

Conversations Today

Your journal about the world of NGOs and Social Enterprises

RNI No.TNENG/2013/52428 | Volume 11 | Issue 5 | May 2023 | 12 Pages | For Free Circulation Only | www.msdstrust.org



PUBLISHED BY: P.N.SUBRAMANIAN
on behalf of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani,
391/1, Venkatachalapathi Nagar, Alapakkam,
Chennai - 600 116 and printed by him at
Express Press, Express Gardens, No.29,
Second Main Road, Ambattur Industrial Estate,
Chennai - 600 058. Phone: 044-42805365
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FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Values and ethics are integral to social development. They form the foundation upon which society functions and progress is made. In this editorial, we will discuss the importance of values and ethics in social development and how they can be upheld for positive change.

Values are principles or standards that guide behavior, decisions, and actions. In social development, values such as fairness, equality, justice, and compassion are crucial. Upholding these values requires a commitment to honesty, integrity, and transparency. For instance, a fair and just society ensures equal opportunities for all, regardless of gender, race, or socio-economic status. Such a society requires ethical conduct in all areas of life, including governance, business, and personal interactions.

Ethics, on the other hand, refer to moral principles that govern our behaviour. Ethics dictate what is right and wrong, and they guide individuals and organisations to act in the best interest of society. In social development, ethical conduct involves putting the needs of society above personal interests and working towards the greater good. Ethical conduct involves respecting the dignity and rights of all individuals, avoiding harm, and promoting the well-being of communities.

Values and ethics are essential for social development as they promote trust, accountability, and social cohesion. They help create a culture of transparency, where individuals and organisations are held accountable for their actions. Upholding values and ethics in social development ensures that progress is made sustainably, with the well-being of communities and the environment at the forefront.

To uphold values and ethics in social development, individuals and organisations must commit to a set of guiding principles. These principles include honesty, integrity, transparency, and accountability. They must prioritise the well-being of communities over personal interests and strive to promote the greater good. Additionally, individuals and organisations must be willing to engage in meaningful dialogue, collaborate with diverse stakeholders, and seek input from impacted communities.

The changemakers featured in Conversations are noble citizens who have upheld their values in their development work.

Read, be inspired.

Marie Banu

EDITORIAL

Latha Suresh
Marie Banu

SOCIAL AUDIT STANDARDS



The purpose of social accounting standards is to go beyond traditional financial reporting and provide a comprehensive view of an organisation's overall impact on society and the environment. They help organisations track and evaluate their performance in areas such as corporate social responsibility, sustainability, employee well-being, community engagement, and environmental stewardship.

Sustainability Reporting Standards Board (SRSB) of ICAI has issued sixteen Social Audit Standards (SAS) effective from 14th Jan 2023. These Standards cover major social issues namely, eradicating hunger, poverty, health, education, gender equality, climate, national heritage, promoting rural sports, disaster, etc. The Standards are divided into four sections, Introduction, Process of social audit, Assessment of Challenges and Limitations, and Appendix.

SAS covers 16 thematic areas in which social enterprises can operate for the purpose of listing on the social stock exchange. The aim is to provide the Social Auditor with the necessary guidance in relation to independent impact assessment engagement of Social Enterprises and the audit steps and procedures that should be applied while conducting the social impact assessment.

The 16 thematic areas are:

1. Eradicating hunger, poverty, malnutrition, and inequality.
2. Promoting health care (including mental health) and sanitation; and making available safe drinking water
3. Promoting education, employability, and livelihoods
4. Promoting gender equality, empowerment of Women and LGBTQIA+ communities
5. Ensuring environmental sustainability, addressing climate change including mitigation and adaptation, forest, and wildlife conservation

6. Protection of national heritage, art, and culture
7. Training to promote rural sports, nationally recognised sports, Paralympic sports, and Olympic sports
8. Supporting incubators of social enterprises
9. Supporting other platforms that strengthen the non-profit ecosystem in fundraising and capacity building
10. Promoting livelihoods for rural and urban poor including enhancing income of small and marginal farmers and workers in the non-farm sector
11. Slum area development, affordable housing, and other interventions to build sustainable and resilient cities
12. Disaster management, including relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction activities
13. Promotion of financial inclusion
14. Facilitating access to land and property assets for disadvantaged communities
15. Bridging the digital divide in internet and mobile phone access, addressing issues of misinformation and data protection
16. Promoting welfare of migrants and displaced persons

By adopting social accounting standards, organisations can assess and manage their social and environmental impacts more effectively, set goals for improvement, and communicate their performance to stakeholders such as investors, customers, employees, and the wider community. This helps promote sustainable and responsible business practices and facilitates the integration of social and environmental considerations into decision-making processes.

Marie Banu

BACK TO THE ROOTS

Natural farming, also known as organic or sustainable farming, is an agricultural practice rooted in the philosophy of working in harmony with nature. It emphasises the preservation and enhancement of ecosystem health while promoting sustainable food production. There are a variety of principles, methods, and benefits of natural farming that only go to highlight its significance in today's world.

In a small town called Moranam near Cheyyar, Karunanidhi's natural farm sees student interns from the Vellore Institute of Technology. Over the years, he has developed a unique model wherein he works with a few companies in producing inputs for organic farming. Karunanidhi's farm is also a centre of excellence, testing products for various efficiencies, even as he collaborates with countries like Japan for initiatives in the agricultural sector.

In a nutshell, natural farming has a few rules that it abides by.

No chemical inputs:

Natural farming avoids synthetic pesticides, herbicides, and fertilisers that can harm the environment and human health. Instead, it focuses on utilising natural alternatives such as compost, crop rotation, and biological pest control.

"It brings down the cost of production and helps reduce toxic levels of agri products," says Karunanidhi, "Natural farming also improves soil chemicals and contributes to maintaining a clean environment." He adds: "food safety can be achieved by natural farming and a healthy young generation can be the result of such actions."

Biodiversity and ecosystem preservation:

Natural farmers prioritise maintaining a diverse range of plant and animal species on their farms. This practice creates a balanced ecosystem, discourages the spread of pests and diseases, and promotes pollination and soil fertility. However, there are challenges.

"Conversion of soil into high microbe levels takes a year, and during this period the production yield is expected to stay low, which in turn results in losses for farmers," Karunanidhi explains, "Small farmers with no cash flows cannot think about natural farming without the support of Government."

He also explains that with academic and farmer collaboration yet to find steam, there is potential for natural farming practices and studies to be adopted at schools, colleges and universities.

Soil conservation:

Healthy soil is vital for sustainable agriculture. Natural farming emphasises soil preservation and enrichment through techniques such as cover cropping, mulching, and the use of organic matter. These practices enhance soil structure, water retention, and nutrient availability. Karunanidhi explains that there are some things farmers must remember while practicing natural farming.



"Avoid any form of chemicals, use low-cost methods, prepare all manure at your own farm, and ensure workers are trained and oriented towards practices," he explains.

Water conservation:

Natural farming promotes efficient water usage by employing methods such as drip irrigation, rainwater harvesting, and contour plowing. These techniques minimise water wastage and ensure that water resources are utilised optimally.

"Natural farming causes a positive impact on the environment since chemical usage is low, which in turn reduces stress on ground water and the air around us," says Karunanidhi, "This in turn enhances quality of feed for cows, chickens and goats, which end up becoming healthier and produce high-yield dung, good-quality milk, eggs and meat."

Methods of Natural Farming:

Composting:

Organic waste materials like kitchen scraps, crop residues, and animal manure are converted into nutrient-rich compost. Compost improves soil fertility, enhances microbial activity, and reduces the need for chemical fertilisers.

Crop rotation:

By rotating different crops in a planned sequence, natural farmers prevent the buildup of pests and diseases specific to particular crops. This practice also helps maintain soil health and balance nutrient requirements.

Natural pest control:

Natural farming employs various techniques to control pests without relying on harmful chemicals. These methods include using

biological controls like beneficial insects, crop diversification, trap crops, and physical barriers.

Agroforestry:

Integrating trees and shrubs into farming systems provides numerous benefits. Trees offer shade, windbreaks, and habitat for beneficial organisms. They also improve soil quality, sequester carbon, and diversify farm income through the cultivation of fruits, nuts, and timber.

Benefits of Natural Farming:

Environmental sustainability:

Natural farming minimises pollution, reduces soil erosion, protects biodiversity, and conserves water resources. It promotes sustainable agricultural practices that ensure the long-term health of ecosystems.

Healthier food and safer environment:

Organic produce from natural farming is free from synthetic chemicals, making it healthier for consumers. It also reduces the risk of pesticide contamination in soil, water, and air, creating a safer environment for farmworkers and nearby communities.

Resilient farming systems:

Natural farming techniques build resilience against climate change impacts by enhancing soil moisture retention, reducing the need for external inputs, and promoting carbon sequestration. These practices contribute to long-term food security.

Economic viability:

Natural farming can provide economic benefits to farmers by reducing input costs and increasing market demand for organic produce. Moreover, it fosters local food systems, connecting farmers directly with consumers and strengthening community ties.

"There is a slow momentum of awareness that is being built around natural farming, however the government needs to do more in order to promote the practice through campaigns involving the private sector," says Karunanidhi, "Social media can also be utilised to spread the word on knowledge platforms and reach out to the farming community. At the same time, awareness and education also needs to reach smaller farmers with no access to social media or smart phones, and this necessitates a crucial role that must be played by NGOs and volunteers."

Natural farming embodies a holistic approach to agriculture, aligning our practices with the wisdom of nature. By adopting sustainable principles and methods, we can create resilient farming systems that nurture the Earth and sustain future generations. Embracing natural farming is a vital step toward achieving a harmonious balance between human needs and the well-being of the planet we call home.

Rahul Philip

BUILDING SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND EMPATHY – CATCH THEM YOUNG!



Scene 1: Students are running toward the school bus at 3 pm. One of the 4th-grade boys fell from the last staircase step, and his school bag and lunch bag lay scattered on the floor. The senior students behind him and his classmates run past him towards the bus, oblivious to the situation and the helpless boy tearing up.

Scene 2: There is an argument at home between the husband and wife. The 15-year-old daughter shouts, "Just grow up, and I am tired of your discussions. I hate you both; you people are a pain disturbing my peace in the house." She walks into her room, slamming the door.

Scene 3: A lady gets down from the car and buys food for a hungry aged beggar. Her 12-year-old son says, "What do you get by spending time on these people? I am getting late to go to the party. You refuse extra money for me but are willing to waste it for people you don't know. So disgusting!"

Scene 4: A 25-year-old start-up company entrepreneur in a meeting, "We are here to make profits and sound money. Don't tell me how our product will disturb the environment or ecosystem. Just look at what we will gain in the next five years. Keep your consciousness speech outside this building."

Scene 5: On a highway road and from a moving car, a 19-year-old throws an empty plastic water bottle and a few chocolate wrappers outside the window while his friends laugh and chitchat in the vehicle.

Scene 6: "Amma, where are you? What's

for breakfast?" The 18-year-old girl walks into the kitchen at 9 am. She sees Amma missing and walks into the bedroom to find Amma lying down with severe back pain. "What happened? Oh, back pain again! Don't worry. I will order my breakfast outside and eat lunch with friends at college. Bye, see you in the evening" and she walks away without stopping to ask if Amma needs food, medicine, or any help.

Scene 7: Upon the death of the Father, the will is opened, and his children find a part of his assets has been written for charity to an NGO. As the lawyer reads this, there is rising anger and annoyance in their mind, and they vow never to forgive him for this act. The narrative in their minds goes, "The money belongs to me, and he is obliged to leave it all for me. How can he think I will be happy to share with those homeless, orphaned kids who are good for nothing."

Well, these are a few scenes from the urbanised lives we all live in. We have got used to this behavior. Even if we crib, it is with friends, or it looks like we are backslashing today's youth. The point here is, where is the simple human-to-human empathy? Is it decreasing in its existence? Or is the individualistic society eating it up? Or are we failing to do anything significant to ensure that social consciousness and empathy are embedded into the lives of children in their growing years? Is technology eating away our lives and making us robots?

But fortunately, Gen Z is a different breed. They need space to be themselves; smartphones and social media have drawn them into action like never before. An article in Forbes says 'Millennials and Gen Zs are taking action to drive the change they want to see in the world. They are becoming more politically involved, making a conscious effort to ensure they spend their money with companies that reflect their values and pushing for change on societal issues. They believe in their individual power to make a difference, but they are also demanding that businesses and governments do their part to help build a better future. Forty-four percent of millennials and 49% of Gen Zs surveyed said that, over the past two years, they have made choices about the types of work they would do—and the organisations they'd be willing to work for—based on their personal values.' (Jul 22, 2021, 11:38am EDT <https://www.forbes.com/sites/deloitte/2021/07/22/for-millennials-and-gen-zs-social-issues-are-top-of-mind-heres-how-organisations-can-drive-meaningful-change/?sh=26d64240450c>)

In three decades of our work, we realised the sustainability of growing social entrepreneurship and enhancing social consciousness lies in catching people young. We began with Business school graduates and youth in undergraduate studies and moved on to secondary school. For the past decade, we have arrived at initiatives that begin in 3rd grade and grow

full-fledged till 10th grade. Almost 15 years back, we realised that catching them at school and providing the students with critical management tools to make decisions and manage projects are equally or more essential than academic excellence. Exposure, experience, and experimentation in articulating social issues, finding solutions, and innovative pathways go a long way in developing more balanced, socially conscious individuals.

The initial work was to move from the word LIFE SKILLS which had become widespread and focussed more on the skills to manage various situations in life, to LIFE EDUCATION. Life education brings a paradigm shift in how students see and experience education. Life Education moves students beyond mere livelihood to creating a sense of purpose and value-based processes and using their intellectual capabilities and knowledge to better society and their lives. The initiative we started is called EQUBE (Enabling Evolutionary Excellence).

Building social consciousness cannot be treated as a subject. It is to be grounded in the common good and win-win perspective. It requires an experiential process and deep-level articulation of values. The students need to explore and understand the orientation, emotional consciousness, and beliefs about several dimensions of life. Their decision-making process and critical thinking have to be sharpened. The most crucial point is to

help them see their life as a purposeful, meaningful journey. The focus of development is not the accumulation of knowledge about management thoughts. It is more about the extent of clarity they have in their actions that makes them better humans. While in academics, we give them several formulas to work with, for leading life, we need to provide them with several tools that will help them think more profoundly. Life is all about asking the right questions! Therefore learning the inquiry process becomes very critical. (www.efil.co.in)

EQUBE curriculum was built based on the research, concepts and tools developed by Dr. J. M. Sampath for nearly two decades. The curriculum in the EQUBE initiative begins with connecting the self to all around as a process of responsibility and knowing the basic nine emotions govern us through the Navarasas. Next comes the ability to Identify stories in everyday life events and the lessons we pick from each. Further, the students learn about the creation and modification of Beliefs/ Values in life. The students realise that a mindful existence enables them to choose the right questions and continue to learn to learn.

The students are assigned to understand care and compassion through small projects at home and in the community. The power of vision is explored with them through goal-setting processes. To sustain their continued growth, they are experientially shown the value of self-awareness and receiving feedback. In 10th grade, students work on Social Action Projects. The students experientially learn their connection and responsibility to society and the world around them. They also understand the power of giving, expanding, and evolving in life with a more profound sense of commitment to themselves and learning to emerge strongly from failures. The students learn project management methods and present their work to a team of panelists. The number of SAP projects in the last eight years has been over 5000, impacting over 40000 lives. (www.facebook.com/kalpna.EFIL/)

An exciting search revealed that students who completed their EQUBE initiatives years back and moved on to higher education and jobs are seemingly people working with various socially connected issues. Here are a couple of sharings from their LinkedIn profiles -

Ananyan Sampath - Active researcher, social worker, and undergraduate student in the III Professional of Bachelors of Medicine and Surgery (MBBS), Edited and authored publications in medical science and works in multiple social organisations from gender equity, child education, and holistic development.

Keerthi Raghavendra's post says – "I started my social service journey back in school(Sri Kumaran Children's Home Educational Council) as part of my EQUBE project by teaching a couple of migrant workers' children science and mathematics. After school, Dr. Kalpana Sampath connected me to Vasudeva Sharma at Child Rights Trust who helped me understand the problem with child labour at the grass root level. A couple of years down the line, the CSE Department at PES University under Dr. Shylaja S S gave me an opportunity to start THE CODER FACTORY! What started as an initiative to combine my passion for



computer science and community service has turned out to be a very rewarding and satisfying experience so far! Over the past year, with over 80 exceptional members, THE CODER FACTORY has specially curated

courses(Web Technology, Cryptography, Artificial intelligence to name a few) for underprivileged high school students keeping in mind their present level of knowledge as well as their language barriers. Our objective to give the kids an essence of modern technology and ignite their curiosity was received well during our on-site sessions."

Vaibhav Kulkarni, a lawyer and senior associate in a leading company, supports social initiatives in North Karnataka.

The true taste of the pudding lies in the journey of two EQUBEITS, Shriya Shankar and Advait Kaluve. They are now founders of Sitara Akka, an NGO that educates underprivileged students. Advait is also an avid photographer of environment-related issues too. They reach over 26000 students from various parts of Karnataka. They also collaborate with EQUBE initiatives. (www.sitaraakka.org)

Mahatma Gandhi said, Be the change you wish to see in the world. Education has a lead role in creating supportive, empathetic, socially conscious people and mindfully leading an inclusive, peaceful, meaningful, and happy life. Enabling people to learn to generate happiness, love, peace, and stretch to make a difference to themselves and others starts young, i.e., right from primary school!!!

—Dr. Kalpana Sampath



Centre for Social Initiative and Management

Contact Persons:

Centre for Social Initiative and Management (CSIM) is a unit of Manava Seva Dharma Samvardhani (MSDS). It is a learning centre that promotes the concept of social entrepreneurship.

CSIM offers training and consultancy to social enterprises – for-profits and non-profits to facilitate them to apply successful business practices and yet retain their social mission. It also offers training and hand holding support to prospective social entrepreneurs and enable them to launch their social initiatives. www.csim.in

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FROM EDUCATION TO PROFESSION



The present generation is growing between information and misinformation. While technology has taken them much closer to their dreams, it has also deprived the underprivileged children. They are not as exposed and informed like other children. The very cycle of inter-generational poverty is the first, big block. As parents survive through different forms of wage labor, they make do with affordable means of education and are kind of trapped within their culture of decision making. Their aspirations is a product of a variety of factors and only a very few of them manage to break out of this mould through education. “So how do we make education work for them?” asks Ms Poornima, Program Director at United Efforts in Bangalore.

Their Founder, Ms Meenakshi Gairola, used to teach Maths and Science for the neighbourhood children. When a student asked, “Why are you struggling so much? We hardly know what to study further or where to study? All we look forward is to complete schooling. You help us put in more efforts and study well, but what is the point madam?” She was taken aback and felt that these children were studying without any pursuit. It was not because they didn’t want to, but because they didn’t know what or how to pursue. She took a while to grapple with real facts and interacted with school teachers, students and their parents. The deep gap built by class divide baffled her. “Why should a huge section of student population in the country miss out on the link between education and profession? What were they missing?” she introspected and figured out that career guidance for children while at school was the way forward.

Career counseling can be a crucial tool in empowering individuals from impoverished backgrounds, providing them with guidance, resources, and support to overcome barriers, make

informed career decisions, and improve their overall socio-economic circumstances. It can help bridge the opportunity gap and create pathways for a brighter future. But when and where?

The answer to this led to the launch of United Efforts in 2018 with an aim to take career counseling closer to children who needed it the most. The organisation introduced a successful model for career guidance within the school curriculum and developed a three phased, STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Math) Career Planning Curriculum for students studying from classes 8 to 10.

“Students may not know the names of sectors, but have a rough idea of what they can do in a sector. They know the name of a course but not the potential opportunities it may open. There are also times when students don’t know names of courses but rely on what they identify as their strengths. We wanted to focus on aligning all this to help them decide on what can be pursued. It is not about what is within their reach anymore. Rather, the decision must now depend on what they think they are capable of,” explains Poornima.

Eighteen different sectors are introduced in classes 8 and 9 where emerging job profiles, skills demanded, various pathways for each of the sectors, complementing skills that can be honed while in school itself are all discussed, along with the story of a role model in each sector. As students complete class 9, they are fully aware of these sectors and are almost ready with their choices. Then comes the crucial part, where they must convince their parents about their career decisions – as parents from modest backgrounds need to be informed from a holistic perspective. For children to be able to do that, they are also taught critical, analytical thinking in class ten. “While in class ten, the focus is

more on giving them the confidence to own their decisions and present it to their parents. Their confidence and awareness must address all doubts in their parents’ minds,” she adds.

United Efforts has so far reached 11,000 students across seven states in India. When they started off with the Karnataka Residential Educational Institutions Society (KREIS) schools that provide quality education for children from SC/ST and backward communities, they covered ten out of the twenty three schools in Ramnagar (Karnataka). In spite of not being able to capacitate the teachers to handle this module, children absorbed United Efforts’ material so well. “It felt like they were given something that they never had access to, but yearned for it,” she exclaims. This is the reach they felt by introducing only two sectors. Given the response from students and the demand United Efforts genuinely felt, the team was determined to take this to all government schools in India.

Karnataka’s senior officials have also invited United Efforts as Knowledge Partner to work on career planning curriculum that can reach about 615,000 children across the state. United Efforts also works in partnership mode, capacitating teachers in partner institutions to deliver the three modules. The activity workbook (“My Future My Plans”) is the key takeaway for all students in which they are scientifically guided to zero in on two career options. It is a skillful assessment that brings them to these choices and thereafter they identify all possible obstacles awaiting them. The knowledge of their aspirations and the challenges ahead, helps them build their agencies to work their ways forward.

Shanmuga Priya.T



CAFE POSITIVE:

GIVING HIV+ COMMUNITIES A SHOT IN LIFE

Cafe Positive aims to empower those with HIV through employment opportunities and to create an inclusive society in India

Rekha was born with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Her childhood was systematically eradicated. She was always treated differently. The child Rekha never knew why. Shunned and shamed, she was kept away from everyone, even family members.

It wasn't until she arrived at Anandaghar, in Kolkata, at the age of nine, a home for children living with HIV, that she even got to know what HIV was and what it meant. Kallol Ghosh, a children's rights advocate and founder of the non-profit Organisation for Friends Energies and Resources (OFFER), runs Anandaghar, knowing how little was being done for young sufferers of HIV.

A right to a quality of life

India is home to more than six per cent of the world's total HIV cases. Among the affected population are children born with the condition. They inherit the stigma. They inherit the pain. They inherit the struggles at an age where they are totally unable to cope with these problems. Often the young cannot access healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. Additionally, the high cost of medication may deter some from seeking treatment or proper care. For Rekha this leaves the door wide open to doubts. "I was uncertain about my future; if society forbade mingling with others, how could we find work or become independent?" When Rekha voiced her concerns, 'Uncle Kallol' as he is lovingly called, recalled an inspiration he discovered in Europe.

Changing mindsets one cup at a time

In 2006, Kallol visited a restaurant in Germany run and managed by people with HIV. This experience deeply touched him and set the wheels in motion, eventually leading him to establish Cafe Positive, a similar initiative back home.

Location became a problem. 'Not in My Backyard' or NIMBY was the stumbling block both from tenants and neighbours. After a great deal of haggling and discussions, a suitable location was finally found in 2018. Cafe Positive was ambitious. Kallol wanted the food and beverage (F&B) outlet to be an industry benchmark. He wanted to have all its staff members receive biannual industry-standard training to maintain a professional operation and adhere to a stringent hygiene regimen. Good service, coffee and food became the bywords to live by. For Kallol, the aim was clear. "The marginalised people run this cafeteria, they have a dream that yes, I am also part of society. And anyone can be a changemaker if you have a drink at Cafe Positive."

There were many walkouts, but there were also just as many walk-ins at the Cafe as well. Kallol speaks only of the positive effects of Cafe Positive. "We have



cultivated a good circle of friends and repeat customers through this cafe."

Looking forward

For Rekha, Cafe Positive is both her beating heart and home. Her colleagues are her family. And Uncle Kallol is just 'Uncle Kallol' - a part of her world since she was a child. "If I do not come here for a day, I feel like I am missing out on so much. Now that we have been able to make it a success, I hope the idea will spread."

Kallol explains that "positive" in the cafe's name not only describes the staff but also reflects the cafe's goal of shaping conversations and correcting misconceptions about the conditions to foster greater awareness and acceptance. "As a dreamer, my plan is to establish 30 to 40 Cafe Positives across the country,

providing employment opportunities for at least 350 to 500 marginalised children and young adults."

Cafe Positive will be opening two new outlets in the coming months. For now, you can visit them at 64A, Lake View Road, Kolkata.

Embracing change is as simple as ordering a cup of coffee. To think that's all it takes is anything but simple. It means overcoming prejudices, challenging misinformation about the transmission of the virus, and it means being seen as an agent of change.

ABOUT CAFE POSITIVE

Cafe Positive, an initiative of the non-profit Organisation for Friends Energies and Resources (OFFER), is Asia's first Cafe run by HIV-positive young adults.

The cafe provides training and employment opportunities for people living with HIV, enabling them to earn a living and gain financial independence. In addition, the cafe also seeks to raise awareness and reduce the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS in India, so that it can create a more compassionate and inclusive society.

A story by Our Better World – the digital storytelling initiative of the Singapore International

Foundation (www.ourbetterworld.org)



UNDERSTANDING GENDER

–FROM ABUSE TO EMPOWERMENT



Women Empowerment is a loaded term. The combination of physical, economic, social, and information resources that women are exposed to; and the necessary redistribution of these resources to help them realize their self-worth and improve the lives of other women is a long journey that must be understood in perspective. “Empowerment can mean different things to different people. To me, from what I have been witnessing since school days, empowerment comes when women decide to take their lives in their own hands. No matter what the family or community thinks about them, they consciously protect their self respect and do not let anyone decide for them,” says Mr Vishnu Lal Maurya, Founder of Lok Sewa Sansthan in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh.

Founded in 1989, Lok Sewa Sansthan draws heavily from the founder’s experiences and encounters with abused women. When he attended his tuitions for class ten, he saw women in the neighborhood oppressed and dependent on their male family members. Domestic violence and abuse was common. He witnessed the arrest of a woman who left her marital home when they forced her into sex work. “I had seen how abusive her family was. When she stood up for herself and accused her in-laws and husband of domestic violence, I felt the anxiety in me rest for a while,” recalls Vishnu. It is this incident that planted the seed of gender equality and women empowerment in him. It affected him so much that he kept preparing himself mentally for taking up this mission which he ventured soon after graduation.

His first step was to mobilise girls who had dropped out from school. He then hired a local teacher and together they both taught these girls. Seeing the improvement, he contacted a local school who encouraged them to clear the Higher Secondary examination. It was due to these efforts that 80 drop-outs managed to complete their schooling. He then identified children of women

prisoners who were also living inside the prison, without having a meaningful childhood and access to education. He spoke to authorities and finally managed to teach these children. 65 children have now completed their primary school due to these efforts.

Vishnu’s work in the prison exposed him to many other realities. Having seen his genuine concern for the future of their children, the mothers began to share their stories. Most of them narrated how they were falsely accused or misused in a situation. Dowry leading to such wrong arrests shocked him and the fact that they were denied bail bothered him. Vishnu took these cases to a lawyer and after examination of all case details, he filed bail applications. 24 women were released on bail and reunited with their families. However, this effort did not continue as the district authorities were not appreciative of a sub system operating in their premises.

Catching up with the global SHG movement, Lok Sewa Sansthan formed 50 self help groups and helped them set up small businesses. “The idea of SHGs was instantly accepted because women had for long yearned credit services but being illiterate or unaware or lacking land documents, they were never in a position to access formal credit services. They had to always depend on the men. This instrument promised social transformation by helping women access credit services when they needed it. It was like breaking a big barrier that held them captive so far. Besides all the access aspect, they had the liberty to choose priorities for expenditure,” exclaims Vishnu. Inspired by the impact his team had on women, they also came up with a women’s toll-free helpline number that managed to resolve 16000 cases of domestic violence and physical abuse. Alongside, the calls also pressed the need for a family counseling centre. The organization went ahead and addressed this aspect as well. Over 5000 cases of marital disputes were resolved.

Lok Sewa gradually touched upon



every service that women in Ayodhya needed. Over 200 abandoned/destitute women were provided rations twice or thrice a year and 900 young girls and women were educated about menstrual hygiene, and also given sanitary napkins. Yet, Vishnu felt that these were not efficient interventions as the root cause – poverty – was not focused upon. The gender poverty interface posed a unique challenge and Vishnu had to work out a plan to intercede this interface and help women realize empowerment. So the team identified 10 villages and 15,000 women from BPL (Below Poverty Line) families. These women were educated about their legal rights, domestic violence as a punishable offence, protocols to be followed by ration shops, health facilities they were entitled to and the functioning of all local systems. “This was an incredible strategy. Women began to identify gaps in services and systems. Their questioning and complaining led to regularization of Anganwadis & ANMs’ regular visits, ensured service provision for all pregnant, lactating women by the ASHAs. In fact, one group of women organized themselves and undertook to manage distribution of ration at a PDS unit,” shares Vishnu.

Women were also educated about Right to Information Act and the processes to be followed. While they were handheld to take big responsibilities, Lok Sewa simultaneously worked to address human trafficking in the Indo Nepal border where women as young as 16 years old were lured by promises of



marriage and high paying jobs, and were subjected to forced relationships, abuse, sex work. More than 200 such women were rescued and rehabilitated in Lok Sewa’s Shelter Home. Most of them are now post graduates, working in different sectors and leading independent lives.

It has been three decades now but Vishnu still believes in starting small and engaging one stake holder at a time. The program for pregnant mothers for example, saw the engagement of a gynecologist who agreed to visit his centre once a month and conduct outpatient services free of cost for that day. With every step, his team not only addressed needs but managed to set up services that can run longer without heavy costs involved. “This was important because funds cannot flow consistently for one particular intervention, for a longer period. The community we work in needed sustained interventions and that is why we took one step at a time,” he reiterates.

Shanmuga Priya.T

How a Teenager Brought 6,000 Kids Together to Bring a Change in her Village

Smruti Kumari Shah, a 17-year-old girl witnessed lack of basic amenities like water, electricity, sanitation, and education in her village in Odisha. She started an initiative to change this poor condition. Today, over 6,000 children are involved in her initiative and have created some extraordinary impact.

The year was 2013, a natural disaster had destroyed Raghupati Nagar in Berhampur, Odisha and left many people homeless. The region was suffering from the lack of electricity, street lights, water, proper houses, and education. All these major issues were noticed by Smruti, who was just a 15-year-old teenager then. She decided to do something to make the lives of the people better in her village.

“When I saw the condition of my village, I felt extremely disturbed and helpless. I decided that I can fight for the rights of my people and if I succeed in doing something, I will feel really happy,” Smruti said.

Berhampur city had 163 slums. Over one lakh residents of these slums suffered from lack of basic amenities. The slums did not have piped water supply, the region did not have public toilets and about 60 percent of the slum residents defecated in open.

There were no garbage bins in the area and door to door garbage collection was never done. Lack of electricity connection, roads, and even drainage added to the residents’ woes.

She got in touch with Youth for Social Development (YSD), a non-governmental social research and development working for the betterment of the Southern part of Odisha. This region of the state has been the most poverty-stricken district since decades.

According to Smruti, she started attending the weekly meetings of YSD. There, she discussed the issues of homelessness of the village with the Vice-President of YSD. She also talked to the secretary of YSD and many influential members of the organisation. She deeply realised the helpless state of her village and how it needed serious support for its survival.

“People of the village were not ready to send their children to school and we had to walk around huts to huts to tell people about the importance of education. We tried hard to convince them to send their children to school. In order to make things better, we had to make sure that we start working on the issues step by step,” said Smruti.

A cleaner village

She tried to collaborate with the Berhampur Municipal Corporation. “We wrote notices to them, which were left unanswered. We tried hard to get the municipal corporation’s support to make sure people start living a healthy life. Finally, a cleanliness drive in the village was started,” Smruti added.

She installed a Slum Sanitation Wall, a child-friendly tool to monitor cleanliness and hygiene of slums on a daily basis by

the children. Weekly report of this wall was sent to the Health Officer, BeMC. The initiative was started with 10 slums and now all of 163 slums of Berhampur district have this unique wall.

Once the village took its first towards cleanliness, Smruti and her team put their steps forward to provide better accommodation to the villagers. They visited 32 slums near their village and drafted a plan to get better houses for the residents. Smruti took proper use of Rajiv Awas Yojana, a scheme under the Ministry

interest towards school.

Gradually, the activities got more serious and useful. Discussing practical issues and challenges of Raghupati Nagar became a regular session. Students were given free book and uniforms. In addition, free basic, but healthy meals became an important part of the children’s school.

“When I could finally see parents being convinced and sending their children to school I felt like I was on top of the world,” the young girl said.

These informal groups meet every weekend to play, discuss, have fun and take action. The children discuss the issues and problems of their slums and come up with possible solutions and action plan. Children analyse their situation, identify and prioritise issues, explore potential resources, identify stakeholders, and plan for a dream neighbourhood.

They then advocate for these improvements with city government officials through direct lobbying and formal planning. Children also bring out a multi-edition fortnightly wall magazine named Ama Kahuchhu, Ama Katha (We Speak Our Tales). Over 16 editions have been published and visited by parents, neighbours, elected and government officials and media. More than 500 children directly and 6,000 children indirectly are involved with Smruti’s efforts.

The impact

Smruti was finally able to witness the positive change in her beloved village. The village did not have any piped water supply earlier. Now, 26 slums were provided with public taps.

Construction and cleaning of drains were done in 18 slums. Regular collection of garbage was started in 18 slums. The Municipality also distributed 10,000 dustbins to the households of the district. Street lights were installed in 14 slums and proper electricity was provided in four slums. Twelve slums witnessed a proper road connectivity and safe spaces for children to play were identified in 10 slums.

However, it was an uphill journey for her. People often did not take her seriously and she had to work extra hard to win the trust of the villagers and authorities.

“It was not easy for me at the age of 15 to do so much work, but I was fortunate enough to get in contact with great people from YSD. It did seem impossible at times as I felt nobody would take a teenager like me so seriously. However, that did not seem to matter when the positive results of my work became visible,” Smruti said.

The road ahead

Smruti has strong plans for the future. She wants to provide leadership and citizenship training to our young leaders and new groups. In addition, she is looking to get access to better resources to enhance her activities and reach more areas.

“I plan to expand our activities to other slums and other neighbouring cities. And also in colleges and schools,” she said.

Smruti wishes to study English and pursue a career in Journalism in future.

“I want to become a Journalist so that I become able enough in my life to fight for the good of the people in our society. I wish to work hard to provide a better standard of life to people living in places, which lack even basic amenities,” Smruti concluded.

Source: www.thestoriesofchange.com



of Housing and Urban Affairs and helped villagers in getting cemented houses.

Better Education

Smruti did not stop her work here. With the help of the government and YSD, she laboriously worked to provide proper education to the village children. Smruti, along with YSD, held sessions with children to catch their attention. Dance and drama was used in the initial stage to win the trust of the students and generate

Using the strength of young minds

Smruti’s most effective strategy was to involve slum children in her work. She prepared a ‘children’s manifesto’ regarding their wishes related to the protection of their rights as well as a safe and healthy environment. She then put forward this manifesto before different political parties during civic and general elections.

She created 30 informal groups of children and called them “Child Clubs”.

Where There's Water, There's Life

When I was about 8 or 9, we had this beautifully illustrated book of parables at home. One of the stories was about a boy who searches along the forest paths for his friend (Krishna), with his whole school and his school-teacher in tow, but He is not to be seen. The picture was of a young boy looking puzzled, surrounded by big trees, graceful green creepers and flowering shrubs, on a narrow path winding away into a dark forest. This picture always used to puzzle me - "who waters all these many, many plants?", I would wonder... "How are they fresh and blooming in the middle of a forest?"

Years later, I found out how Nature arranges leaves and canopies so that when it rains, the canopy, and in fact each leaf, directs the water to the exact place where the roots of the tree can take it in. This is a circle of space around the trunk, at a distance from it, not the spot where the tree or plant rises from the ground. Also, out of every shower, the foliage holds on to a large percentage of water in all its dips and hollows. So do the other structures of the plant, wherever there is any space at all to hold the precious drops. And when the next breeze comes along, this water also finds its way to the ground.

Since there are many levels and layers of plants in a forest, right from the tall trees to the little ones on the ground, and each level holds water, then passes it on to the next lower level successively, for many days after a shower, the entire habitat stays water-rich.

The ground also holds water in various ways. Large pits fill up with water, and so do small depressions in the soil. The soil holds plenty of water in its interstitial spaces too. All this water gradually percolates downwards, enriching the underground reservoirs and aquifers. The percolation process is greatly facilitated by the roots of the plants all around, as these keep the soil uncompacted, and ready with numerous narrow channels through which water can slip downwards. Once all the available spaces in the soil are filled, the excess water then flows away towards the lowest point in the area, which is usually a pond or a lake. This water-body gets replenished, and holds the water for future use. The water also continues to seep downwards through the bed of the water-body, and there is a slow but sure enrichment of ground water in the entire areas.

This is a very inspiring and efficient system of water use. When we cultivate multiple crops, it becomes possible to create a water-use system somewhat akin to this one. Though providing water through foliar sprays may not be practical, it is quite possible to dig shallow troughs around trees where water can collect. The donut-shaped belt should mirror the ends of the foliage, where root-density, and therefore their capacity to take in the water, is maximum. Inside this trough, plants that need water and have shallow roots can be planted. The slopes of the trough can have those plants that do not need much water - the slope ensures that water flows away and does not let the plant be hurt by excess water. The different root zones in a multicropping field ensure that the available water is made use of fully.

The trough around individual trees can be connected with channels, but to do this effectively, you would need to know the specific topography of your land well. Once you do know this, it is quite possible to mimic the natural flow of water in forests in your land too. You can figure out the undulations and dips of your land, and connect and deepen them into channels. These channels, also called [bioswales](#), can then lead water to the lowest point, where it collects into a pond, not only creating a habitat for many creatures, but also ensuring that slow percolation happens constantly in the region, and replenishes ground water. In case there are practical difficulties in leading all the water into the pond, it can be led to other reservoirs. This is what we have done - we lead excess rain water, and also the irrigation water that runs off, into the well nearby.



Excess Water Being Led To The Well



In a monocropping fields too, the soil's power to hold, carry and store water can be used to our advantage through bioswales, as long as we are willing to abandon straight lines and square fields, and follow the contours of the land instead. But the shade system that is at work in a multicropping field cannot be seen. In a multicropping field, the canopies of the taller plants provide shade to the surrounding soil, reducing the rate at which standing water evaporates and soil water evaporates, making the soil dry. Therefore, such fields stay moist for a minimum of two full days more than shade-less fields. This means that, instead of watering fields every third day, you can actually plan your watering every fifth day, saving nearly 4 full days of labour spent on watering. The gap between waterings can be increased even more if you leave the leaves and organic matter that falls from trees on the ground. This organic matter acts as an added reservoir of water too, in addition to providing ground-cover and preventing the drying of the soil.

Further, in a monocropping field, water is not retained at different canopy levels, as there is no significant difference in the heights of the plants of the same crop.

Another interesting aspect is that in a multicropping



field, harvests are invariably staggered. And each harvest rarely manages to denude the entire area - there are always some plants that survive the harvest, and reproduce, and very often the new baby plants take root in the moist soil in places where you weren't expecting them. You might have gone out looking for a nice, tangy raw mango to cook, and as a bonus, you might also find a green chilly plant full of plump chillies peeping out from behind the mango tree, and a young 'curry vepa-elai' plant ready to give you two leaves to put into the raw-mango dish...

Nobody watered all these bonus plants - the water was already there in the soil. And where there's water, there's life.

Ramashree Paranandi

"Changing people's attitudes and behavior towards environmental conservation is crucial."

Dr. A. Samuel Rajkumar shares with Marie Banu the efforts required to create a sustainable and eco-friendly future.

Dr. A. Samuel Rajkumar is the Joint Chief Environmental Engineer, Tamilnadu Pollution Control based at Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu. Formerly, he was associated with World Bank as Environmental Specialist for an Aided Road Sector Project.

In an exclusive interview, Dr. Samuel Rajkumar shares hares with Marie Banu the efforts required to create a sustainable and eco-friendly future.

About your TNPCB and your role?

The Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB) is a statutory organisation established in 1982 under the Water Prevention and Control of Pollution Act of 1974. This act was formulated by Smt. Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India at the time, following the United Nations' conference on human and environmental issues held in Stockholm, Sweden on 5th June 1972. This conference day marked the launch of World Environment Day, which is celebrated annually on 5th of June.

The TNPCB operates as a centralised body, implementing the water and air pollution control Acts enacted in 1974 and 1981 respectively. In response to the Bhopal gas tragedy in December 1984, the Environmental Protection Act was introduced by Shri. Rajiv Gandhi in 1986. These three legislations play a crucial role in addressing air, water, and environment pollution at the national level.

Under the water act, pollution control boards were established across India, including the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB), which was formed on February 27, 1982. The TNPCB functions through a three-tier system, comprising a corporate office at the head office in Chennai, officers stationed in various districts, and regional monitoring officers. I serve as the Joint Chief Environmental Engineer responsible for activities in Cuddalore, Nagapattinam, Mayiladurai, and Thiruvavur districts in Tamil Nadu.

My specific role involves monitoring highly polluting industries falling under the 17 designated categories. Additionally, I serve as the Chairman of the Zonal Level Consent Clearance Committee that consists of district-level officers such as the District Environmental Engineer who assesses and grants clearance to certain types of industries. Regular review meetings and other monitoring activities are conducted to ensure compliance with environmental regulations.

What measures have you implemented to ensure that businesses comply with these regulations?

The three legislations hold significant importance for industries, as they require clearance to operate. As part of the

clearance process, we issue a consent to establish an industry, which serves as a fundamental requirement. Businesses must obtain a valid consent from the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB) to run their manufacturing operations.

In the event of any observed violations, we issue a showcase notice, providing a specific timeframe for the industry to respond. Some companies request additional time to rectify the identified issues and may submit photographs as evidence of the repairs carried out. If the industry fails to respond or the issue remains unresolved, we proceed to summon the concerned parties for a personal appearance.

If the non-compliance persists despite these efforts, we escalate the matter to our head office for further action. The chairman of the corporate office is vested with the authority to make decisions in such cases. Subsequently, a closure notice is signed, and a request to disconnect the power supply is forwarded to the electricity board.

By following this protocol, we ensure that industries adhere to environmental regulations and take appropriate actions in cases of non-compliance

Looking ahead, what are the major challenges you encounter in the pollution control sector, particularly in terms of regulation and control?

Our team comprises of Post-graduate Engineers and Science graduates, researchers, and scientists who collectively work towards addressing various challenges in pollution control. One of the significant challenges we face is controlling sewage pollution, which often leads to complaint. Additionally, the dumping of solid waste, improper waste disposal systems, and the prevalent use of single-use plastics pose major hurdles.

However, there is a positive development in this regard. Our Honourable Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu has initiated a comprehensive program called "*Meendum Manjapai*," which aims to tackle these challenges. This program includes extensive campaigns and awareness programs conducted by our departmental engineers in schools across all districts.

Recently, we organised a Hackathon where we announced substantial cash prizes for innovative ideas to combat improper disposal of single-use plastics. So far, we received an encouraging response with innovative ideas.

Changing people's attitudes and behavior towards environmental conservation is crucial. To monitor pollution levels and water quality, we have established a centralised monitoring center at our head office. Several important parameters are monitored



there, specifically concerning industrial pollution.

Nonetheless, the most pressing challenge remains the effective management of solid waste and the menace of plastic pollution. It is the collective responsibility of every citizen in India to prioritise environmental care and take individual actions to address these challenges.

What are the efforts required to create a more sustainable and eco-friendly future?

Numerous substitutes for plastic are being actively explored and adopted to mitigate plastic usage. Biodegradable Plastics, made from organic materials like cornstarch, sugarcane, or algae, naturally decompose in the environment, minimising their ecological impact. Paper and cardboard, renewable and recyclable resources, serve as popular alternatives for plastic packaging and bags. Bioplastics, derived from renewable sources such as plant starches and vegetable oils, provide a more sustainable option with a reduced carbon footprint. Glass and metal containers, particularly aluminum, are viable substitutes for plastic packaging. These materials are recyclable, possess excellent preservation properties, and can be reused multiple times. Natural fibers like cotton, jute, hemp, or bamboo offer renewable and biodegradable alternatives for various products, including bags, packaging materials, and clothing, thus reducing environmental harm compared to plastics. Lastly, compostable materials, including films and packaging, break down under specific conditions, leaving behind nutrient-rich compost. These materials are environmentally friendly choices for short-term use items.

By embracing these substitutes, individuals and businesses can contribute to the reduction of plastic usage and its environmental impact. Exploring and adopting such alternatives are vital steps toward creating a more sustainable and eco-friendly future.

Your advise for youth?

India is progressing in such a way to find a balance between sustainable development and environmental protection. However, the youth, especially with their widespread use of social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, can play a pivotal role in driving positive change. They can serve as role models by actively developing sustainable manufacturing sectors that others can emulate. By promoting clean technologies and adopting a circular economy approach, the youth can encourage others to prioritise eco-friendly practices.

Additionally, the concept of "greening" can be embraced by the youth, where they take a proactive role in advocating for environmentally conscious actions. For example, initiatives like "one man, one tree" can be championed, encouraging individuals to plant trees and contribute to reforestation efforts. The youth can also engage in innovative thinking, exploring ideas and solutions that align with environmental sustainability.

Harnessing the power of the youth's energy, creativity, and digital connectivity can lead to significant advancements in environmental conservation and sustainable practices. By mobilising their potential and nurturing their passion for a greener future, we can foster a collective effort towards a more environmentally responsible society.