

From the Field

Touching Lives: Interventions of VOSARD

Jose Antony¹

Introduction

Voluntary Organisation for Social Action and Rural Development (VOSARD) was founded in 1998 with the objective of transforming the lives of the poor, marginalised and the under-privileged people in the most backward and remote hilly areas of Idukki district of the Western Ghats region in Kerala. It is a registered Charitable Organisation under Travancore Kochi Cultural, Scientific, Charitable Societies Registration Act of 1955 and functioning under the aegis of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI) Congregation of the Catholic Church. Since the beginning, VOSARD has been working with the poor and weaker sections in the society through self help initiatives and capacitating them to achieve sustainable development, irrespective of caste, creed, and religion. The agency strives to promote a society where the marginalised and underprivileged sections in the society are empowered to bring about positive changes in their lives. The vision of the organisation is to work for a value-based society where the poor, children, women, persons with disabilities and other underprivileged sections in the society are empowered to bring about positive changes in their lives. The mission is to enable 'the targeted people' to be responsible for their own holistic and sustainable development. VOSARD started its work in 10 remote and rural panchayats of Idukki district by taking into consideration the substandard living conditions of ordinary people in the area. Gradually, the activities were extended to nearby panchayats and presently VOSARD is operational in the entire Idukki district of the state of Kerala.

Structure of the Organisation

VOSARD has a 13 member General Body and a democratically elected nine member Executive Committee that meets quarterly or as and when required to monitor proper functioning of the organisation. The organogram is given below (Figures 1 and 2).

¹VOSARD, Kumily P.O, Idukki district, Kerala 685 509. Email: vosard@gmail.com

Figure 1
Administrative Structure of VOSARD

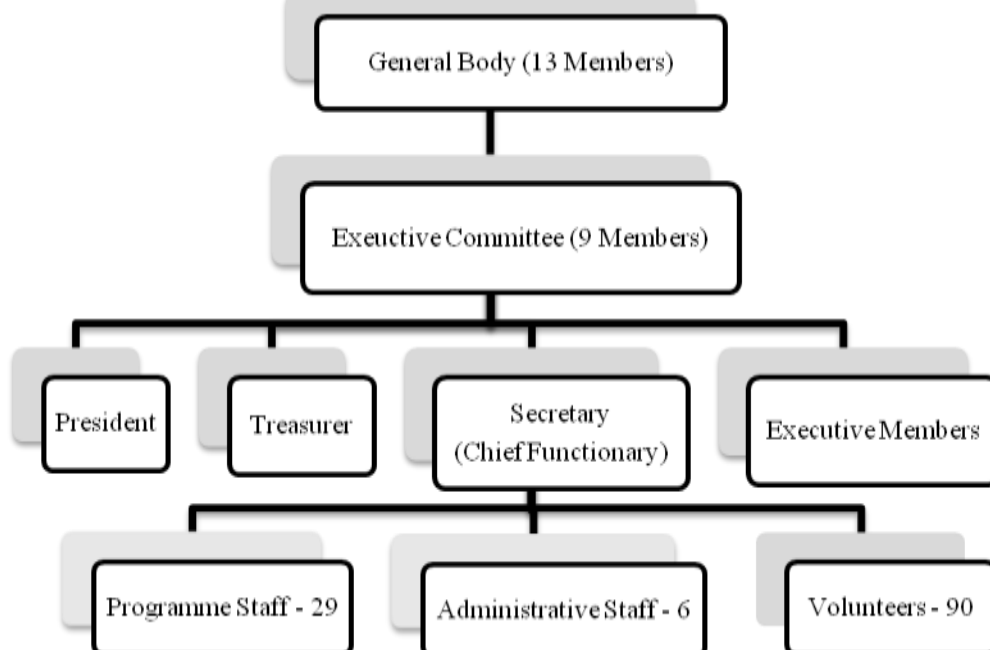
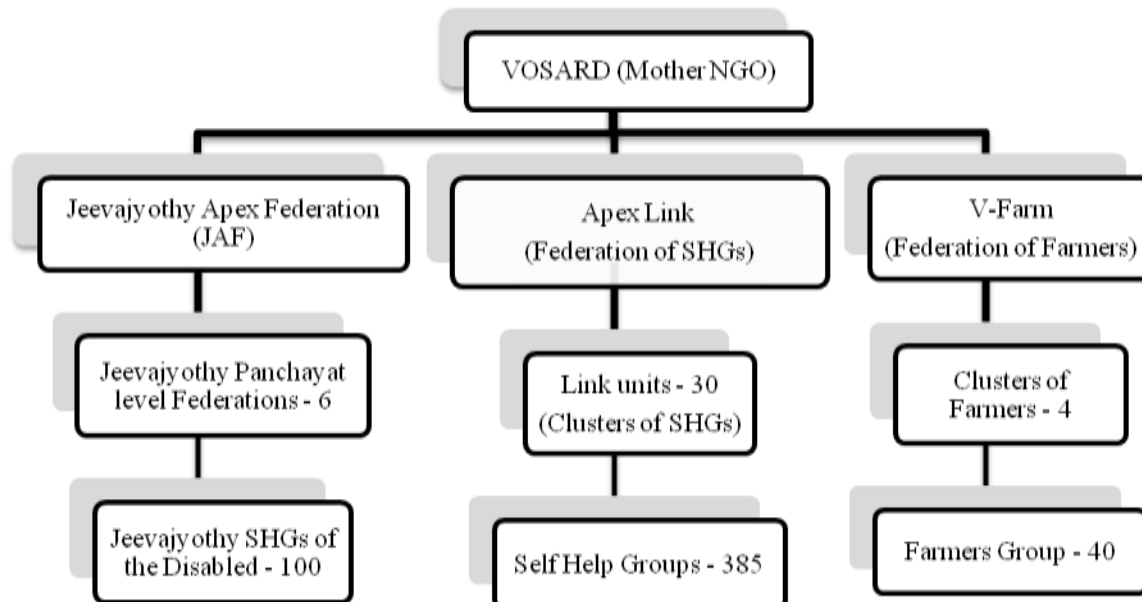


Figure 2
Operational Structure VOSARD



Objectives of the Organisation

The programmes and activities of the organisation are centered on the following objectives:

- Organise and empower the poor and weaker sections in the society.
- Promote and sustain Self Help Groups (SHGs).
- Promotion of microcredit supported rural enterprises with women as the primary partners.
- Serve as an effective link agency between the poor and the government.
- Promote development programmes for women, children and youth.
- Undertake special projects and programmes for socially as well as physically challenged, old aged, terminally ill and all other discriminated / isolated sections in the community.
- Care and protection of children.
- Promote gender equity with special focus on women.
- Skills and entrepreneurial training for rural employment and livelihood development.
- Development of habitats and special housing schemes for the homeless.
- Empower the people to fight against social evils viz., alcoholism, drug abuse, human trafficking and child labour.

Main Activities of the Organisation

Community Mobilisation and Capacity Building

Community mobilisation is one of the most important factors within the social work practice of a community. Since inception VOSARD has been focussing on uplifting the poor and weaker sections through self help initiatives and capacitate them to be part of the mainstream of the society. Besides providing financial assistance, orientation classes and leadership-training camps are also conducted for SHG members. The concept of micro-finance is widely introduced among them. SHGs of the men as well as women are formed as per the norms of NABARD. Over 10,000 families of the target groups located in the remote hilly terrain of Idukki district are organised into SHGs. Today, over 525 SHGs are functioning effectively in the area. VOSARD has also framed 30 clusters and an Apex Federation to coordinate and capacitate the people's structures through decentralised planning, local linkage and collaboration and collective action. Awareness creation, leadership training, skill training, livelihood and agriculture promotion activities are being initiated through these people's organisations. This social structure is helpful in implementation of projects with people's participation, information dissemination at grass root levels and monetary transactions among the groups.

Thrift and credit system has been introduced in all the SHGs to promote economical empowerment of rural people especially women. Microcredit system serves as a stimulant for initiating self help ventures. The Apex Federation coordinates and supervises microcredit activities of 30 clusters and 525 SHGs. This people's network facilitates of VOSARD makes best use of the revolving funds created for continuing the development initiatives. Along with Apex Link, it facilitates and coordinates linkage with banks for availing credit facilities and loans by SHGs and clusters for running their income generation activities and micro-enterprises.

Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) of Persons with Disabilities

Rehabilitation of the disabled is one of the major programmes of the organisation since 2002. The Agency has initiated community-based rehabilitation (CBR) approach among 2,000 persons with various types of disabilities identified from six panchayats of Idukki district with the support of Action on Disability Development India and CBR Forum, Bangalore. A network of 100 SHGs, six panchayat level federations and an Apex Federation of the disabled persons is functioning to address the needs of the differently-abled people. Special attention is given to identify and rehabilitate the persons with deafness -blindness.

Good Practices in CBR

Formation of three-tier system of Disabled Persons' Organisations: Around 1,500 Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) from six panchayats have been organised into 100 SHGs, six Panchayat Level Federations and an Apex Federation. This system is helpful in coordinating the CBR activities in the area of the entire project.

Accessing PRI schemes and benefits: When the CBR programme was initiated, the PWDs were unaware of their rights and the types of schemes/ benefits available for them from various agencies. During the last six years we could educate the PWDs on their rights and privileges. Nearly 200 leaders from the sanghams were identified and they were capacitated with leadership training so that they could direct their groups to tap locally available resources. Now they are able to demand and utilise three percent fund allocation from the PRIs. In many panchayats, leaders from the

disabled's groups have been included in the planning and implementation committee of the panchayats.

Availing schemes from Kerala State Handicapped Persons Welfare Corporation: VOSARD could facilitate 68 groups of the disabled to get Rs. 5,000 each as subsidy for formation and strengthening of their groups.

Formation of Local Level Committee (LLC) and distribution of Guardianship Certificates and Niramaya Health Insurance: With our initiative a LLC under National Trust was formed in Idukki district, in which VOSARD is a NGO member. LLC is the authority to provide guardianship certificate to the parents/ caretakers of disabled children. Disabled people are also ensured Niramaya Health Insurance Scheme of National Trust for availing free medical treatment.

Rehabilitation of Children With Disabilities

Rehabilitation of children with developmental disabilities is given prime importance under CBR programme. For the last two years we have been conducting outreach rehabilitation programmes for those children with cerebral palsy, mental retardation and multiple disabilities. Periodical identification and assessment medical camps are organised for them with the support of a rehabilitation expert. A total of 478 children with developmental disabilities have been identified and their rehabilitation plan has been prepared. Efforts were made to address the top most needs of these children like corrective surgery, therapeutic interventions, livelihood promotion and elementary education.

Community Mental Health Promotion

Community mental health promotion programme is also being implemented along with the CBR programme. This programme provides need-based services to the persons with mental illness (PwMIs), who are lacking in regular medicine, care and other rehabilitation support. Efforts are made to capacitate and facilitate the affected persons and their caregivers for accessing medicines and other rehabilitation services from various sources. Identifying the cases of mental illness, directing them to regular medication, inclusion of persons with mental illness (PwMI) and their caregivers into SHGs, livelihood promotion, training for care givers, sensitisation programmes to eliminate social stigma, and linkage with District Mental Health Programme of the government are the main components of this programme. A total of 215 persons with mental illness have benefited so far from these programmes.

Women Empowerment

Capacity enhancement: Seminars, workshops, interactive lectures, exposure visits and training camps are organised for enhancing existing capabilities of the women. Skill training in appropriate trades, leadership training, micro credit and bank linkage, motivating to contest panchayat elections are also done in this regard. Efforts are made to support and motivate them for self employment and starting micro enterprises.

Service providing centre: It is a project of the Kerala State Social Welfare Board under Domestic Violence (Prevention) Act 2005 for the protection of women from domestic violence. The Service Providing Centre (SPC) for the protection of women from domestic violence started to function in 2008. A lady advocate is employed in the centre /center for providing free legal service to the women who are victims of domestic violence.

Community Health Promotion

Medical camps: General medical checkup camps are also conducted periodically in association with hospitals in and around the district. Eye camps and psycho-socio medical camps are also conducted and need based medical support is arranged for the patients. Regular checking of the blood pressure and blood sugar monitoring of senior citizens are done regularly in two panchayats. Two trained health staff members regularly make home visits and check the level of blood pressure and sugar of these people.

Awareness creation: In order to sensitise the community on preventive aspects of communicable diseases and life style related diseases; a number of awareness creation programmes are conducted frequently.

Counselling Services

Family counseling centre: A Family Counseling Centre under the support and guidance of Central Social Welfare Board and Kerala State Social Welfare Board is functioning since 2004. The centre is

supporting the people to overcome the problems encountered by the families and strengthen the institution of the family with the required values and capabilities. Apart from settling family feuds, the counseling centre is also instrumental in handling adolescent problems, parent-child maladjustment, behavioral problems among school children, cases of substance abuse and suicidal tendencies.

Counselling helpline: Since May 2006 Swadhar Counselling Helpline started functioning under the ministry of Women and Child Development, New Delhi. Three experienced and professional counsellors are employed to provide round-the-clock counselling support over the telephone. A number of suicide attempts have been averted with the help of helpline services. It is proved to be a big consolation for the poor and marginalised people who are living in remote areas.

Health insurance: The poor and even middle class could not afford the cost of medical expenses which is increasing every day. In order to lessen the burden of the expenses for treatment, VOSARD has started a health insurance scheme which is affordable to poorest of poor in collaboration with the national insurance company.

Children and Youth Development

Childline 1098: It is a project under Integrated Child Protection Scheme by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India. CHILDLINE India Foundation is coordinating the programme implemented by 200 organisations covering 104 cities/ districts across 30 states and union territories throughout the country. VOSARD has been approved as a collaborative organisation for initiating CHILDLINE services in Idukki district from 1 July 2011. The 24-hour toll free tele-outreach helpline (1098) service has been set up at Kattappana and Sub-Centre at Kumily to provide assistance to children in distress particularly street children, neglected and delinquent children and children facing physical, mental and sexual abuse. It aims to reach out to those children in distress, who need help. Their main interventions are shelter, medical help, repatriation, rescue, sponsorships, emotional support and child protection to a large extent.

Skilled training for unemployed youth: In order to cater to the needs of the unemployed rural youth the Functional Vocational Training and Research Society (FVTRS), Bangalore, offer support in providing skilled training to unemployed youth. About 150 youth, both men and women belonging to rural communities were selected on the basis of their socioeconomic status and they have undergone different courses such as three-wheel and four-wheel driving, garment making and embroidery, animal husbandry, welding and fabrication. All these youth have successfully completed their training, and most of them have started work in different sectors and are earning a decent salary.

Chavara Jyothi Education Promotion (CJEP): Every year more than 450 students who are bright in studies but financially poor are selected for this programme. They are given interest free loans at the beginning of the academic year. They repay the amount within a year and the amount is rotated among needy children in the subsequent year. Besides this financial support for study materials such as books, dictionaries, umbrellas, and bags are distributed to very needy child with the support of philanthropic people in and around the target areas.

Rehabilitation of children with disabilities: Since 2006 VOSARD has been having outreach rehabilitation services for the children of cerebral palsy, mental retardation, autism, multiple disabilities and other developmental disabilities. This support is meant for education, surgery, medicine, there are also assisted devices and livelihood promotion for the disabled children. Presently, over 160 disabled children are being assisted through this programme. Children are supported with periodic medical camps, medicines, corrective surgery, assistive/assisted devices, food supplement and counseling.

Care and Protection for Senior Citizens

VOSARD has initiated care and protection programme for senior citizens with the support of Misereor, Germany. Those elderly people who belong to the low strata of the society are given support services like awareness, counselling, and social activities to withstand health, economic, social and sustenance related problems. Now, 25 Elderly Self Help Groups (ESHGs) are functional to address the problems of the aged. Health problems of the elders are addressed by arranging medical camps and linking them with the local health service centres. A coordinator and two health workers are employed to implement these programmes effectively.

Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security

Over the years, farmers in the Western Ghats region of Idukki are mainly growing cash crops like pepper, cardamom, coffee and tea. These people depend on the neighbouring state (Tamil Nadu) for

cereals, pulses and vegetables which are costly and grown by using chemical pesticides and manures. Since the last three years VOSARD has been making an attempt to motivate the farmers to produce their traditional food crops consisting of vegetables, tapioca, yam, papaya, and banana along with the main cash crops. This way the farmers can produce food materials in addition to cash crops. We hope to achieve food security and nutritional security for the people by directing more and more farmers into mixed farming. Mixed farming method will be the solution for the small farmers to overcome low productivity and low agriculture income. As a opening step VOSARD has started forming farmer's clubs and clusters. At present 825 small and marginal farmers from Vandanmedu panchayat have been organised into 50 farmers groups and they have been federated into four cluster level associations and a federation. Training in organic farming and value addition and exposure visits to model farms are conducted periodically for enhancing the growth capacities of the farmers. Construction of biogas plants and vermin compost units is encouraged in the entire operational area for promoting organic farming. Fallow land cultivation, introducing modern technologies and methods in farming, conservation and propagation of traditional/ innate seeds/ plants, and developing local markets are promoted.

Promotion of Non Conventional Energy Source

Conservation of environment and nature is inevitable for reducing the negative effects of modernisation. In this context VOSARD makes an all round effort to familiarise and promote non-conventional energy sources like biogas and solar energy among the rural population. Sensitisation and training programmes are conducted across the villages for motivating the people to adopt environmental protection measures. Construction of biogas using ferro cement technology, which is cost effective and long lasting, is widely accepted by the people. As a model for others, VOSARD has installed a solar power system for their entire office to withstand prolonged power-cuts.

Drinking Water Supply and Management

Jalanidhi is a project of Kerala Rural Water supply and Sanitation Agency (KRWSA) of the Kerala government. It is a demand driven project. VOSARD is working as a support organisation to provide technical and social support to beneficiary groups. The main objective of this project is to give sustainable clean and safe drinking water to the rural people. The project is implemented in participatory way by forming Beneficiary Groups (BGs). Survey, source identification, construction and distribution are managed by the BGs. A total of 23 BGs are functioning in Chakkupallam panchayat of Idukki district to manage the supply of safe drinking water to 1,350 households.

Cultural Exchange Programmes

Bridge Builder Programme(BBP):The volunteer service "weltwärts" is a support programme of the German government, in which young people will gain international exposure in developing countries through volunteer work, and thereby increase their inter-cultural competence and knowledge regarding development cooperation. As per BBP programme two German students are doing voluntary service in VOSARD. This programme of the German government provides a cultural exchange between India and Germany.

Integrated Watershed Programme in Vathikudy Panchayat

It is project to improve the quality of life of the rural people through sustainable management of the natural resources, income and employment generation, capacity building and addressing the negative effects of environmental degradation in Vathikudy panchayat of Idukki district of Kerala. The major components are: enhancing capacities of the target people, promoting sustainable agriculture and livelihood opportunities, enabling to conserve soil and water and facilitating to mobilise local resources. Karl Kubel Stiftung, Germany, is supporting the implementation of the project during 2014-17.

VOSARD in the Role of a Mother NGO

Promotion of state level DPO network:Promotion and strengthening of a state level network of Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs) is going on since 2012. Seven DPOs across the state are the active members of this network. Consultation meetings, leadership trainings, formation of a state level federation of the DPOs, and sensitisation of the members of Panchayati Raj Institutions are part of this programme.

Strengthening of other NGOs: VOSARD has emerged as a premier social service organisation in Idukki district. Many NGOs have visited this organisation to learn the CBR model of rehabilitation strategy. Eight NGOs from Kerala are partners of VOSARD for availing technical support and guidance in replicating CBR model, three-tier system of SHGs and resource mobilisation strategies in their area. We could send a team of trained masons to a NGO based project in West Bengal for constructing biogas plants using ferro-cement technology.

Exposure to Social Work for the Students: Students of various schools and colleges doing Social work are visiting the organisation for block placements and exposure to social work practices. Ample inputs are given for their career needs through experience sharing, field visits, case studies and surveys.

Awards and Recognitions

The Functioning of the institution in its hard work, commitment and long vision has brought in a number of honours and recognitions from various corners.

Appointments:

- NGO Member, Local Level Committee (LLC) of National Trust constituted at Idukki District under the chairmanship of District Collector.
- Member, Technical Advisory Committee of District Panchayat, Idukki.
- NGO member, District Disaster Management Committee
- NGO member, The Committee for up-gradation of institutional facilities constituted by Kerala State Social Justice Department.

Awards:

- Best Social Service Organisation Award -2007 by Consumer Federation of India
- Excellence in Social Work Award-2008 by YMCA Kumily.
- State Disability Award-2010 by the Government of Kerala for the commendable services rendered to the differently-abled persons.
- Pathfinder Award-2013 by CEVA, Kochi
- Fr. Jose Alex Award for Excellence in Social Work - 2014 by Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, Kochi.

Conclusion

VOSARD has an efficient and dedicated team of staff committed to the pursuit of its mission. The spirit of team work based on Christian values, following and practicing the principles of the heavenly patron of the agency, Bl. Kuriakose Elias Chavara is the reason behind its achievements. Having an integrated approach to take care of all the marginalised sections in the society is also making VOSARD a unique organisation in the field of social work.