



UNDERSTANDING SHG PRACTICE: A STUDY ON THE SHG SCENARIO UNDER A WATERSHED DEVELOPMENT PROJECT IN NALBARI DISTRICT, ASSAM

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ABSTRACT India being a 'welfare state' has a great responsibility of curbing poverty or any kind of social maladies posing grave threat to the very development of the society. Unfortunately after 70 years of independence it has failed in various human development aspects like healthcare, education, pure drinking water facility to rural household, sanitation, social justice, empowerment, literacy rate etc. leading to the emergence of poverty and various social evils like unemployment, alcoholism, beggary, terrorism, theft, dacoity etc. Most of the problems are widespread mainly among the low income group people and its worth mentioning that economic backwardness is widely found behind all these problems. Efforts have been made by government, civil society organizations, NGOs etc. to eradicate rural poverty and empower the rural mass through various micro finance credit processes or development program and formation and supporting SHG for livelihood generation is one such process. The idea of SHG has been one of the most recognized poverty alleviation programs in the developing countries and its manifold sides from economic development to employment generation and empowerment really brings a ray of hope for the people facing deprivation and negligence in their day to day life. This paper intends to assess the SHG scenario in a watershed development project in Nalbari district of Assam and its successes and various shortcomings in the implementation phase that surpassed the achievement of the SHG activities and a way forward to remedy the situation.

KEYWORDS : welfare state, society, NGO, micro finance credit, employment, empower

INTRODUCTION

The effort for reducing global poverty and bridging gender based gap has led to the birth of different initiatives and policy interventions and one of such initiatives is evident in the birth of participatory development process. The concept of 'socialist' ideology and 'welfare state' enshrined in the preamble and the directive principles of state policy in our constitution make the policy makers accountable for welfare of every citizen of the country within its territory. Thus the state is under obligation to take initiatives for the welfare of its citizens. SHG is a widely accepted and perhaps the most feasible and cost effective community based organization for livelihood generation with all the features to lift one out of abject poverty and socio economic backwardness. Besides, its impact on other aspects like promoting self-employment, socio economic development, intellectual, political and psychological development and its role on enrichment of the empowerment process of the participating members holds significance in the emerging economies. Though the process of SHG has become the first choice of most of the livelihood programs of government or various NGOs and is held in high regard for its multifarious impact on livelihood generation and empowerment process, still one can not turn a blind eye in to the fact that some loopholes in the implementation process often overshadow the successes or achievements of the practice. A study of the SHGs under a watershed development project in Nalbari district, Assam gives an impression that there is an urgent need for some correction and reviewing of the process to ensure proper functioning of the SHG and to get the loopholes corrected. An attempt is made to look into various aspects of SHG, its importance, successes and shortcomings in the light of the SHGs under the said project. The study is divided into three parts, one dealing with the processes and relevance of the SHG in general, the second part is about the SHG scenario in the Nalbari - its successes and the shortcomings and the third part is the conclusion and a way forward.

Processes and relevance of SHG in general:

Before go into the detail of the SHGs in the study district it is imperative to have a discussion on the concept of SHG in general and its relevance and the reasons for its widespread acceptability as a livelihood generation program in particular. The word Self-Help itself suggest a process where a group of people, preferably of 10-12 members with same socio-economic status and homogeneity in other aspects work together and help themselves for livelihood generation. The most significant aspect of the process of SHG lies on its same socio economic status and homogeneity in all aspects of the participating members to ensure that no members have any superiority or inferiority complex which is potential enough to affect the spirit of people towards achieving its goal. Thus the process of SHG has all the ingredient of participatory development process giving everyone the opportunity for full utilisation of the available resources which in turn contribute to the all-round development of the participating members of the group. There is scope for higher success rate of SHG activity than any activity done at individual level because of the fact that in a

group wise activity, members feel a kind of psychological security and the fear or any kind of negativity automatically gets minimized resulting in boosting of self-confidence essential for the growth of an activity. Difficulties seen in attaining the goal in one's individual capacity is generally not found when attempted in a group thus making the process more cost effective, feasible and easily achievable. Again the group norms, rules and regulations that one needs to follow in a group process make members more punctual and disciplined, which is not an essential condition in any individual activity. A group process is more fruitful as it provides opportunity for frequent group discussion or interaction among members which often lead to the generation of innovative ideas, improvement in their skill and working environment and marketing. Under this circumstance group members have the scope to make collective effort to address their issues and grievances and develop the ability to take any challenge head-on than one can do with his individual capacity. On top of everything, in group level activity, individual weaknesses do not affect the functioning of the group much and other members' expertise helps the group overcome any challenge. Therefore, there is no difficulty to prove that a group wise activity is more effective than any individual activity.

SHG under the watershed development project in Nalbari district:

The study attempts to throw light on the SHG scenario, success or achievement and shortcoming in the functioning of SHGs under a watershed development project in Nalbari district of Assam. Some significant achievement of the SHG activities includes inculcating the habit of generating income through various livelihood based activities by a section of women and introducing the practice of systematized savings, mostly in non-formal institution. Though the number of women practising systematized savings is not fully geared up, it needs improvement towards a change in attitude in the way they conduct themselves in the pre SHG period. These have far reaching impacts on the overall development of the women. Women's involvement with the SHG activity has reduced their habitual tendency to remain within the four walls of the house and keeping themselves aloof from the outside world to a great extent along with reducing their dependency on financial front to some extent. As stated by some of the women their association with the SHG and frequent interaction among members has helped them in the banking processes, money transaction and attending SHG meetings etc. which itself is a great learning for them. For instance more than 50% of the beneficiaries acknowledged that they have been able to perform official activities, banking processes etc. only after their association with the SHG. Again 14% of them have conceded they never had any experience of speaking in public forum before their association with the SHG and nor had they associated with any official activities prior to the involvement in SHG process. Thus their involvement in the SHG has helped them to overcome inhibitions and fear thereby contributing to the empowerment process to some extent. The process of maintaining documents and resolution book, records keeping, meetings, etc. have been very new to a significant number of members and their association with group activity and

involvement in the SHG process has helped them in their capacity building. Frequent interaction with outside people in relation to money transaction also helped them in changing their attitude towards economic development and ground bonding.

The study gives a mixed feeling about the SHG scenario under the said project and reminds one the fact that how the various shortcomings or flaws in the implementation process often overshadow the little success that the beneficiaries achieve out of the SHG process. Though the process of SHG has all the components to render all round development of people and have been quite helpful in certain aspects of the development process, one should not subscribe to the idea that the implementation process was absolutely flawless. It would be wrong to forget that people are not well versed with the concept of SHG, yet despite of spending lakhs of money on training and awareness generation under various programs. The philosophy of SHG is not that of helping nor is it a charity work but it is in fact an enabling process where people are enabled to utilise or mobilize their resources for their self-development. Around 67% beneficiaries believe that a small amount of money provided against their activities under the project is not competent enough to render changes in their status. This led a section of the beneficiaries distribute the amount that they received under the project among them.

A number of indicators showed that people were unmindful of very basic ethics of the SHG process and their failure to understand the crux of the concept of SHG has impacted the whole process to a great extent. Some of the activities like duckery and goaterly were not found and ducks or goats were either sold off or they all died. This shows the sheer negligence of people towards continuing the activity. Only component of SHG activity left there is the people's self-contribution by a meager amount that they contribute either every week or every month and lending out the money among them or outside the group on interest. This is a failure on the part of the beneficiaries as well as the implementing agency not being able to actualise the very objective of the process of SHG. One of the prerequisites in the process of SHG is the regular holding of meeting to discuss and review the functioning of the SHG. In contrary to that, a significant number of beneficiaries feel that there is no need for them to attend SHG meetings as they do not have to play any role there except paying the monthly amount for maintenance of the group. According to them, as their SHG secretary/president is expert at SHG activities so they can run the group on their own. Therefore, the SHG leaders have to shoulder the entire responsibility and rest of members remains mute spectator in most of the cases. Thus the empowerment process gets a big blow with this malpractice apart from damaging the sense of belongingness of other members. Again, communication gap between the SHGs and the implementing agency is also evident at a number of places as once money was disbursed to the SHGs there was no one to monitor the functioning of the activity. Communication gap among the group members is also palpable as there was irregularity in convening committee meetings and the absence of frequent discussion on SHG functioning weakened the spirit and self-motivation of the members. Some inadequacies were also observed in the selection procedure of the beneficiary as there were members in certain cases without requiring any micro finance assistance. Sometimes lack of cooperation and half-hearted approach on the part of the sponsor or the financial institutions also hampers the functioning of SHG. It is also a responsibility of the funding agency or the sponsor agency to ensure that the allocated money for the activities reaches the beneficiaries on time. Certain SHGs under the watershed development project in the said district suffers delay in receiving a part of the money which not only hampered the growth of the SHG but also affected the enthusiasm of the beneficiaries towards their works. Again there should be uniformity in the disbursement of money for the same activity to the different groups which was found missing in certain cases. So survival of a SHG can't be a one sided effort and contribution of the sponsor group is equally vital to the functioning of the SHG.

Success or failure of any activity mostly depends on how one perceives the idea of the activity and its importance and relevance to their development process. A significant number of members under the project have very poor perception in the idea of SHG with a section of them has a preconceived notion that small amount of money received against an activity does not help to change their status. It is a clear indication of people's unawareness and disbelief on the resources available in them. Unless people are able to identify resources in them or helped them realise their abilities and have faith in their capabilities, situation is unlikely to be better in any future endeavour.

Conclusion and way forward:

As the process of SHG requires no such big investment and is quite handy to an unskilled individual with every potential to make meaningful contribution to the target people so the idea of SHG has become the first choice of most of the livelihood program of government and various NGOs. There are several factors that pose a threat to the growth of a SHG and identification of such factors and timely action to remedy the situation is the need of the hour. The reason for the SHGs under the said project not being able to achieve the desired result is manifold. People's unawareness and their negligence for the activity are quite visible at every level leading to the whole efforts and the resources go in vain in a number of cases. The study touched upon several aspects in the functioning of the SHG and come up with some suggestions which are enumerated below.

The root of the problem lies in the unawareness of people and beneficiaries' inexperience and their misgivings with regard to efficiency of SHG is clearly visible at multiple level, therefore, it is expected that the project practitioner would put more emphasis on creating awareness among the community. Apart from the awareness programs, some exposure visits to successful SHG activity can also be arranged as part of it. SHG members can also be made familiar with various success stories of SHG activity and can be shown photographs and videos of various successful SHG activities. Unless the idea of SHG is popularized and its every positive aspect is made known to the people, it is unlikely that people would hold any positive view on the idea of SHG under the circumstances that has been witnessed under the studied project. Again, to impart adequate training on the functioning of SHG is indispensable for achieving the prescribed goal. Unless people are trained up properly and equipped them with adequate knowledge, entire effort is likely to go in to disarray. A half-hearted approach on the part of the beneficiaries and the project practitioner could make all efforts go in vain. Thus, to avoid any wastage of resources in the form of cash or kind and to ensure people's enthusiasm towards SHG work, it is essential to equip all the stakeholders with adequate knowledge on the activities. So imparting proper training is inevitable to build up the capacities of the beneficiaries to continue the activity. Again organizing awareness generation program and popularizing the idea of SHG can also double the spirit of people towards the activity.

In the study district a preoccupied mindset of the beneficiaries and their skepticism of SHG as a proper means of livelihood is a clear reflection of the lack of positive attitude and faith in their capabilities. Effective communication among the members and with the implementing agency is of paramount importance. In the project, communication gap was observed between the implementing agency and the SHGs at various stages which resulted in the mishandling of the SHG process and violation of SHG guidelines and inadequacy in the implementation of the project at community level. Therefore, apart from imparting training, constant process monitoring is required to get things on right track. In certain cases funding agency's failure to ensure timely disbursement of funds also hampered the growth of SHG, affecting enthusiasm of the beneficiaries. Thus it is the responsibility of the funding agency or the sponsor agency to ensure that the allocated money for the activities reaches the beneficiaries on time. Again it is not to mention that success or failure of SHG also depends on the selection of beneficiaries. Random selection of beneficiary from among the community is disadvantageous to the smooth running of the activity. Those who are really interested and is actually in need of help should be covered under such benefits. This can only be achieved with a robust field study by a group of skilled members for identification of the potential sector and beneficiaries for the pursuance of the welfare services with maximum efficacy.

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