

Proposed intervention strategy

'Making Local Governance Work for Women - Exploring New Institutional Possibilities'

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Country: India

Research organisation: IT for Change

Research team: Anita Gurumurthy and Nandini C.

Partner organisation: *Prakriye* - Centre for Community Informatics and Development, field unit of IT for Change and *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka

1. Context

The field centre of IT for Change, *Prakriye*, has been working with women's collectives of the *Mahila Samakhya* programme of the Government of India in three blocks of Mysore district, since 2005, as a part of its *Mahiti Manthana*¹ initiative. *Mahila Samakhya* is a pan-Indian governmental programme that works with the aim of 'education for empowerment' through a collectivisation strategy that mainly focuses on rural women, especially those belonging to economically and socially disadvantaged sections. *Mahiti Manthana* adopts a three-pronged Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) strategy using community radio, community video and telecentres, for strengthening the empowerment processes among grassroots women's collectives (locally, *sanghas*).

Our work in the past five years focussed on the following objectives, building on the work of *Mahila Samakhya* Karnataka (MSK) and its vision and strategies:

1. Carving out a space for *sangha* women in the local public sphere and enabling their participation in local governance processes, to give them greater voice.
2. Transforming information and communication processes within the *Mahila Samakhya* programme so that there is a qualitative shift in the reach of the *Samakhya* programme to its *sanghas* and in the participation of *sangha* women in shaping and directing their own empowerment, a mission that MSK has striven towards.

Broadening and deepening our on-going work with the *Mahila Samakhya sanghas* is an important imperative for us, in developing an intervention strategy for our project on 'Making Local Governance Work for Women - Exploring New Institutional Possibilities'. We will now examine the current strategy that informs our work, and analyse its successes as well as gaps. This analysis will form the basis of our proposed intervention design.

2. Current strategy with *Mahila Samakhya* collectives: Building an informatics culture

One of the major aims of our current strategy has been to try and tackle the dependency of *sangha* learning processes and mobilisation of women, on the physical presence of the programmatic staff of *Mahila Samakhya*, who perform a strong function in the handholding of grassroots women's everyday struggles. We have therefore attempted to bring new techno-social processes to carry

¹ *Mahiti Manthana* literally translates as 'informational churn'

forward MSK's vision to develop the *sangha* as a space for citizenship pedagogy, and as a local knowledge institution that privileges women and the marginalised in the community. The cornerstone of our strategy therefore has been in the building of a community informatics culture based on three digitally enabled components. First is a weekly radio broadcast that is the *sangha* women's own voice in the local public sphere, called *Kelu Sakhi*² (Listen, my friend). The second is an on-demand as well as push based video system for information that women seek, to share inspirational biographies of *sangha* women, as well as to open up debates on gender and patriarchy. The third component is a village based telecentre model for public information access called the *Namma Mahiti Kendra* (Our Information Centre). It is run by *sangha* women in select villages through a young information intermediary, *sakhi* (friend), trained by the women and the *Prakriye* team. The *sakhi* addresses the information needs of the village community and engages with local institutions through a continued dialogue with government departments at the block level to push for transparency and responsiveness.

As part of our strategy, we produce digital content along with *sangha* women for documenting local knowledge, providing information to other *sanghas* and for identity-building, in audio-visual formats. We have also focussed on enabling peer-to-peer learning processes as well as the use of email and telephones for more effective communication among *sanghas* and between *sangha* women and programme staff.

3. Impact of the strategy

Our strategy has had the following impacts, as confirmed by a recent evaluation study we conducted:

- a) In the villages where the *sangha* women have taken to discussions based on radio broadcasts and to collective video-viewing, developing a new culture of questioning and seeking information through digital means, a move towards greater *sangha* autonomy and lesser dependency of *sanghas* for their information needs on the programmatic staff of *Mahila Samakhya* is perceptible.
- b) It is evident that access to and effective use of ICTs, in contextually meaningful ways, leads to a greater sense of empowerment. We saw non-literate *sangha* women grow in their self esteem through their experiences of handling ICTs, using digital learning resources to conduct meetings, and confidently innovate around peer learning processes, without the presence of external

2 *Kelu Sakhi* which means 'Listen, my friend' is a weekly radio programme that is broadcasted over the Karnataka State Open University FM channel in Mysore, between 9.00-9.30 P.M every Monday. The programme, produced by IT for Change, reaches out to women who are part of the *Mahila Samakhya* self help groups, in their idiom, and is an attempt at carving out an alternate public sphere that enables rural, *dalit* women to speak their concerns.

facilitators.

c) The *Namma Mahiti Kendras* have been symbolic of a new equation in the community; they have improved women's bargaining power in their village communities and enhanced the community standing of *sanghas*.

d) The proximity of the governance system to the *sanghas* enabled through the project and a transformation in the local culture towards an entitlements-based access to public information has, to some extent, displaced traditional information gatekeepers.

e) The programme staff of MSK, especially those in the field, have found new pedagogic possibilities for both mobilising women and for ongoing interventions on women's socio-economic empowerment in the possibilities offered by *Mahiti Manthana*.

The relevance of this strategy has motivated us to select the following broad areas for our future intervention:

a) Developing 'village information centres' as new institutions that women identify as accessible and relevant, of which the default expectation is; "if I want some information, they are likely to have it, and are obliged to provide it to me" (to use an asymmetric analogy, it is somewhat like the way we rely on 'search engines' in the online world).

b) Putting in place processes for community generated information – related to traditional knowledge, mapping of local resources and household information – through digital means of collection, storage, systematisation and reproduction that are geared to be of value to the citizenship rights of poor, marginalised women.

c) We also plan on expanding the current three -pronged ICT strategy to include other components: we want to use a mix of radio, video, mobile, GIS and Internet technologies in a manner that is responsive to *sangha* women's perception of information needs related to their well being, rights and entitlements.

d) Another important consideration for the proposed project -- in keeping with MSK priorities – is the strengthening of the federation of *sanghas* – a representative, membership based body across *sanghas*, at the block level. The federation's key goal is to enable *sangha* women to move towards greater solidarity and autonomy in their local development agenda. Since digital technologies can create network effects that allow for decentralised, collaborative models, the linkages between the *sanghas* and their federation in a block will be useful to consider in addressing gaps in access to entitlements and rights.

From our experience in the field, and a round of conversations and dialogues that we conducted in April-May 2012 with *sangha* women who have been a part of our intervention³, we find that the following areas need attention in the new strategy:

a) Informational needs of *sangha* women that are not currently being met by the existing strategy

The current strategy has ensured that *sangha* women and other members of the communities that they are a part of, have adequate information about government schemes and entitlements that they can avail from government departments at the block level. However, there is not enough information available about their rights in engaging with local government institutions arising from legislations on political decentralisation. Currently, information centres are not providing any information about the functioning of *Gram Panchayats*⁴, the *gram sabha*⁵ and the rights of various sections of the society, especially women and dalits, to participate in local governance. Other information needs expressed by *sangha* women for the information centres to address in the future include: accounting and financial literacy trainings, and information about starting cottage industries.

b) Enabling *sanghas* to develop their capacity to question malpractices and inefficiencies in the functioning of local government institutions

Our strategy has so far not focussed on building the capacity of *sanghas* to develop their capacity to challenge corruption, malpractices and inefficient functioning of the *Gram Panchayat* and other local government institutions. Many of the women we have dialogued with, expressed that violation of rules of participatory selection processes of beneficiaries for housing schemes, corruption in the implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme⁶ and elected representatives' (even *sangha* women who had been elected by their peers to the *Gram Panchayat*) were issues that urgently needed attention. They felt that trainings about the duties of elected representatives, and laws and rules pertaining to local governance were important. More

3 These insights emerge from over the entire period of 2005-12 in the course of our work, as well as from dedicated interviews we conducted with a few *sangha* women who have been actively involved in *Mahiti Manthana* between March-April 2012, when we were trying to pave a roadmap for the future.

4 This is the lowest tier of governance and administration in the quasi-federal Indian system, which is situated at the village level. tremendous fiscal and administrative powers were devolved from the State Governments to the *panchayats* by the Central Government of India, through the enactment of the 73rd amendment to the Constitution of India in 1992. However, in practice, the devolution of powers to *Gram Panchayats* has been broached with reluctance by State Governments.

5 *Gram Sabha*, which means "Village Council", refers to the village level electorate – in other words, the body consisting of all registered voters in a village. Indian law, policy and the resolutions adopted by an Inter-State Ministerial Conference on *Gram Panchayats* in May 1998 require the elected representatives of the *Gram Panchayat* are required to convene a meeting of the *gram sabha* on a single pre-determined, at least every quarter, and the approval of the *gram sabha* must be taken before implementing any village level development works that would affect the local population.

6 MGNREGA is a Government of India scheme that promises a minimum of 100 days labour at minimum wages to every village level household that applies under the scheme.

importantly, our interactions at the field level revealed the need for enabling *sanghas* to collectively engage with local governance issues.

c) Ensure the creation and availability of forums for women's participation in local governance

Our experience on the field revealed that at present there are very few forums where women can directly engage with local governance issues. Forums such as *Jana Spandana*⁷ or the *Mahila Samakhya* initiated *Gram Spandana*⁸ are not regularly convened. This needs attention. Forums created by decentralisation legislation such as the *Gram Sabha* or participatory committees at the village level are mostly dysfunctional, and their workings are distorted by the power-elite. This prevents *sangha* women, especially those from the marginalised sections, in participating in such forums actively. Our dialogues with *sangha* women reveal that women perceive the need to develop *sangha* capacities to participate in such forums and build their collective capacity to challenge vested interests dominating such forums.

d) Addressing the needs of the larger community

Our experience also reveals that linkages to livelihood and employment opportunities for young men and young women in the community, created as part of the information centres component of our existing strategy, needs to be further strengthened.

When we plan our intervention strategy, we want to ensure that our work towards a 'shift' in the community's informational culture also enables a shift in gender relations.

4. Proposed intervention strategy

Building on our insights from our analysis of the existing intervention strategy, we will continue our direct work with *sangha* women, and other members of communities, in the two villages in Hunsur block where we already have existing information centres. We will also extend our work to three more villages in Hunsur block, and set up similar information centres, after following community-sensitive entry processes and ensure that there is adequate support from the village communities for initiating the information centres.

⁷ A Government of Karnataka programme which aims at organising forums for government official- community interactions.

⁸ A *Mahila Samakhya* initiative that aims at building community rapport with different officials of various departments and access the available facilities for the developmental work of the village.

Over the project period, through our direct presence in the five villages, and the creation of digital platforms with the active involvement of the *sanghas* and support from *Mahila Samakhya*, we hope to build translocal networks of *sangha* women and reach out to 25 villages at the secondary level. We also propose to develop a networked informational system through establishing interlinkages between the five village level information centres and our existing information centre at the block level (*Taluk Mahiti Kendra*).

We hope that this will enable the development of a networked informational system with women's leadership at its core, which will also focus on enhancing women's participation in local governance.

5. Areas for intervention

After the review of the existing intervention strategy (as discussed in the earlier section), the *Prakriye* team also developed a stakeholder mapping⁹ of the hopes, concerns and challenges of primary and secondary stakeholders of the project.

Based on the review of the existing strategy and the stakeholder mapping exercise, we have identified the following areas for intervention:

1. Capacity building of *sangha* women to enable them to engage with local governance institutions and influence the discourses in the local public sphere effectively.
2. Reductions of community level power blocks that prevent women's political participation in the local community and prevent their access to community resources.
3. Increasing the associational power¹⁰ of the *sanghas* at the village level at the community level, and enabling women to become conscious of the power of the collective.
4. Building the linkages of the *sanghas* with local government institutions, other organisations and government departments at the block level; as well as networking with other *sanghas*.
5. Strengthening the local information ecology by enhancing the information, learning and knowledge processes at the community level.

The following table depicts the activity plan we propose for each of the areas of intervention:

Area for intervention	Activity plan
Capacity building of <i>sangha</i> women	Building women's capacity to engage with local

⁹ Enclosed at Annexure 1. Note that this was an internal scenario building exercise conducted by the *Prakriye* team.

¹⁰ Associational power here refers to the power emerging from an individual's recognition of the bargaining capacity in social relationships that membership in a collective provides him/her.

	<p>governance and democracy issues through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ICT enabled collective learning processes at the village level that enables <i>sangha</i> women to build their skills of critical analysis of existing power structures. (Training women through an experiential techno-pedagogy approach) - Creating peer learning platforms and spaces for interaction with resource persons who can provide information and training about engagement with local governance, at the information centres (Screening videos/ Radio interviews with experts/Video Conferencing at information centres)
<p>Building <i>sangha</i> identity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Using our existing community radio programme '<i>Kelu Sakhi</i>' as a space for women to develop a shared <i>sangha</i> identity. - Carving out a space at the village level information centres for enabling women to collectively view videos and engage in critical discussion, and reflect on the power of collectivisation.
<p>Building <i>sangha</i> linkages</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training of <i>sangha</i> women and <i>sakhis</i> at the village level about the need and possibility of building information linkages, especially through the information centres at the village level, using audio-visual material. - Capacity building of <i>sakhis</i> on relationship building with institutions and developing their communication, leadership and facilitation skills. - Building SMS-based informational networks of <i>sangha</i> women and <i>sakhis</i>

<p>Strengthening the village-level informational ecology</p>	<p>Address critical information blocks at the village level through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Challenging information gate-keeping through the information centres. - Questioning malfunctions and inefficiencies in local governance structures through community level awareness generation of local governance issues using a composite ICT strategy (radio/video). - Initiating GIS based participatory mapping with communities to influence village planning and local governance processes. - Enabling village communities to create web based portals on community history and put out locally generated information of relevance to the community.
<p>Reduction of community level power blocks</p>	<p>Ensuring that information centres address the needs of the wider community such as:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Health education for women. 2. Livelihoods training for youth. 3. Awareness generation about local governance issues through community video screenings. 4. Creating a youth time slot at the information centres to provide them a space for voicing their concerns. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Using radio and video creatively to create awareness on women's role in local governance and their participation in the local public sphere. - Carving out a space in the local public sphere for <i>sangha</i> women to talk about the activities of the information centre.

Annexure -1

Our analysis of the hopes, concerns and challenges of primary and secondary stakeholders of the project emerges out of an internal scenario-building exercise conducted by the *Prakriye* team. The hopes, concerns and challenges of each stakeholder were presented by team members as part of a role-play, and the insights emerging here reflect the team's reflections from the *Mahiti Manthana* project implementation experience.

Stake holders	Their hopes	Their concerns	Their challenges
Primary stakeholder 1: <i>Mahila Samakhya sangha</i> women from 5 villages	This project might change the status of information and facilities available so far. We might get what is rightfully ours.	Can we take this up collectively? Is it possible to be united?	Family and livelihood pressures put pressure on our time.
Primary stakeholder 2: Village opinion leaders, husbands and adult sons of <i>sangha</i> women and women not from the <i>Mahila Samakhya sanghas</i> from 5 villages	I am part of this, I can also benefit from this. (recognition and support giving role).	What is in store in future if we support now?	Managing family needs, how much can I support the project?
Primary stakeholder 3: <i>Mahila Samakhya sangha</i> federation, Hunsur	Our collectives will be strengthened due to new platforms at federation level. Federation will have access to more new information.	Though we come for federation activities, we federation members live away from the block. It is difficult to engage actively.	Travel constraints will limit participation.
Primary stakeholder 4: <i>Sakhis</i> (or the adolescent girls who manage our information centres)	I will progress and grow individually as well as at the community level.	Can I do so much more work?	Family may not like my work. My lack of experience may affect work.

<p>Secondary stakeholder 1: Govt. departments and <i>Gram Panchayat</i> (local government)</p>	<p>Departments: Your work will help in targeted informational outreach for us.</p> <p><i>Gram Panchayat:</i> Your work will help in targeted informational outreach for us.</p>	<p>Departments: What if people start demanding new information?</p> <p><i>Gram Panchayat:</i> What if people start demanding new information?</p>	<p>Departments: Increase in applications which is not proportionate to resources from our end for people.</p> <p><i>Gram Panchayat:</i> Increase in demands from people.</p>
<p>Secondary stakeholder 2: <i>Mahila Samakhya programme staff</i></p>	<p>Our federation might be strengthened through this.</p>	<p>Unsure about interests and time share of the executive committee members of the Federation, vis- a -vis the project. Need to proceed with the express consent and close engagement of <i>sangha</i> women and keeping in mind programmatic priorities of <i>Mahila Samakhya</i></p>	<p>Being able to spend adequate time for deep involvement in the project.</p>
<p>Secondary stakeholder 3: <i>Sangha</i> women from outreach villages (25 villages)</p>	<p>We might get new information and facilities.</p>	<p>Who are these people? Why should I participate? What is in it for me?</p>	<p>Will I be recognised for my efforts?</p>
<p>Secondary stakeholder 4: Community members and youth in the project area</p>	<p>We might get information on livelihood options.</p>	<p>We don't want to get too involved and take responsibilities for a <i>sangha</i> women's project.</p>	<p>Will we be targeted by power elite, for giving support?</p>