

AI Practitioner

The Impact of Appreciative Inquiry on International Development

Guest Editors: **Mette Jacobsgaard and Irene Nørlund**

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Social Capital and MYRADA's Pioneering Approach

The Power of Women in Community-Based Organisations in Southern India

ABSTRACT

MYRADA has always been in the forefront of pioneering and spreading new ideas in development. This paper examines how MYRADA is bringing AI and the concept of social capital together, empowering the women and their villages.

Over the last few decades, research on community development has increasingly shown that involving community members in their own development through participatory approaches is critical for sustainable development. Two major trends have given rise to this new paradigm of community development: first, a weakening of the social contract that bound people together, especially the poor, and provided a cushion of social security especially in difficult times; second, a focus on problems which became ingrained in communities and which in turn attracted outside attention and assistance.

The government and NGOs took the responsibility of delivering 'ready-made solutions' for these problems. This paper explores the corresponding transformation in the practice of community development in MYRADA, with particular focus on women's community-based organisations (CBOs).¹ In this case study, we examine how MYRADA has been unleashing the power of women by building on the affinity among poor and marginalised women to create social capital while building their capacity through the AI approach.²

1 Homogenous and membership groups of poor people at village level, federated at the second level, under a resource centre managed by the community itself.

2 The work with AI is vividly portrayed in the film which can be downloaded from the web-site www.myrada.org.

The concept of capital needs to be enlarged to include social capital.

MYRADA, founded in 1968, is a South Indian development agency focusing entirely on the poor and marginalised in rural areas and is presently managing thirteen projects in the states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. It has also collaborated with government, bilateral and multilateral programmes, with other states in India and in countries such as Myanmar, Indonesia, Timor Leste, Sri Lanka, Uganda and Rwanda. Over the years MYRADA has evolved into a group of autonomous societies, companies and informal institutions sharing a common vision to promote livelihood strategies, local governance, management of natural resources and health and education, favouring the rural poor in an inclusive, equitable and sustainable manner.

In 1999, Appreciative Inquiry was introduced in MYRADA through a two-and-half year partnership with Canada's International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD). Funding was provided by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID)³ to field test what was then a new participatory development approach called AI. In the last 10 years, MYRADA has conducted AI workshops for most of its own staff, many in turn have used this approach with their own families, and 80% of the members of the CBOs.

These include self-help affinity groups (SAGs)⁴; watershed management associations (WMAs)⁵; SAG federations⁶; community managed resource centers (CMRCs)⁷; district level HIV-positive persons' networks; and district level Soukhya Samudhaya Samasthe.⁸ Though the AI approach to community development was introduced in MYRADA in the late 1990s, social capital seemed to be gaining a foothold from 1984 through the creation of community-based organisations.

Extending the definition of 'capital'

Traditionally, the definition of 'capital' has included physical, natural and human capital. This overlooked the way in which 'the people engaged in the organisation' interact and organise themselves to generate growth and development. Hence the concept of capital needs to be enlarged to encompass social capital – the social structure plus the facilitation of the actors within that structure⁹ – for a better understanding of community development.

3 The project worked with governmental and non-governmental organisations in India.

4 Self-help groups or self-help affinity groups are CBOs, small groups of 15-20 poor men or women. The groups, mainly women's SAGs, are a major component of MYRADA's strategy for empowering the poor and marginalised.

5 CBOs are associations of poor farmers and other groups who live on or own land in a small, geographically contiguous area usually involved in planning for soil and water conservation, natural resource management activities, agriculture development and non-farm-based livelihoods.

6 One member is nominated from each CBO to represent the organisation at the federation level.

7 Created in 2004, each comprises 100-120 SAGs, WMAs and Soukhya groups. They are integral to MYRADA's withdrawal strategy as the role played by MYRADA in mentoring, monitoring and supporting these SAGs and WMAs is taken over by the CMRCs. The CBOs seek out membership in the CMRC and the latter levies a fee for the services they provide to nonmembers.

8 Registered societies at district level of sex workers. Focus is on health, safe sex, without oppression and harassment and, later by their own choice, on alternate livelihoods.

9 Coleman, 1988:598.

Social capital is an important new dimension of community development.

Valuation of the impact of AI strengths-based approach at the community level was felt necessary. Such a study remains incomplete unless it recognises the impact of social capital in community development. There is growing empirical evidence that social capital represents an important new dimension of community development, a link that has gone unnoticed in sustainable development. The CBOs, poor people's organisations, embody a very important form of structural social capital which is indispensable in making development possible and sustainable. As emphasised by Coleman, unlike human capital, social capital is embedded in structures, not in individuals. This capital, which is embodied in relationships and groups of people, constitutes a potentially important asset and plays a significant role in reducing poverty.

A MYRADA case study in Karnataka

MYRADA brings the concepts of social capital and Appreciative Inquiry (AI) together in women's CBOs at community level, and building the capacity of its members for sustainable community development through AI workshops. Social capital and AI complement each other and seem to be essential for a sustained long-term development, more so in the context of the poor and marginalised women in the villages. This case study is part of ongoing research studying the impact of AI workshop by MYRADA on the members of CBOs.¹⁰ The case study focuses on the impact of AI workshops on the CBO members of women's SAGs in three out of six CMRCs and explores the concept of social capital through these CBOs.

This is a descriptive study, based on qualitative analysis of the data collected from focus group discussions with the members of the SAGs; interviews with individual members of SAGs; observation of SAG meetings; SAG records like books, ledgers and vision charts; observation of the villages, the interaction of CMRC staff and others; and discussion with CMRC Managers and the MYRADA staffs in the MKHAD Project in Karnataka.

The structure of social capital: the relationship between CBOs, federations of CBOs and CMRCs

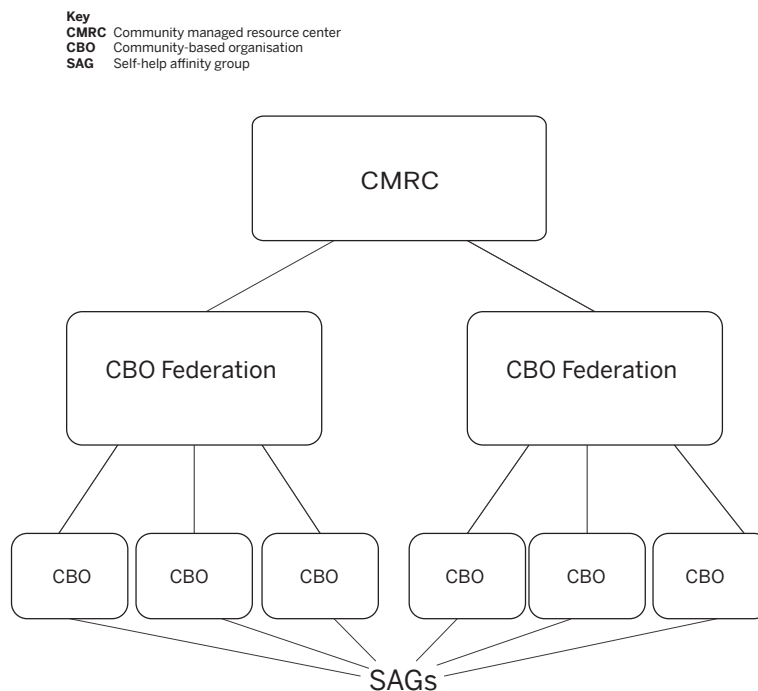
It is important to examine the structure of the CBOs in MKHAD project in order to understand the creation of social capital in the community.

Figure 1 (see following page) illustrates the three layered structure of the CBOs: SAGs are the base level CBOs; at the next level is the Federation of SAGs; and at the top level is the CMRC. This figure illustrates the scaling up of informal village level CBOs (they are not registered, have no office or full time staff) into the second level informal institutions of the federation of SAGs, which in turn scales up into the supra-community level CMRCs, the formal institutions.

SAGs, the base level institutions, self-select their members on the basis of internal bonds of affinity. These are membership and homogenous groups of poor and marginalised women from the village; they are linked by trust and mutual support. This affinity is the strength of the group and forms the basis for agreements, rules, regulations and sanctions. Since the SAGs bond the poor people together, it is an indication of social capital with no hierarchy.

¹⁰ CBOs have participated in an AI workshop in six CMRCs (all in Kollegal Taluk) out of eight under the MKHAD Project. Approximately 80 % of the CBOs have been involved in an AI workshop, while the rest are yet to receive one.

Figure 1: the structure of the CBOs



At a higher level, federations of well-managed CBOs represents the horizontal dimension of social capital in a network of 15–20 SAGs. These federations change oppressive power relations and create a level playing field in a sustainable, non-violent manner, looking at issues individual SAGs are unable to achieve. It is a link between the SAGs and the CMRC.

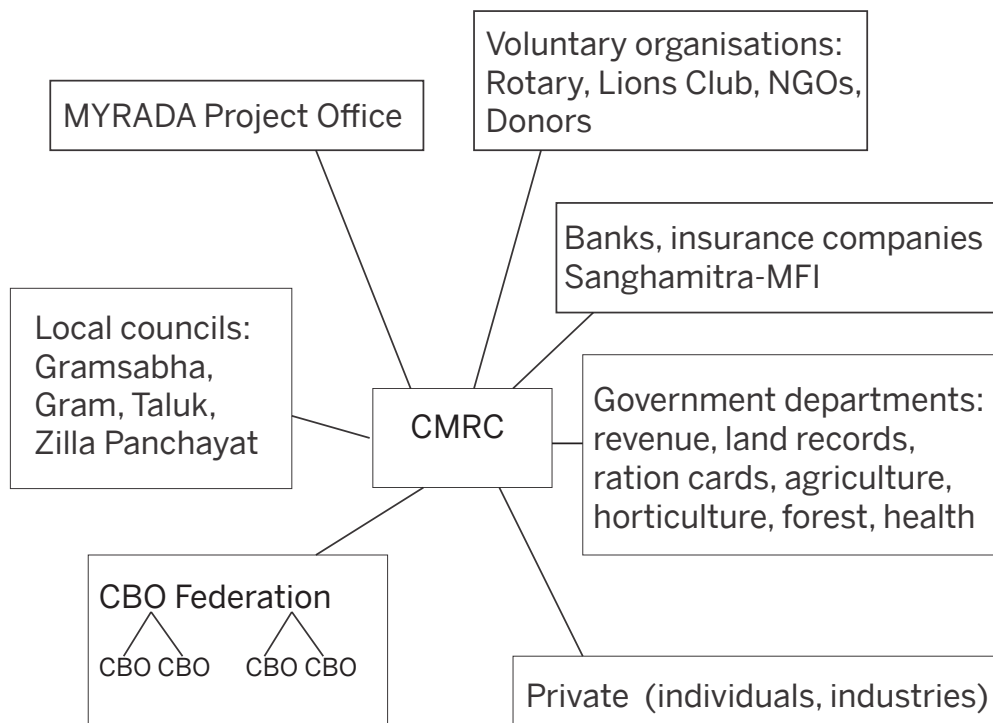
The CMRCs unite a number of base groups (100–120 CBOs) at a supra-community level. It embodies both the dimension of social capital; it is not just developing internal relations, horizontally linking the SAGs and the federation of SAGs within and among them, but at the same time building bridges, developing external links with government departments, private individuals (doctors, lawyers, engineers etc.), industries and institutions (banks, insurance companies), voluntary organisations, NGOs, donors and local councils.

The role of CMRCs in bridging with external linkages seems to be particularly important for the long-term sustainability of the CBOs as well as the development of the community. The individuals within the CMRCs assume several roles: political lobbying, activists, facilitators, service organisations and information hub.

Information sharing in an informal framework

Social capital affects economic outcomes. An in-depth study of these CBOs and the federation of CBOs shows that these groups provide an informal framework to organise information sharing, coordination of activities and collective decision making. Information sharing by the members plays an important role in poverty alleviation by facilitating easy access to credit. The CBO common fund is created by the savings of the women members (they contribute every week), and loans given to members at 24 % per annum (as opposed to 60% by the money lenders) rate of interest. In SAGs every woman member knows the written or unwritten rules, including penalties of noncompliance.

Figure 2: The dimensions of social capital within a CMRC in the MKHAD project



Information sharing thus reduces risk and uncertainty: they can depend on the SAG common fund rather than formal banks and insurance institutions.

Similarly, the members of the SAGs, federations of SAGs and CMRCs interact repeatedly, collectively coordinating activities and making decisions regarding activities like institution building and individual members (literacy, proper housing and sanitation) and village development activities (awareness camps, tree plantation, etc.). This formal or informal interaction intra, inter-group and with external actors enhances trust and reduces transaction costs.

In SAGs, every woman member knows the written or unwritten rules, including penalties ... The common fund is created by the savings of the women members.

AI complements social capital

The three CMRCs under study combine social capital with workshops in AI for the CBO members to bring about a gestalt change in the community. Two to three years after the formation of a SAG, the members are given an AI workshop which lasts one to two days, depending on the capacity of the CBO. During this session, through oral story telling, members discover and track their own strengths, those of others in the group and of the CBO itself. The strengths and achievements of the SAGs are written on a chart. Recording and reviewing them is very important because they become the foundation stone on which the vision is built and 'best practices' are amplified in the next phases of AI. After identifying these strengths and achievements, the members build a vision for their own CBO.

Vision charts: central to the process

The SAGs' pictorial charts show how the women build vision not just for the sustainability of their CBO and their families, but also for the village. Their vision is multifaceted: social, economic and environmental development.



Vision charts of Sri Ganesh SAG, Chinchally village, Kamadhenu CMRC: (left to right: 2001-6; 2006-8; and 2009-14)

The pictures drawn illustrate vision in:

- Education
- Health and sanitation
- Legal awareness
- Learning to sign their name
- Village development(cleaning water tanks, drainage, planting trees; repairing or constructing community hall; supporting school)
- CBO strengthening (federation support; increasing savings, financial transactions and mobilisation of funds; network and linkages with external actors; help forming new SAGs)
- Alleviating the poverty of members
- Increasing income generating activities such as cow-, goat- and sheep-rearing, and small shops
- Purchasing household goods such as gas cooker, almairah and mixie; proper house and sanitation construction
- Conducting weddings without spending too much money
- Philanthropic activities (for example, giving notebooks to poor children in school, and helping earthquake, and flood victims)

These visions are developed for between two and five years. A few SAGs have the confidence to go for the five year vision the first time; others develop a vision for two to three years and, as they become experienced in AI, build the next vision for five years. It is also interesting to see how the pictorial representation of the vision improves over the years as the members are constantly learning, experimenting and improvising as they go through the iterative AI phases (4 D – Discover, Dream, Design, Destiny).

Social systems grow in the direction of what they study.

The development of vision charts over time

Social systems grow, like heliotropic plants, in the direction of what they study, and the vision created has a pull effect. The SAGs as a social system are constantly striving for co-creating better and better imagery for the future.

| | |
|---------|--|
| 2001-6 | Lists only the activities as their vision. |
| 2006-8 | Shows the pictorial vision, but all in a column, one under the other. The fourth vision shows a member with a small cap, then a bigger and in the last a wearing a big cap. The cap is the metaphor for awareness and this group has a vision of increasing (hence the growing size of the cap) health, education and legal awareness of its members over a period of two years. |
| 2009-14 | Shows the four arms of the vision as economic development, social development of members, clean village and environmental development. AI approach is participatory. This vision, co-constructed by all 15 members of this women's SAG, is for the members of the group, the group overall and the whole village. It also lists plans and activities for these five years. |

Table: Vision for the year 2009-14 for Sri Ganesh SAG

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Economic Development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SAG saves 2 lakhs (1 lakh=100,000 rupees) • SAG financial transaction of 15 lakhs • All 15 members continue income generating programmes |
| Social Development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All members will have income above poverty line • All members pay their tax (land, water, house) to the government • All members' children educated till twelfth Grade or pre-University College • 18 years as the marriageable age for daughters |
| Clean Village | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Streets have a garbage tank • Clean and hygienic drinking water facility |
| Environmental Development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All members have constructed toilet |



Action plan (2006-11) of Shree Vidya SAG, Hanur village, Spandana CMRC

Shree Vidya SAG, Hanur village, Spandana CMRC: the 6Ws

The design or the action plan is drawn up on a large chart showing 6Ws (What, Why, Where, When, Who, Whom), 1 H (How) and a Remarks column where the group writes down the names of the member beneficiaries, the existing amount in the common fund, or the names of awareness programmes conducted, for example health programmes like TB, HIV, pregnancy, adolescent boys and girls of the village, eye camp etc. The exhaustive and detailed action plan chart has helped the SAGs to constantly review the activities planned (in their meetings held every week) and achieve them.

Managing their SAGs – and their families

It is important to highlight that the complex task of managing the SAGs is done by women who are mostly illiterate. Each group has only two or three women who can read and write. Managing their SAGs has made the women better managers within their families as well (in comparison with their husbands). The focus group discussion with the women members of the Allahhaibada SAG, in Basappanadoddi village, Spandana CMRC, reveals interesting stories. When they start talking and sharing stories of their past and present capacities, they highlight their achievements, unexplored potentials, core values, innovations, strength, best practices, moments of high point and competencies. In the language of AI, they discover their positive core.

The women are learning to link the energy of this core directly to their change agenda and are bringing about these changes that were never thought possible before. Sharing makes the positive core the common and explicit property of all so they can collectively and consciously co-construct a better future.

Crafting a vision for the future

During the focus group discussion, a woman said that in the beginning, they had to cover their heads with their sari and sneak out of the house to SAG meetings, hiding the membership book from their husbands, because the men did not trust the women or the group, more so because the CBOs have no office or staff.



Members of Allahhaibada SAG,
Basappanadoddi village, Spandana
CMRC

Today the same women come out of the house with confidence without covering their heads (she demonstrated this with gesture) proudly holding the membership book in their hand and their husbands are also encouraging them because the SAGs have helped these women support their families. The MYRADA's experience too indicates that when men's income increases they tend to spend it on themselves, whereas women use it for their family. The dynamics of this group discussion generates a confidence to change relations at home and in society showing the intangible assets being tapped into by AI.

Conclusion

The case study of women's CBOs in MYRADA shows that far from contradicting, AI complements social capital. More precisely, AI builds on social capital. This seems to be essential for a sustained long-term development, more so in the context of the poor and marginalised in the villages. It's positive impact on community development is slowly but surely emerging. However, working with poor, marginalised and illiterate women's groups still remains a challenge.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank CMRC managers Ms Sowmya, Ms Lalitha and Ms Nagarathna for helping us conduct this study.

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About the November 2011 Issue

Appreciative Governance: The Principles and Practice

Governance is the set of activities that guide the functioning of a human system, enabling members to set direction or purpose, to make decisions assuring the fulfilment of their purpose, and to set the standards of relationship, behavior and accountability. We know new governance models are needed. Thinking differently about governance is the first step; a set of principles and a process for the design and implementation of new governance systems are also required.

Everywhere we turn we see evidence of a need for new governance structures: the inability of the global financial system to self regulate; the malfunctioning of the Deepwater Horizon 'network' responsible for taking corrective action when an explosion occurs on the oil rig. From the Wall Street crash and great depression of 1929 to the massive bankruptcies (and criminal conduct) of Enron, MCI/Worldcom, and many other corporate scandals, including the 'great recession' of 2008, the issue of organizational conduct has grown in importance for all of us.

Issues of conduct have not been limited to commercial organizations. Major not-for-profit organisations (NPOs) such as the Roman Catholic Church, the United Way, the American Red Cross, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the American Cancer Society, and Toys for Tots are among the many NPOs which have had senior executives imprisoned and/or fined for various forms of malfeasance. This issue of AIP shares the results to date of an on-going inquiry into the principles and practices of Appreciative Governance. The articles reflect our effort to answer key questions such as:

1. What if Governance is happening everyday in every corner of the system (vs only in the boardroom) and what if it is concerned with a lot more than compliance, strategy, corporate reporting and selection and compensation of executive management.
2. How would the design of governance and control systems (traditionally almost exclusively the purview of accountants, lawyers and economists responding to negative situations) change?
3. How would a participatively-developed set of governance structures and systems (based on principles for strengths-based organizations) generate sustainable value?



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Purpose of AI Practitioner

This publication is for people interested in making the world a better place using positive relational approaches to change such as Appreciative Inquiry.

The publication is distributed quarterly: February, May, August and November.

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ISSN 1741 8224

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