

Uncovering the Silent Resources for Sustainable Development

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SUMMARY

Our study concerns the Kol and Koda communities. The objective was to build capacity that preserves the language and the culture.

Indigenous people are a significant and important part of humanity. When considering sustainable development it can be seen that their heritage, culture and way of life, their stewardship of this planet and their indigenous belief and knowledge are invaluable. But their diversity and uniqueness is silent, seldom heard or evaluated by society at large.

In the case of the Kol and Koda, the population is very small, about 1,000 to 1,500 each. They follow their traditional religion and Hinduism.

Their literacy rate is low. Very few children go to school and they are on the extreme fringes of Bangladesh society.

There is a keen sense of unity. They want to work to improve their society. They are interested in positive change in reducing poverty through savings. They are aware of the importance of education and want to preserve their language and culture.

However, day by day they are losing their language and culture. They are adopting the Bangla language and the children are concerned about this.

We find creativity in these communities, what we term silent resources. They have songs, poems and rhymes.

We have been working on language and cultural development and supporting their writing system and developing a mother tongue curriculum.

If we look at the Koda, we have helped them write their own story in their own language for the first time. They have produced the first book in their own language. In addition, we have been involved in family and community transformation.

We have been helping with income generating activities, taking a holistic approach. At the beginning we tried to engage the people so that there was a high degree of involvement and that they understood the programme goals. They are now discovering their strength and capability.

We are at the beginning stage. The intention is to help develop a community-based organization (CBO) on a group and village level.

We have been helping with literacy and basic maths training, savings and investment, health and law, with the idea to train for leadership so that the programmes can be self run.

This programme will run over 10 years so that in the end, they run it themselves.

The role of the CBO is for the people to run community development, including advocacy for people's rights, welfare and building social awareness, as there are problems with dowry and child marriage.

There are several steps to be taken to sustain the CBO. Initially, from year one to four, there is learning, then graduating, then sustaining and then multiplying from the 10th year onwards. They can then continue by themselves with their own office and staff.

We need to look at sustainability. We need to consider ownership, an institutionalized development programme, a self-help group for self-reliance, rights and empowerment.

The community will be able to envision a better future and will be sustained by using silent resources.

DISCUSSIONS

Question: What about the financial aspect? Are the people willing to put in money?

Answer: Initially, we have been helping assign staff, started helping, and bearing the costs. In two to three years then it will be sustainable and the people will be able to run the programme.

The people have been participating, even if only a small amount. We hope that they can someday afford their schooling, and we also want the government involved with support.

Question: How difficult is it to get around the money lenders?

Answer: The money lenders charge high interest for survival. People borrow for medical or consumption reasons. When they can't pay back the loan, they sell assets and become poorer, with some running away, which is very dangerous.

Question: What about the problem of wholesalers making a big profit from these communities?

Answer: The middleman exploits a lot. They call for selling at a low price and in advance. So it will take time for the community. When the community gets enough money in hand and can make investment. What we have found is there are many syndicated money lenders. But they are paper tigers and disappear eventually.

Question: What is being done to empower the women?

Answer: When we started it was difficult. Now the participation of women is getting better. Now we are finding women are coming to the workshops and training.

We have women active in the group. Often the men are out in the fields working. Most groups are now women.

Question: What are the criteria you used in choosing communities? Are you working in the Bengali script? When it comes to integration, do you persuade or do they persuade? This has implications in terms of bringing to the mainstream.

Answer: We began in 2004. They were a small overlooked linguistic community. Nobody worked with them. It needed time to work. They decided and we facilitated.

In another community, the Santali, they use their own script. But with our group we decided to use the Bengali script.