

ASSESSMENT OF COMMUNITY BASED INSTITUTIONS

(A Theoretical Framework and a Participatory Methodology)

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Summary:

To what extent do Community Based Institutions (CBIs) – whether they be Panchayats created by the Government, Self Help Groups (SHGs) formed by NGOs or Solidarity Groups that emerge on their own – exhibit characteristics that distinguish them as institutions as against a collection of individuals?

This paper attempts to:

- i. Outline the six critical distinguishing characteristics of a functioning institution.
 - ii. Elaborate on a process through which CBIs can be assessed against the above characteristics.
 - iii. Stress that this process of assessment is not to grade or rate the CBIs but to enhance the CBIs own skills of assessment and understanding of the need to periodically assess itself so that every decision it takes is viewed from the perspective of its organisational learning, health and sustainability.
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PART 1

Assessment of Community Based Institutions has drawn the attention of development practitioners in recent times. Several approaches are being tested and different methods used. Among the latter, those that have drawn most attention are methods, which have focused on participatory methods of CBI assessment, even though the hurdle of quantifying the data has not been satisfactorily overcome.

The focus on assessment of CBIs arose from the increasing importance given to the objective of sustainability of impact and empowerment. The underlying assumption is that people's institutions at the base contribute significantly to sustainability of impact of interventions as well as to the strength of civil society within the broader framework of promoting self help, self reliance and democracy. This assumption has been tested by several studies undertaken by International, National and Local Organisations and found to be valid. There is adequate evidence that institutions of the

poor when facilitated to evolve into vibrant institutions play a critical role in fostering empowerment of the poor and marginalised in a sustainable manner.

This paper describes a participatory method to assess village institutions; it does not claim to be comprehensive, neither does it have any pretensions of being the best. It is part of an on-going search. It does not offer any method to quantify data, though this can be attempted. It presents a “friendly tool” that can and has been used by extension staff with experience in promoting participatory strategies in development. Given that MYRADA and other NGOs have formed thousands of CBIs, assessment of CBIs need to be made rapidly and by a large number of staff. I have called this approach Rapid Appraisal of Institutions (RAI).

Though this paper is primarily intended to help staff assess the CBIs, it must be pointed out that CBIs, like living organisms, are constantly changing. Assessing them in a one shot manner is useful but not adequate. The ultimate objective is to increase the capacity of the CBI to assess itself so that every decision it takes is viewed from the perspective of its organisational health and sustainability. The capacity for self-assessment is, indeed, one indicator of the CBI's strengths. The questions listed below, therefore, are also intended to build up the capacity of the CBI to assess itself. These questions must not (repeat not) be handled by the staff in the traditional interview mode even though it may be participatory – namely within a focus group. These are not questions, which require answers immediately from the group, but should be used to guide the discussion. Each question, therefore, should be strategically presented and not necessarily in the order given below. The objective is to enable the CBI to assess itself very broadly at the end of each set of questions. Briefly, the very exercise of assessment, even though led by outsiders, must be handled in such a way that it helps to train the members of the CBIs to assess their own institution. The assessment must be carried out in a participatory manner. This requires that the facilitators, staff and people (members of CBI) be involved at every stage beginning with the planning required for the exercise. There are several reasons for promoting this level of participation; one of them is that participatory methods have emerged as the most appropriate instruments of communicating skills – in this case the skills of assessment – to the members of the CBIs.

How To Conduct This Exercise:

The CBI should be broken down into two or three small groups and each sub-group “interviewed” by two or three staff members.

The staff who handle this exercise need to have experience in working with group's. At least 3 to 4 years of experience is required to handle this exercise. The assessments of each sub-group can then be discussed in a general meeting where the entire CBI is present as well as a few other concerned invitees from the village. Triangulation, where views are divergent, can be attempted. Consensus can then be reached where possible, and where not, clearly documented.

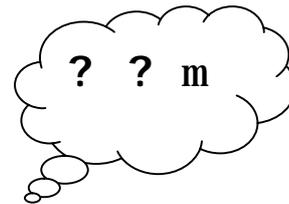
- CBI to divide itself into small groups of 5 to 8 members.
- Each sub-group to debate on all questions listed in the following pages. If possible, provide one or two facilitators for each sub-group who have understood and can clearly explain each question.
- Each small group makes a presentation of its responses to the key questions.
- Similar and dissimilar responses to be noted – where views differ, if they cannot be reconciled, they should at least be probed.
- Others who know the CBI can also be asked to contribute their own assessments.
- Record the process and the outputs where they can periodically be accessed and reviewed by the CBI.

The staff who are involved with the assessment exercise as well as others who have interacted with these CBIs can, on their own, assess the CBIs. The output of the two assessments can be compared for deeper insights to emerge. It is accepted that all assessments will have underlying subjective biases. Efforts to identify and share them openly are required.

It is also possible to quantify the output though there are limitations to this endeavour. This paper will not cover the attempts to quantify the output. The need for quantification and how to go about it can be discussed in the preliminary workshops that must be held at the beginning of the assessment.

Theoretical Framework:

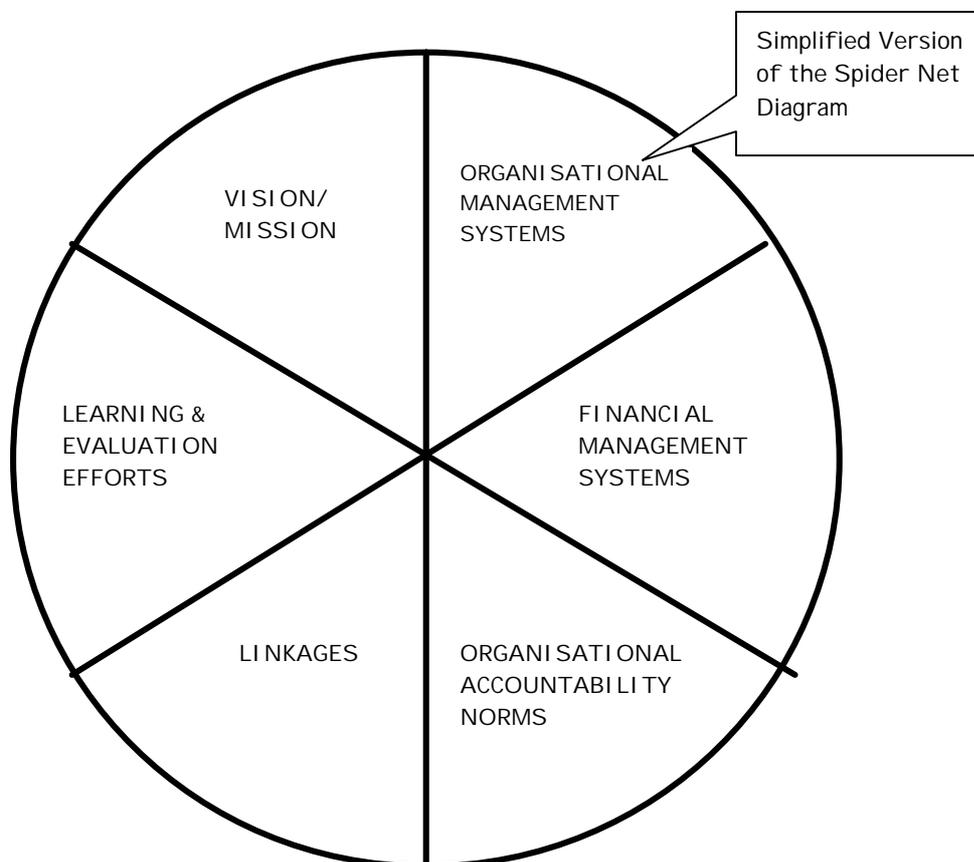
This paper suggests that the CBIs assess themselves or be assessed against two sets of indicators:



1. One set covers the six organisational features, which are normally identified as critical to the structure and functioning of any organisation or institution. **This paper and the exercise it offers refer only to this first set of indicators.**
2. The second set of indicators helps in assessing whether these CBIs are implementing the objectives of the Project. While in a well managed project, the CBIs will be supported to develop their own Vision and Mission, they also need to share the major features of the Projects Vision/Mission since at the field level they take the initiative to plan, implement and manage the Project's interventions. For example, the Project may seek to strengthen all or some of the concerns related to sustainable development, namely, a) maintaining an explicit pro-poor focus; b) promoting affirmative action to address gender injustices and inequities; c) assuring responsive, accountable and transparent governance; d) securing environmentally sustainable development, and e) generating sustainable sources of income in the non-farm sector. The second exercise suggested could enquire whether the CBIs fostered by the NGO are promoting these objectives of the Project. This facet has not been explored in this paper.

The first set of indicators against which the CBI is assessed comprises the six organisational features, which are accepted commonly as critical to the health of any organisation.

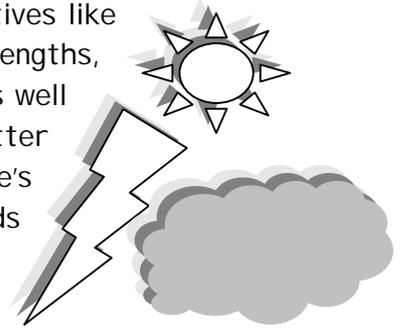
MAJOR FEATURES OF AN ORGANISATION



1. Vision:

Vision is a mental picture of the institution and its potential impact in the future. It is what an institution hopes will happen both to itself and to its members if its dreams are realised. A set of values forms the basis and guiding norms of an institution's vision. Beliefs and values produce and sustain institutions; this set of values drives the institution to intervene strategically in order to fulfil its vision; it also ensures that the interests of the institution are kept above those of its individual members. This is particularly true of an institution, which sees itself as a change agent in society. True the interests of the institution and those of its members are closely inter-linked, but in an institution devoted to change, the interests of its members cannot override those of the institution. It must be noted that an institution is based both on a system of beliefs and values, as well as systems that support its functions and programmes.

Every institution needs to develop a vision of its own it is to be an institution in its own right in keeping with its name. Vision building is not a one-shot exercise; it requires time and involves a series of exposures and modules; vision is a critical feature of all types of CBIs and particularly of CBIs, which have social objectives like the ones fostered by MYRADA. It is also built on people's strengths, which can be directed towards fulfilling their livelihood needs as well as their social needs like reduction of work and drudgery, better transport, health and drinking water. It grows as people's confidence increases and as people's sense of ownership extends beyond their immediate assets like a house and fields and local institutions to include natural resources related with the environment and other institutions. It is nurtured by and in turn nurtures certain core values, which help to reinforce the vision when periodically recalled and reflected on.



The questions related to vision building which form the framework for focus group discussions on the basis of which the members of a CBI can assess themselves and in turn be assessed are the following: (Group = Community Based Institution.)

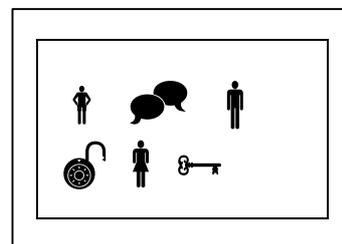
1. Why did the members join the group? (individual motivation of 3 or 4 for taking group membership)
2. Why are they continuing to be members?
3. Can they describe one achievement of the group of which they are proud?
4. How do they think the group was able to achieve this? List the strengths of the group in this context.
5. In five years time what would they like their group to be? (Ensure that the answers do not list activities - or what to do.)
6. How do they want to see this village or community in 10 years time? (Ensure that the output is not a list of activities; once again it is what they would like the community/village to be, not to do.)
7. What are the present activities of the group to achieve the vision of the group and the vision they have of the village?
8. What are their future plans to achieve the vision of their group and the vision of their village?
9. When the public (other villagers) talks about their group, what do they expect the public to say the group stands for? (Guide the discussion towards eliciting the core values of the group - or at least those values subscribed to by most members. (Would they like people to see their group as one which supports the poor, women, children's education, environment, water/sanitation, self help and progress, women's issues?))
10. What is the members' self-assessment in terms of the CBIs and Village vision, and in terms of the strategy to implement this vision? Has the vision influenced their thinking, discussions and actions? Can they give examples? (Scale: excellent, good, not so good, weak). The group should agree on 3 indicators to back up its assessment and list them.

2. Organisational Management:

Organisational systems, which support the functions of an institution, are as critical to its health as beliefs and values.

The questions can be divided into the following main sub-sectors:

- 2.1. Several questions relating to group formation. These questions are important to understand the structure of the group. For example, if a leader was chosen first and she or he was asked to form a group, the chances are that the leader will continue to dominate the group. If the leader in such a group also has to take on several responsibilities (like Manager, Chairman, Secretary and Accountant) then he/she tends to dominate. Such a situation could well lead to new relationships of dependence between the leader and the other members. If people from several villages are grouped together mainly to reduce the time and trouble required to visit smaller group's in several villages, several may be left out who cannot or do not want to join the large group. In MYRADA's projects, groups are formed on the basis of affinity among the members. Affinity is based on **mutual trust** and could arise from several factors; e.g. same caste or community, same place of origin, activity, livelihood source, religion or economic status. The network exists before MYRADA intervenes. The role of the NGO is to build on these relationships and to help the members to develop new ones to support the new responsibilities and roles of the CBI. Groups are not formed on the basis of criteria determined by the "scheme" or the intervenor.



The questions relating to this sub-set which form the framework for focus group discussions are the following:

1. When was the group formed?
2. Who or at whose initiative was the group formed? NGO, Government or local person?
3. How did this initiator go about forming the group?
4. How many members does the group have (group size)?
5. How were the members identified and selected (criteria)?
6. How did they actually become members, given the above criteria?
7. Why did they join the group? (List responses from the members and categorise them.)
8. (a) What is the group's self-assessment of the level of members participation in the group formation process (scale: excellent, good, not so good, weak)? The group should agree on three indicators and come to a consensus on each.
(b) What is the group's assessment of its sense of ownership of the CBI (scale as above; list three indicators to back up its assessment)?

- 2.2.** The second sub-set of questions relates to group Rules and Regulations (R&R). It is important to note here that though some CBIs are set up by Government Departments and have to abide by certain R&R, there is no ban on the CBI formulating additional rules to cover new responsibilities. In fact, even if the Government prepares a set of R&R, the group should review them and change/adapt them according to the group's vision and roles. It is, therefore, useful to know whether the CBIs have modified or added to its rules. Since sanctions are critical for the continued health of any organisation, questions regarding the inclusion of sanctions in the R&R and who enforces them, are important for organisational health. If, for example, sanctions exist but they have to be enforced by the village leader (who is not a member of the group), then the group needs to build up its own organisational strength and credibility to enforce its rules if it is to survive and grow.

The questions under this sub-set which form the framework for focus group discussions are the following:

1. Are there written rules and regulations (R&R)?
2. Have all the members seen them in writing/print?
3. Who made them? When?
4. How often, in their opinion, should R&R be discussed in the group?
5. Have any training sessions been held in R&R for all the members? For office bearers only?
6. Can the group mention three R&R?
7. Does R&R include any sanctions? Should sanctions be included? If yes, why? Have they been enforced to your knowledge? If so, by whom?
8. Was R&R revised? Give one example.
9. List three major problems experienced by the CBI.
10. How did they arise? Were R&R the cause of any of these problems?
11. What is the group's self assessment of the members' observance of the R&R. (Are they adequate? Do they need change? Who will change them? Do they cause more conflict or reduce it?)
12. What is the group's self-assessment of the members' observance of the R&R? (Do all respect and follow the R&R? What happens if some do not? Do all respect sanctions?)

- 2.3.** The third sub-set of questions relates to Group Meetings. These are helpful to assess features related to dependence and exclusion. For example, if we find that the average attendance is low (below 60%) then it is quite possible that the regular absentees do not want to be in this particular CBI. The assumption that they are not interested in attending meetings and getting involved (in other words that they are lazy or disinterested) needs to be tested. If a decision is taken that there should be only one CBI in the area (a group of villages), then it is quite possible that several families which belong to a small group will be left out and in most cases they will turn out to be the poorer families in the area. It is also useful to make the CBI members aware that the date, time, place of the

meeting as well as the agenda should be decided by the group and adhered to. Group's that leave these decisions to their leader usually tend to be dominated by the leader's agenda.

The questions under this sub-set which form the framework for focus group discussions are the following:

1. Who calls the meeting – who fixes the date, time and place?
2. What is the frequency of meetings?
3. Is the date, time and venue of the meeting fixed? Or do they change?
4. Is there an attendance register? Is it maintained? By whom?
5. What is the average attendance at group meetings?
6. Is there a minutes book? Is it maintained? By whom?
7. Is there an Account Book? Is it maintained? By whom?
8. Is there a Bank Account? Who operates it?
9. Who actually/physically holds these books? Where are they kept?
10. Is there a written agenda for every meeting? Who sets the agenda?
11. What are three important items that are regularly on the agenda?
12. How does the group ensure that decisions taken in the group have the approval of the majority and are known to all the members?
13. List the "office bearers" and indicate what roles they actually perform.
14. How does the group assess the level of participation during meetings (good, not so good, weak)? Why? Give three indicators.

2.4. The fourth sub-set relates to Capacity Building, including learning of CBI s. Here the focus is on finding out if there was training for all the members of the CBI as a group or at least for a critical mass as a group. The focus on group training is critical here. This section does not focus on training for individuals in CBIs or for individuals in several CBIs who manage the same or similar functions, e.g. all bookkeepers or technical hands. Training as a group is important for the group to build a vision, to develop its own R&R, for organisational accountability and learning (which will be discussed below).

The questions under this sub-set which form the framework for focus group discussions are the following:

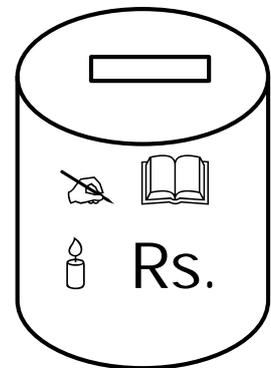
1. Has any training been provided to all the members as a group?
2. What were the modules? (Name them). How long did each module last? Where was the training conducted? (Village, Training Centre).
3. Did the members find the training useful? Give two examples of why they found it useful.
4. Have the members as a group visited any other group or project? Which one?
5. Has the group made any changes (additions/subtractions) to R&R? (This was discussed earlier, but bears repetition in the context of Capacity Building).
6. Is there a policy to train members to take over responsibilities in the group?

7. When were office bearers/representatives/cheque signatories last changed? How many times have they been changed since inception of the group?
8. Have audits and reports been discussed in group meetings?
 - a. Have follow up actions been taken to address audit recommendations?
 - b. Are reports/feedback and assessments made by Project Management (Project Officers, M&E officers) or consultants shared with the CBI?
 - c. Does the group take follow up action on recommendations made? List three.
9. List the official responsibilities performed by the group officials/representatives.
10. How does the group ensure that each of these official duties/responsibilities are shared or rotated among different members?
11. Describe three major lessons/innovations/ideas which the group learned/implemented during the past six months.

3. **Financial Management:**

The questions under this section are the following:

1. Are the Books of Accounts properly maintained and updated?
2. Are the members concerned to know what is the total common fund? Who are the defaulters? Can they give the total common fund and list the regular defaulters.
3. What are the sources of income of the CBI? For what purposes? Is it clear to all?
4. How are decisions made regarding expenditure? What is the process of decision making? What are the supporting documents (minutes, plans, estimates, bids, vouchers, etc.)? Does the group maintain regular expenditure vouchers?
5. Have any problems arisen during the last six months regarding management of cash or inputs? Describe them. How were they sorted out?
6. Where is the cash kept?
7. Does the group apply any sanctions for mismanagement? Who enforces it?
8. What are R&R relating to financial management? Can the members list 3 major ones.
9. What is the group's self-assessment of the process of financial management? (Scale: excellent, good, not so good, weak). List three reasons for assessment.

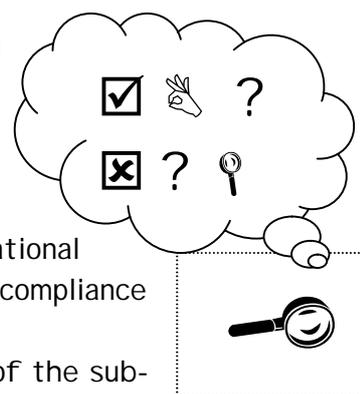


4. **Organisational Accountability:**

Regular change of leadership is important. Other concerns relate to whether the reports and assessments made of the project have been fed back to the CBI, whether the compliance audit reports of the CBI are placed before a body either outside (Government) or within (members).

The questions under this section are the following:

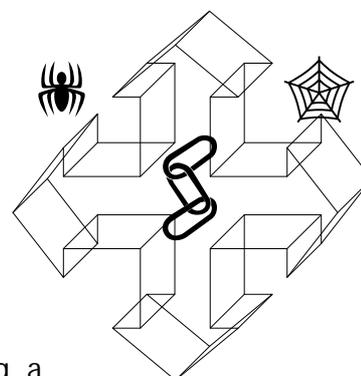
1. How has the group changed the leaders (representatives)? Did the former leadership appoint them?
2. What are the group's criteria for selecting leaders (representatives)? List them. Were they observed? If not, why?
3. Does the group ensure that compliance audits are carried out yearly?
4. Does R&R include issues related to organisational accountability, e.g. need to present reports and compliance audit reports to members.
5. Are management committee members or leaders of the sub-groups, related by bonds of blood and/or marriage?
6. How frequently does the Village organisation require the sub-committees to submit their financial reports and compliance audit reports to the higher authority (V.O. Government) and to all members?
7. If not, are there plans to submit them?
8. Is there any practice of applying sanctions? Who enforces them?
9. What benefits do the following get from the CBI ; President, Vice-President, Secretary, Accountant, members?
10. Does the CBI ensure that benefits (loans or facilities) are shared so that the weakest also participate in decision-making, get a fair share of resources and access to facilities? How? Give two examples of the weakest/poorest in the group, who have progressed and who have held positions in the group.
11. What is the group's self-assessment of the level of its performance? List three reasons for the assessment.



5. Linkages:

Supportive linkages among CBIs within every village and with CBIs/Institutions outside are a critical factor for sustainability and empowerment.

In this section, exercises can also be conducted to ascertain the perceptions of each CBI with regard to other CBIs in the village. Perceptions regarding "empathy" and "importance" of respective CBIs are important indicators for intervenors who are formulating a strategy that works towards achieving a level of synergy among CBIs at the village level. The PRA exercise of the Venn or Chapatti Diagram can be used to ascertain relative importance of CBIs and the relationships among them.



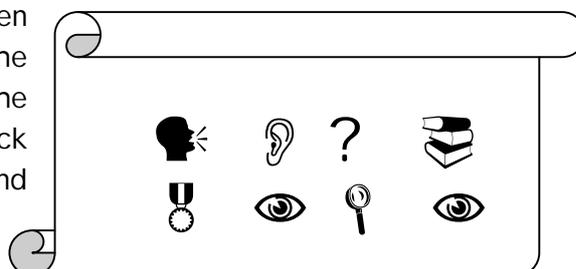
The questions under this section, which provides the framework for focus group discussions, are the following:

1. Number and types of CBIs in the village [formed by the project, other NGOs, by people (on their own - both old, i.e. traditional and more recent ones) by Government, etc.]

2. What are the major functions of traditional CBIs? List two or three.
3. Can the group rank all the CBIs in order of importance – in the groups' perception?
4. How does the CBI “empathise” with other CBIs in the village? Does it have any programme collaboration with another CBI? Describe one such action? (Venn diagram can be used to ascertain relationships).
5. Is this CBI linked to formal institutions such as banks, NGOs, Government and private institutions? How?
6. Is there any competition among CBIs? Between which ones in particular. In what way? Describe two examples. In the group's opinion, is this competition “good” or “bad” for the members?
7. Do other institutions in the area know about this CBI?
8. With whom does the group wish to establish linkages? Has it made some effort to do so?

6. Learning / Evaluation:

Questions relating to this feature have been included in the above five sections whenever the group is asked to assess itself and whenever the group is asked whether and how it uses feedback from audit (financial and systems) reports and regular management responses related to monitoring progress. However, a few questions



can help the group to focus on the need not only to be open to suggestions and to new ideas but also to pro-actively take initiatives to learn from other experiences and new areas of income generating and livelihood opportunities. The group also needs to realise that time spent on analysing and reflecting on its experiences is an important input in the process of growth.

The intervening agency, however, must also be a “learning organisation” it is to share this commitment and concern with the CBI it fosters.

1. Has the group made any effort to exchange experiences with other CBIs in the village? If yes, describe one such interaction.
2. Has the group interacted with institutions outside the village? If so, list them. What are the results of this interaction? List one.
3. Does the group assess the capacity of each member periodically and plan to provide opportunity to each one to increase in livelihood skills as well as in confidence and ability to negotiate with others particularly with middlemen? Give examples.
4. Have the members made any efforts to increase their literacy and numeracy skills?
5. Have the members taken any initiative or have they supported any initiative to start and manage a reading room in the village, or any other regular system and structure for dissemination of information?

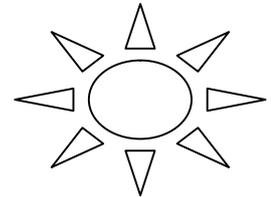
To Conclude:

As already indicated a system to ascribe numerical values to the responses is possible but has not yet been worked out in detail in MYRADA. However, quantifying the data and giving the CBI a 'grade' or a 'rating' is not the primary purpose of this exercise. What are important are the responses themselves, what they reveal about the CBI s to the members themselves, how they can help to transform the CBI from its present level of functioning, and what guidance they can provide to the project staff on how they can support the CBI to acquire and sustain the characteristics of a mature and functioning institution.

Aloysius P. Fernandez

January 2000

Bangalore



Appendix:

MYRADA has fostered several types of CBI s in all its projects. The following CBI s are the primary partners of MYRADA. (Status as on June 30, 2000)

Self Help Affinity Groups	4,131
Watershed Development Associations	183
Federations of SHAGs	117
Village Development Committees/Councils	55
School Betterment Committees/ Parent Teacher Associations	624
Village Water & Sanitation Committees	59
Farmers Associations	6
Children's Clubs	487
Village Forest Committees	388
Village Health Committees	11
Others *	21
Total	6,082

- * Others include Street level and Stand post committees; Programme Implementing Associations, Project Health Committees, Youth Clubs, etc. This list does not include institutions formed in projects where MYRADA has deputed staff or where our staff is providing support on a long term basis in India and abroad.