



India

## Self-Governance: the Backbone of Sustainable Development

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Narendra Paul, Chief Operating Officer, Chinmaya Organization for Rural Development

### Interaction and exposure

Coming first in the Japanese Award for Most Innovative Development Project of the Global Development Network Awards Competition at the GDN conference was an enriching experience for Narendra Paul, “We were selected as a winner [from] among 253 entries competing in this process. As an organization [that] is always focused on the field, we never had much opportunity to reach out to our peers, so to be recognized like this was very gratifying. At the conference, we were able to connect to World Bank economists and high-level researchers working on similar [projects] in agriculture across the globe. For me this was great in terms of interaction and exposure.” The GDN training introduced Chinmaya Organization for Rural Development to a number of presentation and acquisition tools that they still use in their program management today. One of these is a one-pager presenting quantitative and qualitative outputs, and the replicability and scalability of projects. This has now become standard practice in CORD.

Narender Paul is the Chief Operating Officer of the Chinmaya Organization for Rural Development (CORD) and represented CORD at the GDN conference in Morocco in 2015, where they won first prize for the Most Innovative Development Project (MIDP). CORD has been working for over 32 years in integrated rural development in India. Initially, it was primarily concerned with health but, as it evolved, it shifted its focus to governance and income generation, driven by a growing recognition of the need to empower women within households.

Before engaging with GDN, CORD had already established itself in India as a resource center for self-help groups, microcredit and women’s empowerment. With GDN funds, they were able to raise their global profile and increase their local impact.

### A livelihood model for institutionalizing and empowering women farmers

With the funds from MIDP, which later led to a grant from the Japanese Social Development Fund (JSDF), CORD was



able to expand a program they had started with the Indian Government in 2014. This rural development program was aimed at institutionalizing and empowering smallholder and marginalized women farmers engaged in hill agriculture in the district of Kangra, Himachal Pradesh. In the project area, procuring inputs (such as seeds) is often very expensive and time-consuming for local farmers, many of whom live below the poverty line. CORD started a seed program with women farmers to foster ownership of the inputs, as well as improve yields and the nutritional value of crops. Through systematic investment, and by developing backward and forward market linkages – for example, by establishing direct contact with seed vendors – women were economically empowered. All the selected farmers were either already part of self-help groups or became members of these groups in order to access microcredit.

### Implementation and impact

The MIDP funding for the project ended in 2017 and the JSDF funds will end this year. Including the 1,000 women farmers under both these projects (MIDP and JSDF) and the 2,500 women who participated in the earlier government program, a total of more than 3,500 women farmers have been covered and over 10,000 have benefited indirectly. The impact of the project has exceeded all expectations, largely due to the interest

and enthusiasm of local communities. According to Paul, the most important outcome of the project was the growing recognition of women farmers as a critical mass and their increased participation in policy and advocacy; as well as its success in demonstrating a viable model of sustainable agricultural practices for marginalized and smallholder farmers in rural India. Improving agricultural practices has led to more effective water utilization and increased productivity through a System of Crop Intensification (SCI), which increased household income by 25 to 30 percent in the project areas.

The success of CORD's approach is based on a number of factors – in addition to the viability of its sustainable agricultural practices. The project's institutional design – the formation of women farmer groups in each of the ward (a sub-village level of local self governance) and their representation in collective groups at the panchayat (village self-governing institution) – and inclusivity ensured that even the poorest of the poor were included. The practice of local self-governance enabled women to collectivize their demand and negotiate improved access to government services. According to Mr. Paul, one of the critical elements of the project was the close collaboration with the Indian Government and the creation of permanent institutional linkages: "One of the strengths of CORD is that we do not duplicate government programs but always





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complement their efforts by adding our bottom-up approach to their top-down approach. Since local self-governance in decision-making is part of decentralized efforts [in] India, there is room in Indian law to create policies and programs in this area.”

CORD is now working on follow-up activities, where they will share their experiences of the livelihood approach with other existing groups. In this new program, peer-learning will take a central role, through an institutional mechanism created at the ward and panchayat levels with facilitation by CORD when required.

### **Policy influence and sustainable impact**

CORD has been influential in a number of policymaking areas. As a direct result of their networking activities,

parts of their model, including the adoption of improved crop cultivation practices and methods for affordable animal husbandry, were adopted by the official education program of the State Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Husbandry. In addition, the empowerment of women to lobby and advocate for themselves locally, has resulted in more effective policies and greater impact.

The sustainability of the institutional mechanism is now widely recognized, and several NGOs have taken up their approach. “Quite often, I see development projects struggle with establishing a sustainable impact, and project achievements slowly disappear when funding ends. By creating women’s groups, the CORD model creates an institutional backbone for sustainable impact and leads people to self-help and self-governance.”



## Achieving critical mass

Through the MIDP and subsequent JSDF funds, the CORD approach has been implemented on a large scale and has proven its viability for both the Indian context and that of other countries. There are a number of reasons why Paul is thankful for GDN's support: "We were given a chance to share our model on a global forum and get endorsement from distinguished researchers and from our international peers. This boosted our confidence and drove us to achieving a big critical mass of evidence to demonstrate our approach. GDN also led us to win a grant under the JSDF program, which allowed us to take our project to an advanced stage. In the end, we have been able to improve the lives of over 3,500 women farmers and their families and prove our integrated agricultural approach as a successful model."

### Award

Japanese Award for Most Innovative Development Project, 2015

This is one of nine stories produced in partnership with Aidenvironment to document the outcomes of GDN's awards and medals program, generously supported by the Government of Japan, the World Bank for implementation and a host of donors over the years for the medals.

### About the Global Development Awards Competition

The Global Development Awards Competition is an award scheme that identifies talent, supports the career advancement of researchers in developing countries, and funds innovative social development projects, implemented by NGOs, to benefit marginalized groups in the developing world. Since its inception in 2001, the competition has supported more than 340 individuals, research organizations and NGOs with roughly US\$3.8 million worth of awards, placing it as one of the most important global competitions targeting development and research. It currently has three categories of awards: Japanese Award for Outstanding Research on Development (ORD), Japanese Award for Most Innovative Development Project (MIDP), and Japan Social Development Fund Award (JSDF). The Medals for Research on Development (MRD), funded every year by a

### Sources

Chinmaya Mission. <http://www.chinmayamission.com/what-we-do/cord-chinmaya-organisation-for-rural-development> (accessed October 15, 2018).

### Interviewees

Mr. Narender Paul

### Author

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### Key words

CORD, India, self-help, self-governance, institution, women, empowerment, sustainable agriculture, microcredit

### Images

From first to last:

A women farmer managing her kitchen garden, CORD.

A Women Farmer Group (WFG) meeting is in progress, CORD.

Women farmers are practicing the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) technology, CORD.

Women farmers learning to raise vegetable seedlings in the nursery beds, CORD.

different pool of donors, were discontinued in 2015. Over the years, the competition has built a community of excellence among researchers and development practitioners. The Global Development Awards Competition receives annual funding from the Ministry of Finance, Government of Japan. The World Bank manages the trust fund that makes these activities possible.

### About GDN

The Global Development Network (GDN) is a public international organization that supports high quality, policy-oriented, social science research in developing and transition countries, to promote better lives. It supports researchers with financial resources, global networking, access to information, training, peer review and mentoring. GDN acts on the premise that better research leads to more informed policies and better, more inclusive development. Through its global platform, GDN connects social science researchers with policymakers and development stakeholders across the world. Founded in 1999, GDN is currently headquartered in New Delhi.

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