer of Special Duty in November 1988 in order to register and make operational the MS Society. Ms Srilatha Batliwala was appointed as State Program Director and took charge on April 1, 1989. Subsequently the MS Societies have continued to work autonomously, with the National Office extending support when needed and being there when called upon. The program has grown and taken root in the state, built a support structure and has been accepted as an innovative education program for women within the state.

1.4 Uttar Pradesh has been a special case. For over two years, from September 1988, when the program was formally approved by GOI, to September 1990 the Mahila Samakhya Society could not be operationalised. The MSS was registered and funds transferred in September 1990. However the appointment of a full time project director and requisite district level staff has been difficult. The posts were advertised in all national newspapers and journals. The first round of short-listing and selection has been completed. It is hoped that a fully functioning MSS-UP will be a reality by October 1991.

1.5 It is often said that women have greater access to education and health in those areas where the status of women is relatively high. Areas with low female literacy are also low sex ratio areas and are also areas where development programs have not been very effective. Health, education and the general infrastructure for development is not sensitive to women. In Uttar Pradesh female literacy is 20.92% [1991], sex ratio ranges from 801 in Badaun District to 1081 in Tehri Garhwal [where there is a very high rate of male outmigration for employment]. Atrocities against women is common and medieval prejudices continue to haunt them. The entire administration, private organizations, voluntary organizations and educational institutions do not have a significant presence of women. Uttar Pradesh has been a challenge to social reformers and it is going to a long struggle before women can claim a place in the sun - away from purdah, archaic customs, prejudices, and walls that keep them in the dark. It was therefore very necessary to launch Mahila Samakhya knowing that it will be a major challenge.

1.6 The choice in Uttar Pradesh was to either wait for the MS-Society to be operationalised or start the program through voluntary organizations. After a series of discussions MS started in UP with the help of local voluntary organizations. But for support of these groups and the dedicated work of women's groups like Jagori, Alarippu and women from the Women's Development Program, Rajasthan in training and orienting of Sakhis and Sahayoginis - Mahila Samakhya would not have been able to take off in the state.

1.7 The program was thus launched by giving grant-in-aid to voluntary organizations in the districts with training support from women's organizations from New Delhi and the WDP program in Rajasthan. Thus, till September 1990, the UP program was really a loose confederation of grantee organization of Mahila Samakhya

with Jagori coordinating training and resource support. After the MS Society was registered and operationalised under the Directorate of Adult Education, Government of Uttar Pradesh - this loose confederation started coming together .

1.8 Working with a loose confederations of MS grantees and ensuring that the basic tenets of the program are not diluted has been the greatest challenge in Uttar Pradesh. Voluntary organizations used to the grant-in-aid model give a lot of importance to reaching targets and utilization of the funds earmarked for a given period. This is particularly important because any grant giving organization evaluates success on the basis of its capability to deliver what was budgeted for. In MS, utilization of funds for AE , NFE , Sangha huts etcetera has never been seen as targets. They are seen as enabling provisions. The emphasis is on the process which enable rural women's collectives to identify and articulate their needs and work out in detail the logistics involved in creating and managing them. For example in order to build the Mahila Sangha hut, once the women feel they actually need it, they are expected to apply for the land, meet the concerned officials and go through the entire process of acquiring that piece of land in the name of their collective. Once the land has been acquired, they are expected to design the hut [with help of some professionals], manage the funds for construction and ultimately plan its use. This is a long process which is not short-circuited at any cost. In the process if the funds lapse in one year it is carried forward to the next year. Some of the nodal agencies used to a grant-in-aid mechanism were impatient with the MS insistence on processes which they felt prevented them from delivering services quickly. Launching the program through NGO's and transferring it to the MSS society after two years has been a difficult task. The UP program has to been seen in this context.

1.9 When Mahila Samakhya was being drafted, the financial pattern was based on other government programs. Systems worked out for financial monitoring and annual releases was also based on the experience of other central sector schemes in GOI. Over the last two years, it became apparent that an innovative programs need innovative budgeting. Very often financial procedures become bottlenecks. This was discussed at various levels, and as the program is moving into the VIII plan, the system of budgeting and financial monitoring has been changed accordingly. This has been outlined in Chapter V.

2 VILLAGE LEVEL CATALYST - DIFFERENT MODELS

[This chapter has been based on the discussion note prepared by MS - Karnataka for a NRG meeting in April 1991.]

2.1 Sakhis of Uttar Pradesh are paid a small honorarium of Rupees 200 a month to function as a catalyst. Sakhis of Gujarat receive a stipend of Rupees 200 per month for a period of one year when they are treated as learners. After one year, she helps select the next Sakhi - thus over a period many women from the same village get an exposure to training and the MS network. In Karnataka, every village has many Sahayakis who participate regularly in different activities, including training organised by the DIU. They work as a collective with different women performing different roles. The Sangha money is transferred to this collective, through a savings account in a bank or post office and the Sangha manages the funds through two signatories and the Sahayogini. When we organised a discussion to consider extending MS into Andhra Pradesh, most of the participants felt they should devise a model to suit the state.

2.2 Many large scale government programs are constrained because they are molded into rigid financial and administrative structures. This has been identified as one of the main bottlenecks in development projects. While decentralization is preferred goal, operationally it poses a major challenge. When Mahila Samakhya was being formulated, its approach to planning was spelt out and the administrative and financial structures designed for regional variations.

2.3 In 1987, when the consultants drafting the project proposal visited Rajasthan for discussions with the WDP team, one of the insightful comments made by Prachetas was on the inherent contradictions in perpetuating the paid village level worker model. The concept of a paid village level worker is rooted in the Community Development model of the 1950's. At that time, both planning and development were inherently top down. A paid village level worker was essential to rally local support and carry out tasks allotted to him/her by the development agency or department. This person implements projects which were externally determined and planned. They were seen as government employees answerable to the administration. The experience of this model over the last forty years shows that these part time function

aries become a part of the government/NGO hierarchy taking orders from them. They often share their superiors contempt for the "ignorant villagers" and essentially see their role as advisors to the community. A number of problems occurred in this model, such as :

2.3.1 Even though they were supposed to be honorary/part time workers, they invariably saw themselves as government employees. They also formed unions and struck for higher wages and recognition as full time government employees.

2.3.2 Because they were undertaking externally determined tasks, they were often at odds with the beneficiaries they were serving.

2.3.3 Their selection/appointment was done by outsiders and the village community had no say in the matter. Therefore they were loyal to their superiors and fulfilled their targets. The conflict between the village community and such functionaries in family planning programs is well known.

2.3.4 Not being accountable to the village community, they were given to shirking work, petty corruption and many other ills of a top down program.

2.3.5 This loss of morale was accompanied by a total dependence on the small honorarium and a loss of traditional occupation skills. As a government functionary, they became alienated from their own community and started identifying themselves with the administrative machinery. In many cases they became an inherent part of the village power structure.

2.4 There have been exceptions to the above scenario, but they are few and far between. Through intensive training, supportive supervision and creation of positive value systems, one can probably minimize the illeffects of the paid worker syndrome. Individuals - even if they are highly motivated and skilled cannot bring about social change from without for the most powerful incentive to change lies within the hearts and minds of the people. Creating dependency on an externally paid and supported catalyst may be counterproductive in the long run.

2.5 All these factors assumed greater significance in Mahila Samakhya because it is a time bound program. Our greatest priority was to build a network which becomes progressively autonomous and independent of the project infrastructure. On the other hand, in very backward regions it may be necessary to have a few village level catalysts to help organize women into a

Sangha.

2.6 Each state unit grappled with these issues and evolved its own model. Again UP was a special case because the program was launched through local NGO's and as the project did not have a cohesive identity therefore the traditional model was accepted. But with the units coming together, they are now planning to introduce a rotation system for Sakhis so that more women from each village get an exposure training and resource inputs.

2.7 The main challenge before MS is to devise mechanisms through which each Sangha manages its own funds, pays for its inputs like Child Care Centers, NFE, AE etc. monitors them and finally manages these inputs as their own. If women identify themselves with their activities and do not see them as the responsibility of the government alone, then regardless of whether MS continues beyond the pilot phase, women will begin to take charge of their own support structures. In Karnataka they have been discussing the possibility of registering each Sangha and enabling the Sanghas to come together as a federation.

2.8 Despite the diversity, a common thread runs through the program. They are :-

2.8.1 Sakhis and Sahayakis are identified by women in the village after a series of meetings. DIU, Sahayogini or the village pradhan/landlord do not have the final say. The criteria for selection is discussed at length. For example any woman who practices any caste or community based prejudices is automatically disqualified.

2.8.2 No service is delivered without the active participation of a group of women from the Sangha in planning, monitoring and administering the input.

2.8.3 Targets are not set from above, and each Sangha plans for itself with help from women in other villages and Sahayoginis. Utilization of funds is not seen as an end in itself but the process through which inputs are introduced is important.

2.8.4 Sahayoginis, Sakhis and Sahayakis are first accountable to the women's collective. As far as possible they are not encouraged to derive their legitimacy or clout from the district or state office of MS.

2.9 The program is grappling with many issues and each model has been adopted after a great deal of thought. There are no magical solutions to the problems of catalyzing women's forums in every village and in the ultimate analysis, what has been made possible in MS is the freedom to experiment, make mistakes and learn.

3 TRAINING -DIFFERENT APPROACHES

3.1 Training as a critical input has been woven into the MS strategy. The project document outlines some non-negotiables in the area of training - " An effort has been made to ensure that every training experience in the program [whether it is skill based or attitudinal] is a microcosm of the fundamental values and processes of the program itself." While the participatory nature of the training process is adhered to at all levels, each state has evolved its own system of training .

3.2 Training is not a single time bound activity but an intrinsic part of planning, reviewing, implementing, evaluating and documenting. Various forums like the monthly meetings of Sahayoginis, the periodic meeting of the district and state teams, annual internal reviews, etc are invariably turned into training situations. Nevertheless, each unit has devised mechanisms for regular training of new functionaries and periodic in-service training, namely:

3.2.1 Initially voluntary organizations with experience in training, or in grassroots work helped MS organize the first round of training and orientation of Sahayoginis.

3.2.2 In some areas select women's organizations shouldered the responsibility of organizing training in the districts. Trainers/resource persons were drawn from outside, and on a few occasions Sahayoginis/Sakhis from different districts came together for training.

3.2.3 In some areas district training teams were put together with the help of NGO's, social activists and educational institutions. This team worked in close coordination with the DIU.

3.2.4 In all the districts, an effort was made to build training capabilities within the district teams. Sahayoginis District Resource Persons from one district helped another.

3.3 The duration of training and the training rhythm also differ. In UP, the initial Sakhi/Sahayogini training is an intensive 15-21 day exercise, with periodic intensive follow-up trainings. In Karnataka and Gujarat, the duration is shorter and it is done in a phased manner. For example - initial training of Sahayoginis would involve three rounds of seven day training with a

break of three weeks in between when the Sahayoginis are expected to move around in their area. As the district teams are becoming more experienced and with the induction of older Sakhis, Sahayakis or Sahayoginis into the training team, each district has been able to work out its own method. A significant observation made in an internal review meeting was that when rural women train/communicate with other women like themselves, then very little time is taken to break the ice and help women open out. On the other hand urban women trainers - regardless of their sensitivity and skill - may take a longer time to build a rapport with women. An experienced Sahayogini can quickly zero in on vital issues.

3.4 Cultural factors play a very important role. Women in areas where they are totally confined either behind a purdah or in rigid social customs take a much longer time to open out than women who feel free to move around. Tribal women who commute every day to collect firewood and sell it in the market and fisherwomen who go and sell fish in the market every day may open out much faster than women who have never left their village. Similarly, the status of women in a given society, determine the nature of training inputs.

3.5 One of the issues that have generated a lot of debate is the role of outside resource persons as trainers. When it comes to specific inputs like health, law or any technical skill the role of the trainer is very clear. However, if the ongoing orientation and training of Sakhis and Sahayoginis are done by an outside team, their role in the DIU vis-a-vis regular follow-up visits to the villages, participation in the monthly meetings of Sahayoginis and monitoring the "impact of their training" becomes a particularly tricky issue. They end up taking over the role of the District Coordinator/ Resource Person. In some cases, the District team ends up depending on the trainers for their day to day work and do not enhance their own capability to lead the team. There are obviously no easy solutions and each district team has to arrive at its own balance.

3.6 In all the district, ongoing activities provide an ideal forum for training. For example, in the monthly Sahayogini meetings held over two days - they get an opportunity to look at their work as a group, plan for the next month and discuss conceptual issues as and when they emerge. Similarly, Sahayoginis initiate the same process with Sakhis/Sahayakis. Large gatherings like the Mahiti Mela in Bidar, Sammelans in Saharanpur,

Children's mela in Varanasi or the Sahayogini mela near Ahmedabad provide an excellent opportunity for training without selfconsciously planning it. More than the event itself, the process of analyzing it, looking back and doing a thorough review with the district/state team is in itself a valuable learning process. The capacity of the district/state team to covert different activities/forums into a training situations is perhaps the best training methodology - and is the essence of MS approach to training

4 MAHILA SAMAKHYA NGO RELATIONSHIP - SOME ISSUES

4.1 When the program was being planned in 1988-89, an important concern was to devise mechanisms to prevent excessive bureaucratization. Providing space for non-government organizations and individual activists as the conscience keepers of the program was a carefully worked out strategy. Meaningful partnership with the non-government sector was seen as an important component of this strategy. Therefore in the initial phase a great deal of time and energy was spent in identifying partners. Detail discussions were held on the criteria of selection of NGO's. MS was launched through voluntary organizations in three of the ten districts in October 1988 i.e, before it was formally approved by GOI. The project infrastructure was set up almost six months after the program was informally launched. Women's organizations were difficult to find in the districts, therefore NGO's having a presence among the poorest communities were identified. Over the years, there have been ups and downs, and MS-NGO relationship has not been as simple and straightforward as was expected in 1988.

4.2 MS takes great pains to see that women who come in contact with the program walk with their heads held high. Training in MS ultimately leads to enhancing the self image and self-confidence of women. The first comment a Sakhi or Sahayogini hears on her return from any MS activity or training from men in their area is -" you think you have grown wings since you started working in MS !" Some of the NGO partners were chosen even though they were not working among women or have women in decision making positions in their group. Groups with sensitivity to the gender question or women's organizations were difficult to come by in most districts and in the absence of such groups it seemed logical to work with organizations which have a significant presence among disadvantaged communities. As MS was seen as an active partnership, it was felt that gender input could be provided through training and regular interactions. Conflicts emerged in many districts, for example :

4.2.1 In one district the organizational head asked the Sakhis to support the NFE center [supported under MS] by cleaning the place, wiping the faces of children and fetching water. When this issue was raised and when the women said they wanted to participate in the selection and training of the instructors, monitor their work and be seen as a coworker and not as a helper, their request was ignored. When this issue was pursued, the

organizational head referred to the MS style as being western, feminist and essentially urban middle class as opposed to the Indian notion of women. Since the MS program was running through NGO's in this district the dialogue continued, but Sakhis could not change their role in the NFE centers. If they laughed with abandon, talked loudly especially with village elders [men] it was frowned upon. If women's health, their bodies and their feelings were discussed openly in training programs, it was seen as being vulgar and not in keeping with Indian womanhood. All discussions on women's empowerment invariably ended in a debate of Indian womanhood as being very different from the feminist notion of equality.

4.2.2 In one district Sahayoginis and Sakhis started mobilizing women and going directly to the block or district headquarters to meet or petition the officials. In the past they invariably asked the NGO to mediate. Within a year of starting MS, Sahayoginis started depending on the MS network for guidance and in many areas they started taking their own decisions. At this point, the NGO wanted to ensure the Sahayoginis continue to get their honorarium from them and not the DIU. With every passing month, Sahayoginis became more articulate especially in the staff meeting and in meetings within the NGO. As the grant-in-aid period was coming to an end, and the DIU was being operationalised, such conflicts became more acute. Changing attitude of Sahayoginis, their behavior and the impact of training became issues for discussions. These discussions were particularly virulent with organizations that did not have women leaders in their organization. Debates invariably ended on the MS notion of women's equality as being alien in the Indian context, and how MS is making them "aggressive".

4.3 Increasingly it was felt that the program cannot move forward when its basic tenets are questioned time and again and when lot of time is spent on defending women's right to participate in decision making processes within her family, society and the organization she is working in. In Mysore, Sabarkanta, Banda and Tehri Garhwal this was a major preoccupation for over eighteen months. With every step forward, we had halt to sooth ruffled feathers.

4.4 Utilization of funds and reaching targets is not a priority in MS. On the other hand MS insists on going through the process regardless of whether the earmarked funds are utilized or not. Like the sangha hut example discussed in Chapter I, starting AE or NFE centers is not an end in itself. In the initial phase some NGO members in the DRG insisted on moving quickly. Starting child care centers was a great favorite. They were impatient with

MS insistence on initiating work on such inputs only after the Sangha clearly articulates its need. For example if a village Sangha wants a child care center it should make a case for it. Existence of ICDS centers, their accessibility, impact, existence of other services in the village, their access to all communities/hamlets in the village ; is discussed at length . MSP tries, as far as possible, to activate existing resources before starting anything new. The facility is planned carefully and the Sangha is made to internalize the idea that it is their center and they are responsible for it. Is not seen as yet another government service. They select the center workers, decide on the inputs, pay the worker and manage the funds of the center. No supervisory structure is encouraged from above. In Karnataka, the Sangha goes through the process of applying for a center, defending their proposal, planning it and finally managing it. This is done to enable women to understand procedures involved in acquiring any government service. This is a slow process, but once the women go through it they feel confident to gain access to and control over other services in their area. Impatience of some conventional development oriented NGO's pushes the MS functionaries to explain the MS strategy at every step. Debate over conventional approaches to service delivery leads to conflicts with some NGO partners. MS is put in a difficult position when NGO partners repeatedly raise fundamental issues in every DRG meetings or when Sahayoginis raise these issues with NGO members. Intra organizational conflicts is then attributed to MS. It gets worse when some NGO functionaries leave their organization as a result of such conflicts or if some women apply for jobs in MS. As this is a very large program with scope for expansion, MS is seen as a threat and MS-NGO relationship becomes strained.

4.5 In the first year a conscious decision was taken not to work in the same villages as the NGO, but in villages where no NGO is active [UP is an exception as MS itself was being implemented through NGOs]. Towards the end of the second year, MSP has been able to start various interesting activities. At this stage, small NGO's working in the area started feeling uneasy over MSP's ability to respond to and provide concrete inputs. Having decides not to overstep each other's territories the dilemma is whether MS should extend into the NGO villages or not.

4.6 Some organizations, especially activist groups equate organizing women with agitation and struggle. If they are working with lower castes they are perforce against upper castes; if they speak of women they are perforce against men and if they are involved in any struggle which involves clashing with the administration/police/courts then they take an aggressive

anti-establishment stand. Raising social consciousness does, in the first stage, lead to understanding issues in black and white, in terms of oppositions. MS will however have to help Sahayoginis and Sakhis to move beyond knee-jerk reactions and develop a more nuanced understanding of the structures of oppression. This alone will enable the program to move, when necessary, beyond an agitation mode into constructive strategies. Some partners, involved in agitation work see everything government as being anti women. Some look at the entire government machinery as being patriarchal. Their ability to explore the possibility of using the status of MSP as a government program to the advantage of women and exert pressure as an insider is limited. The potential of a government program with a radical agenda recedes into the background. In some cases groups which share the MSP approach in their own work are unable to work in partnership because they are constantly trapped in their rhetoric against the patriarchal Indian state. This is particularly tragic when such organizations agree to work with the program in the first instance and are unable continue working amicably as a result of such rhetoric.

4.7 In any partnership the partners must share a common vision and there has to be agreement on the basic strategy. The relationship becomes very stressful if fundamental issues need to be debated at every step. Mahila Samakhya is at a juncture when we have to redefine the nature of our partnership with NGO's - especially in the context of their role in the DRG, as trainers and as partners in implementation. Needless to add, this must be done in consultation with the organizations currently involved in Mahila Samakhya.

5 FACILITATING DECENTRALIZATION

5.1 When the program was being drafted, a great deal of attention was paid to the concept, approach to training, procedure for selection of project staff and innumerable details regarding the kind of support structure required to nurture the program in the initial phase.

5.2 However, when the budget was being formulated, the conventional system of calculations to arrive at a comprehensive figure for the project was followed. We tried to estimate how many Mahila Sanghas, NFE centers, AE centers etc would come up in each block of 100 villages. Similarly, estimates were calculated on the basis of annual addition of 100 villages per district. All the funds required for Mahila Sanghas, including huts, AE, NFE etc, was provided from day one of the first year. Even though the project document and the notes on the financial pattern clearly stated that no targets will be imposed, in effect calculations were made on certain numbers of villages to be covered and a certain number of components per village. Funds to the Mahila Samakhya societies were released on the basis of this budget. This resulted in some problems, namely :

5.2.1 No gestation period was provided for setting up the project structure. Obviously, the identification, selection and training of Sahayoginis would take time. Mahila Sanghas would need time to come together as a cohesive group. The project document went into great details on the need for time and space, and how services be delivered on demand only. Mahila Samakhya was seen as a program that would generate a demand for education and a mechanism to increase women's participation in village level forums - including the village education committees. Educational inputs - called program components in the project document was to be made to women if they wanted. The budget did not reflect this.

5.2.2 Calculations were made for a cluster of 100 villages and all inputs were budgeted for. When the conceptual part of the project was designed to make room for region/community specific innovations, there was little scope for variations in the budget. The Mahila Samakhya Societies were thus burdened with enormous funds when their capacity to absorb them was limited. In the first year they were concentrating on selecting their teams, training them and getting the project infrastructure on the ground.

5.2.3 Executive Committees of MSS had the powers to monitor and guide the program, but little financial flexibility. It was not clear if they could approve innovative educational activities that do not conform to approved patterns. Minor rules related to leave, delegation of financial powers etc had to be approved by GOI.

5.2.4 The financial pattern and the budget was in effect topdown, whereas the program was expected to take its cue from the village.

5.3 While GOI appreciated the reasons for underutilization of funds in the first year, it took some time before the inherent contradiction between the program objectives and the financial pattern became apparent. In April 1990, these contradictions were discussed openly and it was felt that the entire financial pattern would necessarily undergo major changes in the VIII plan period. The National Project office therefore concentrated on drafting revised financial patterns and system for the release of funds. As a stop gap arrangement the following changes were made and approved for Financial Year 1991-92 :

5.3.1 The Executive Committee was fully empowered to consider any innovation and approve the same . As GOI is represented in that committee, the decision of the Executive Committee would be treated as final.

5.3.2 The Executive Committee was fully empowered to appoint staff, regulate their working conditions [including leave rules] as long as the society does not exceed the total number of approved posts and do not increase the proportion of management costs.

5.3.3 Annual budgets to be prepared by each society on the basis of the plans made by each district. These budgets should be based on the capacity of each district unit to take up activities or expand. If any district decides to harness the resources of an ongoing educational program like Adult Education - then that district need not ask for funds for AE. Similarly, if a district team decides to take hut construction at a later date, they can do so. In the meeting of the NRG held on July 23, 1990, Education Secretary, GOI urged the MS teams to promote innovative work in education.

5.4 Once this was done, the entire project team heaved a sigh of relief. Many innovative government sponsored programs have not been able to introduce the necessary financial flexibility and they have had to face innumerable problems. Too many

controls and rigid financial patterns rob programs of its initiative. Once the project staff at the state and district level feel they have no control over their own plans and that targets are handed to them by someone who is not aware of their working condition - then they loose interest. If Mahila Samakhya is to steer clear of this trap, it was imperative to respond to signals of distress and take corrective measures immediately.

5.5 The financial pattern , pending approval for the VIII plan period reflects this commitment. The following changes have been suggested:

5.5.1 While the staffing pattern of the National, State, and District level project offices have been worked out in order to keep the management cost low; no such numbers, rules and limits have been stipulated for activities.

5.5.2 A lump sum has been provided in the budget for all activities. The overall project budget has not been based on any de-facto targets taken as a base for calculations. Each state unit is expected to prepare its annual budget based on the district plans. Funds will be released on the basis of these plans. The Executive Committee of the MSS has to approve and forward these plans/budgets.

5.5.3 Financial patterns in the form of unit costs have been worked out with respect to Sahayoginis, Mahila Sanghas, Huts, Mahila Shikshan Kendras and District Resource Units for AE/NFE. The MSS cannot exceed the limits prescribed in these unit costs.

5.5.4 MSS can follow the approved financial patterns for AE, NFE, and Children's Centers. The Executive Committee has full powers to approve any innovative model keeping in view the reasonableness of the financial requirement. For example if a district decides to adopt a camp based approach to literacy, the Executive Committee if fully empowered to approve this. As it is chaired by the Education Secretary of the state, and the State Departments of Finance and GOI are represented in the committee, its decisions will be treated as final.

5.5.5 The number of resource persons in each district has been linked to coverage. An additional resource person has been provided for every additional cluster of 100 villages. Similarly, if any district adopts the approved GOI pattern for AE or NFE, they can provide additional staff on the lines of those schemes.

5.5.6 The responsibility of the National office is to ensure smooth flow of funds. On incurring expenditure to the tune

of 75% of the grant, the MSS society will be given another installment. Each MSS is to submit quarterly statements of expenditure and detailed audited statements annually. For all practical purposes the MSS are governed by the rules applicable under the grant-in-aid scheme to NGO's.

SOME CHALLENGES

5.6 A lot more needs to be done before each Mahila Sangha is truly empowered to take its own decisions and implement them. There are some tasks before Mahila Samakhya, namely:

5.6.1 Devise mechanisms compatible with government procedures to enable each Sangha to manage its own financial resources vis-a-vis program components. In Karnataka the Sahayoginis asked if it was possible to transfer funds for all program components to the Mahila Sangha, for them to use as a collective; whether registration of each sangha be necessary and whether the Sangha hut will belong to them. Under any government project, any property acquired automatically returns to the government on the termination of the project.

5.6.2 If a cluster of Mahila Sanghas do register and come together as a federation, can they continue working and receive grants as a federation.

5.6.3 As the District Implementation Units become fully autonomous and capable of guiding the program in the district, can they get the financial powers to formalize and legitimize their autonomy.

5.7 The next year will be crucial for the program and the National Office will have to organize a series of workshops with experts in financial management to enable the program to become truly decentralized. This may be an important contribution of Mahila Samakhya in the field of development.

6 NATIONAL LEVEL SUPPORT FOR THE PROGRAM

6.1 In the initial phase, the National Resource Group and the National Project Office played an advocacy role to communicate the concept, convince people in the states/districts that it was worth a try and generating enthusiasm for implementation. The energy for the program came from the concept, its power, and through the experience of organizations like SPARC, Bombay and the Women's Development Program, Rajasthan.

6.2 As the Mahila Samakhya Societies came up and the program started becoming a reality, the NPO held the hands of the state and district teams, helped iron out financial and administrative problems, intervened in crisis situations, trained/oriented the district and state units in all aspects of administration and finance and nurtured the fledgling program. In the Department of Education, a great deal of time was devoted by senior officials towards extending moral support. This nurturing role continued until the state teams were able to carve out a place for themselves in the state. In Gujarat and Karnataka the Executive Committees started providing guidance and support. The NRG and NPO however continued to steer Uttar Pradesh.

6.3 1990-91 was a phase of feverish activity and each district/state unit was totally immersed in their own work. At this juncture, the NRG and NPO took a back seat - it extended support, participated in activities, and shared the ups and downs. As expected, the energy for the program now came from the Sanghas, Sahayoginis, District Units and the State Units. It was now upto the national level bodies to respond.

6.4 Many issues concerning the concept, strategy and administrative bottlenecks were thrown up for discussion. The state teams did not want the NRG meetings to limit its role to listening progress reports. They wanted the NRG as a sounding board of experienced and creative people who could flesh out in programmatic terms the innovative ideas been thrown up in the field. In July, 1990 the NRG debated the Education Component of the program. Subsequently a note on the concept of a paid village level worker was circulated by Karnataka and Gujarat. Often the state teams

wanted the National Office to help collect information for them. In some cases the state teams wanted the National Office to bring out documents informing them about the program in other states. In some cases, due to their preoccupation with implementation, they wanted the National Office to help them with documentation in English. Essentially, the demand was to redefine the role of the national level support structure.

6.5 Given the structure of the National Office it was becoming impossible for it to play an active role in documentation, collation and dissemination of information. Being far removed from village level activities, the National Office could not give any concrete guidance on specific issues, and all that could be done is to collect the experience of other programs/experience of NGO's and give it to the teams. It had to now respond sensitively to the energy emanating from the field. In a meeting of the NRG held on August 28 and 29, 1991 it was decided to reconstitute the NRG to play the following role :

6.5.1 To advise and guide GOI in policy matters concerning women's education and the future of MS strategy in larger educational interventions.

6.5.2 To plan the future expansion and containment of the program in more districts and states ;

6.5.3 To safeguard the non-negotiables of Mahila Samakhyas and ensure they are treated as such at all levels;

6.5.4 To discuss and debate various issues, concerns and concepts that arise from the field and evolve broad strategies;

6.5.5 To participate in internal evaluations and reviews.

6.5.6 To draw upon the experience and knowledge of other programs and organizations;

6.5.7 To devise mechanisms to safeguard the national character of the program as members of the Executive Committees in the four States and the District Resource Group.

6.6 Similarly, the following areas were identified for action at the national level :

[i] Collation and dissemination of information and experiences;

[ii] Bring out periodic overviews of the program outlining

different strategies, innovations and experiences;

[iii] Provide a forum for reflection, sharing experiences of program functionaries;

[iv] Respond to the information needs of the MS units and facilitate joint evaluations and;

[v] Organize workshops to orient new entrants and key officials dealing with the program in GOI and the in the State Governments.

6.7 The National Project Office, consisting of a Project Director, one consultant and administrative staff could not raise to the expectations of the program. It is this context that a Resource Unit attached to the National Office is being discussed so that the financial monitoring and administrative functions could be performed by the project office in MHRD, while all work related to documentation, collation and dissemination of information and giving systematic resource inputs into the program could be taken over by the Resource Unit.

6.8 Structures and roles will continue to change in accordance with the changing needs of the program. The greatest strength of the program has been its ability to adapt continuously to different situations. Perhaps this pilot program will be able to make concrete recommendations in the area of planning for decentralization by demonstrating the viability of a bottom up approach in large government sponsored development projects.

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