

KIDS : ACHIEVING NEW HORIZON IN INTEGRATED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Community development is a programme of action in the field of social work or social service and is considered as an important part of the process of nation building in a developing country like India. It can be understood as the efforts of the people of a community themselves in conjunction with the government and non-government agencies to improve the economic and socio-cultural conditions of their community, to integrate it into the life of nation and to enable it to contribute fully to national development. In order to achieve it an integrated approach to all the elements or sectors of the community is essential. Such an approach to community development implies the integration of the two sets of forces, viz. (i) the opportunity and capacity for cooperation, self help ability to assimilate and adopt new ways of living, and (ii) use of the techniques and tools in every social and economic field, drawn from world wide experience and now in use or available locally. It is with this objective and approach of integrated development of the rural community that the Kottapuram Integrated Development Society (KIDS) came into existence.

KIDS was established in 1987 as the official organ of the Diocese of Kottapuram for social action, simultaneously with the formation of the Diocese of Kottapuram. Since the inception, KIDS has been striving hard for the total development of the community, especially the poor and marginalised by integrating all the elements and resources of the community. The vision of KIDS is "to establish a just and self-reliant

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society based on human values." Within this vision, the thrust of KIDS essentially entails an enabling process through which the people of the community live a life of their own in self-reliance with full human dignity and confidence and in complete harmony with nature. Officially, KIDS is a registered voluntary organisation under the Travancore Cochin Literary, Scientific and Charitable Societies Act of 1955. With its headquarters at Kottapuram in Thrissur district KIDS operates in four revenue districts of Kerala, namely Thrissur, Ernakulam, Malappuram and Palakad.

In accordance with its principle of integrated community development, KIDS adopts the strategy of forming self-help groups of the marginalised section of the community, especially of women, getting them engaged in income generation activities that are eco-friendly, and facilitating their access to certain basic necessities. Thus the major community development programmes of KIDS can be broadly understood as (i) mobilisation and organisation of women, (ii) introduction of income generation schemes, (iii) water resource management, (iv) provision of basic services, and (v) disaster management.

MOBILISATION AND ORGANISATION OF WOMEN

KIDS has recognised women as the primary agents in its community development initiatives. In view of this, it has formed community based organisations in the form of self help groups and *Mahila Mandals*. The activities of KIDS are carried out through these organisational structures.

Self Help Groups

Swasraya Sangham or self help group (SHG) is envisaged as the basic unit or nucleus of the organisational framework of KIDS. As the nucleus of the village development system SHG is formed as a fraternity on a neighbourhood basis. Twenty neighbourhood families sharing more or less the same socio-economic situation make a SHG. The value that is fundamental to the group is sharing and cooperation. It is expected to permeate all the spheres of life and behaviour of the community, particularly in the endeavours that provide them progressive existence. In the programme of development it accepts

the proverbial understanding that little drops of water make the mighty ocean. Women are the centre of the activities of the SHGs.

So far, KIDS has formed 3247 SHGs on a neighbourhood basis with the membership not exceeding 20 in each unit. Thrift and micro credit constitute the key to the activities of the SHGs in such a way that through the common pooling of savings and sharing of the credit, the needs of families are met with distributive justice and transparency. The SHG system provides for equal and effective involvement of all in terms of attaining knowledge, planning, resource mobilisation, economic activity, personal growth, leadership development, sharing social responsibilities etc. Loan advance is given always after an evaluation of the functioning of the SHGs and the performance assessment of the SHG members. KIDS is facilitating the functioning of all the SHGs within the area of its operation.

Occupation-based SHGs have emerged as model groups of KIDS especially towards self-reliance and women's empowerment. They function under the realisation of the fact that poverty is the root cause of the low standard of living and poor health situation of backward communities. Therefore community development has to focus on poverty eradication, and strengthening and stabilising livelihood systems. It is in this context that KIDS has promoted the SHGs in all its income generation programmes of community development, such as handicrafts and fish culture.

Mahila Mandal

An average number of five SHGs constitute a *Mahila Mandal* in a geographical location demarcated by the ward of *Grama Panchayath*. Accordingly, the average membership in a *Mahila Mandal* is 100 families. The *Mahila Mandals* function as the link agents at the village level for implementing projects and programmes of KIDS.

The members of the *Mahila Mandals* meet once in every month in their locality and discuss various matters of developmental importance. Common discussion is an important part of the action plan in the process of development in any given situation, be it employment generation, social issues, response to natural calamity, health care and management. Thus the *Mahila Mandals* of KIDS act as an important force in activities dealing with the social, economic, political and environmental problems faced by the community.

INCOME GENERATION PROGRAMMES

Majority of the people in the operational area of KIDS are marginal land-holders. According to a survey conducted by KIDS, 59.8 per cent of the people in the operational area have less than 10 cents of land and 28.5 per cent have 11-50 cents. KIDS has been intensively promoting vermin composting, backyard farming etc. in order to improve the yield from whatever land the people have as a source of their subsistence. As land is a meagre source of income for most of the families in the area, KIDS has been offering a number of income generation programmes that are suited to the local community. They include handicrafts based on locally available materials, the Japanese quail rearing, dairy, goat rearing, duck rearing, poultry farming, floriculture, garment making, fish vending, etc. Two of the innovative projects of KIDS, that are eco-friendly and locally relevant are the natural fibre crafts and the cage fish culture.

Natural Fibre Craft Sector

In the natural fibre craft sector KIDS has two schemes for promoting and sustaining the traditional artisan occupation in the local community. They are the projects for making handicrafts using the locally available of raw materials of screwpine and water hyacinth. In the process KIDS promotes plantation of screwpine which is known to be functional to preserving and sustaining the ecosystem of the locality, and profitable use of the water hyacinth which is a menace in the locality.

The twin projects, launched by KIDS, have wide ranging objectives. They provide livelihood means to the local people, sustain and improve local artisanship, and contribute to the management of larger environmental issues of ecological preservation and use of plastic. Following are the specific objectives of this programme of integrated development of artisans and the area of the village community.

- Preservation of the cultural heritage of mat-weaving by uplifting the declining craft and making it economically viable.

- Development of a non-polluting industry using locally available resources and provision of jobs for thousands of people without any huge infrastructure investment.

- Regular supply of raw materials for the local artisan occupation through large-scale planting of screwpine.
- Achievement of qualitative improvement in the production of handicrafts with new and value-added products through skill up-gradation of artisans and development in design.
- Creation of an effective marketing network for the artisan products of the SHGs and higher exports for the country.
- Eco-restoration of the water bodies of the area through plantation of screwpine along the banks of rivers and canals.
- Management of wetlands by conversion of water hyacinth into natural fibre for making eco-friendly items of general utility.
- Development of an environment friendly alternative to many plastic products.

Screwpine Project

Screwpine (*Thazha* in Malayalam, the local language) is abundantly found in Kodungallur taluk. Its fine natural fibre, one of the best of its kind in the world, has been in use for centuries for weaving bed mats. The local artisans continue to be engaged in the production of screwpine mats, although they have been in less demand on account of the availability of cheaper plastic mats. However, in the present context of the knowledge about the serious ecological problem created by plastic, screwpine products are gaining in demand. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has classified screwpine as an ideal alternative to plastic.

The artisan communities engaged in natural fibre crafts in the area have been facing severe poverty as their level of skill is confined to making mats alone. They make both screwpine mats and reed mats. KIDS with the assistance of the Ministry of Textiles encouraged the screwpine artisans to make more value-added products, which are having good market. Design experts have been of great help in this regard. Services of professional designers have been used for giving training in skill up-gradation to the traditional artisan women enabling them to learn how to make value-added products, which fetch good price. The inputs from fashion designers are also encouraging them. The artisans are also given training in developing new designs. Besides

bed mats, the artisans are now making products like vanity bags, carry-bags, wastepaper baskets, newspaper holders, laundry boxes, files, articles of interior decoration etc. They are encouraged to attend various exhibitions in the country. As a result more young women are getting attracted to the craft.

The artisans get training also in planting screwpine, collecting the leaves once in three months without harming the plant, managing them as raw material, dyeing with eco-free, permitted dyes as well as organic dyes, stitching and splicing the leaves, fumigating, packing etc which make them professionally competent to meet international demands.

From the ecological point of view, screwpine has an exceptional capacity for protecting the banks of rivers and canals from erosion. Its fibrous root system also helps in keeping the alluvial soil intact and maintaining the water-holding capacity of the soil. Screwpine provides great refuge for a number of organisms, especially fish, that find the areas surrounding the plant as ideal breeding and nursing ground for raising the young ones. The plant can tolerate both fresh and saline water conditions. Therefore it has great relevance in an area like Kodungallur where one can find rivers joining the saline backwaters of the Arabian Sea on which thousands of fishermen depend for their livelihood. Thus screwpine is ecologically considered a 'key stone species' and a must for the ecological balance of this area.

There are about 30,000 artisan women in Kodungallur taluk. For its project KIDS selected 250 of them to form one cluster. They were grouped into SHGs. The success of this project of KIDS has been nationally recognised. KIDS has been awarded the Baba Sahib Ambedkar Hasta Silpa Vikas Yojana by the Ministry for Textiles, Government of India for the programme of making screwpine handicrafts. The Minister for Textiles, Government of India, read out in the Indian Parliament the success story of this cluster of artisan women. In continuation of this recognition, the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) came forward to sponsor another cluster of women for the screwpine programme of KIDS. Now the Department of Industries, Government of Kerala is supporting yet another screwpine craft cluster of KIDS.

Water Hyacinth Project

Water hyacinth (*Eichhonia crassipes*), though native to South America, is now an environmental and social menace throughout the tropical and subtropical world. This is undoubtedly the weed, for the eradication of which, the world has spent maximum amount of money. But water hyacinth has survived all such efforts. The problems posed by water hyacinth are multifaceted. It has severe impacts on aquatic biodiversity, inland navigation, flow of water, human health and the livelihood of fishermen, and causes substantially increased loss of water by evapo-transpiration. As both the biological and chemical methods for the control of this weed are not found effective, their proper and efficient utilisation is a highly sustainable and sensible option, though this has not yet been efficiently developed.

The research and development (R and D) wing of KIDS has found that the petiole of water hyacinth is an excellent soft and spongy natural fibre which can be weaved as such for making wall matting, door mats, cushions, hats, purses etc, or can be easily blended with other materials like coir, banana fibre, screwpine, reeds, bamboo, sedges, sea grass, jute etc. Water hyacinth fibre is also found to have great affinity for basic dyes. By using the mordant, natural dyes can also be conveniently used for colouring this fibre.

The most important beneficiaries of the water hyacinth project are the SHG women and their families. The project is expected to improve the quality of life of these families by ensuring the means of their livelihood. As part of this project the women are trained to use the spongy natural fibre of water hyacinth directly for making craft items like table mats, and also to blend them with similar materials for making a series of general utility items which can be used as alternative to plastic products. The local administrative bodies, which are spending large amount of money for mechanical removal of water hyacinth, will find this project an eye-opening model. Collaboration with the local bodies is being initiated in promoting this project. The other beneficiaries of this project, as it clears water from the menacing weed, include the hundreds of traditional inland fishermen, people using inland water for navigation, irrigation, drinking, local washing etc, who are the inhabitants of the locality.

This is another programme of KIDS to deal with the alarming increase in the use of plastic that is threatening the life of the people and the health of this planet. Attempts are made around the world to reduce the use of the non-degradable plastics. The present project could certainly come forward with several general utility items, which can be used as alternatives to many plastic products. The success of KIDS in facilitating water hyacinth craft paved the way for the award of a major project in water hyacinth craft by India-Canada Environment Facility which is a joint initiative of the Government of India and Government of Canada. A cluster of SHGs of 300 artisan families is being formed under this Indo-Canadian project.

Cage Fish Culture

Cage fish culture, which is a unique technique of growing fish in the cages within the natural surrounding has been introduced by KIDS with the technical and financial support from the Government of New Zealand and with the collaboration of the central and state governments in India. Assistance in the biological matter of the project is provided by the School of Industrial Fisheries, Cochin University of Science and Technology.

The project intends to be a helping hand for the economic development of the fisher folks who have been adversely affected by the tsunami of December 2004. The major responsibilities in implementing the project have been given to the SHGs of fishermen in Satar Island, which is situated in the district borders of Ernakulam and Thrissur. The cages are placed 20 metres away from the island in the Kottapuram backwaters and the fish are transferred to the cages when they grow up to 10 cm. in the hatchery. The project team of KIDS has also developed a technology to convert low quality fish into effective feed for the fish in the cages. The project started in October 2005 when fish fingerlings of Sea Bass and Pearl Spot varieties were transferred into the cages. Within eight months they have grown up to 750 grams and they are in very good demand in the market. The first harvest of the Cage Fish Culture project was done jointly by the Minister of Fisheries, Government of Kerala and the High Commissioner of New Zealand to India. The success of the experimental cage fish culture has opened up a lot of opportunities for the fisher community in and outside Kerala. The project is expected

to serve as a long term, sustainable one for the development of tsunami affected fisher-folk villages.

WATER RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Water is an important natural resource for the living organisms on earth. KIDS has been actively involved in maintaining water as a sustainable resource. Rain water harvesting and watershed management have been the two important programmes undertaken by KIDS in this matter. It has become clear that freshwater is going to be the scarcest natural resource of the 21st century. The ideal and sustainable solution to this alarming problem is harvesting rain water and using it for drinking. KIDS was the first agency in Thrissur district to introduce roof top rain water harvesting. This was immediately well taken by the district administration and with the technical assistance of KIDS, the programme was included as one of the most urgent items for district level planning. KIDS was selected as the first agency for providing training on making Ferro-cement tank for roof top rain water harvesting to the engineers of the ground water department by the Government of Kerala. The training was conducted as a pilot step before implementing the "Varsha" programme by the Government of Kerala.

The second water related activity of KIDS has been that of watersheds. Watersheds, meant to collect and preserve rain water for improving ground water resource, are part of the process of sustainable development. They also help sustainability of the ecosystems. They are natural topographic, functional units for development activities. Eco-restoration through watersheds is the best solution to many of our environment problems of today. Watershed has been accepted as an important component of the extensive efforts for the eco-restoration in harnessing and nursing back to health the life support systems, namely land, water and biomass of the area, which were degraded through misuse and overuse. The major involvement of KIDS in the field of watershed has been in the implementation of the Integrated Watershed Development Programme at Manancherikunnu, in Puthenvelikara Panchayat, Ernakulam district.

SOCIAL SERVICE SECTOR

Another set of activities of KIDS for community development consists of the programmes that provide certain basic social services within community. A number of activities are undertaken in the social

service sector. Some of the main activities of this nature include community health, children's development, housing and disaster management.

Community Health

KIDS has made remarkable progress in its community health and nutrition programme. At present 30 village health animators are active in this field of activity. As the prevalent allopathic system has become very expensive to the poor, KIDS has formulated an integrated health package which includes preventive as well as promotional aspects of health. Health workers teach disease prevention methods and health promotion measures. These health workers are regularly trained through monthly meetings. Services of doctors, government health workers, social activists etc. as resource persons are used for the purpose of training the health workers.

Children's Development

KIDS has a unique programme of children's development. Its basic objective is to help children grow into responsible persons with social commitment. In order to achieve this programmes are organised to create social awareness among the children and to inculcate values that promote attitude and behaviour that reflect concern for fellow human beings as well as nature and environment. There are also programmes to promote and give expression to the talents of children and help them improve the standard of education. Holiday camps, leadership training, career orientation classes, sponsorship, special educational assistance, awareness seminars for parents, etc, are the major activities under the programme of children's development. The programme has evoked very good response from the children as well as their parents.

Shelter for the Homeless

Housing is a basic necessity of human living. The need for housing has been increasing and the disasters like the tsunami further aggravate this need, which requires special efforts especially in the case of the vulnerable sections of the society. KIDS takes keen interest in this matter and has a scheme to help the poor families to construct their own houses.

DISASTER MANAGEMENT

The coastal Kerala is regularly affected by disasters such as flood and sea erosion, and occasionally by tragedies such as tsunami. Much of the operational area of KIDS is disaster prone. Hence KIDS is regularly engaged in activities of disaster management. During the tsunami of December 2004 relief and rehabilitation services were provided to the affected people of the area by KIDS. In view of the fact of regular occurrence of disasters, KIDS has initiated a community based disaster preparedness programme for reducing the adverse effects of natural disasters.

Response to Tsunami

The sudden attack of tsunami on 26th December 2004 really caused serious havoc to the life of the people in the coastal villages. KIDS immediately responded to the situation and got actively involved in the post-disaster programmes of relief and rehabilitation. The activities undertaken by KIDS include: distribution of food kits for 2145 families, nine medical camps, trauma counselling services for 548 persons, supply of water for 1345 families, distribution of sleeping mats for 1470 families, cleaning of 425 wells/ponds, construction of 180 toilets, construction of 169 rainwater tanks, supply of utensils to 125 families, child oriented programmes (camps/games/libraries) in four places, repair of 43 houses, and construction of 44 new houses.

Community Based Disaster Preparedness Programme

An important post-tsunami development has been the initiation of the Community Based Disaster Preparedness Programme (CBDP) by KIDS. The CBDP is undertaken in tsunami affected coastal villages of Thrissur and Ernakulam districts. The main objectives of the CBDP initiative taken up by KIDS are: (i) to reduce vulnerabilities and increase capacities of at-risk groups and communities to cope with disasters, prevent or minimise loss and damage to life, property and the environment; (ii) to minimise human suffering; and (iii) to hasten post-event recovery, backed up by detailed pre-event planning. The CBDP covers a broad range of interventions that include measures, activities, projects, and necessary policy changes that focus on disaster risk reduction, and are designed by communities at risk and based on their needs, priorities and capacities.

Community participation has been recognised as the most essential element in reversing the devastating impact of such disaster events. Experiences and practices in the CBDP show the positive impact of the participatory learning approach to disaster preparedness and mitigation. The local community is the prime focus under disaster risk reduction programmes. It is the community that is affected by any disaster, and more importantly, they are both the first and last responders to the event. Irrespective of the dimension and level of the event, it is the community that suffers its adverse effects. In the absence of any specialised skills, the community relies on traditional coping and survival mechanisms to face and respond to the event before it starts receiving any outside help from the government or non-governmental sources.

With the shifting of paradigms from reactive emergency management to disaster risk reduction, there is more stress on proactive pre-disaster intervention - prevention, mitigation and preparedness. While natural hazards cannot be prevented, measures can be taken to prevent hazards from becoming disasters, by making communities more resistant and resilient. The uniqueness of the CBDP programme lies in its emphasis on the process of transforming the at-risk and vulnerable communities to disaster-resilient communities.

CONCLUSION

The main emphasis in the activities of KIDS has been on the improvement of the conditions of the people through the expert services available to the organisation. The focus of the activities has been on the vulnerable sections of the society. KIDS has been concentrating on the developmental needs of the community and the programmes it has initiated within the community have been sustainable. Sustainability of its main economic programmes comes from the fact that they enlist the active participation of the community and are rooted in the ecosystem and community culture of the locality. The community development programmes of KIDS wholly concentrate on the adoption of consistent policies, specific administrative arrangements, recruitment and training of personnel, mobilisation of local and general resources, and organisation of research, experimentation and evaluation.