

MYRADA

Rural Management Systems Series
Paper – 51

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TOWARDS A NEW VISION
A Preliminary Note for the
Project Officers' Meeting September 26 and 27, 2008

Myrada cannot stand still; if it does, it will disappear. The same holds true of all the institutions promoted in our Projects.

You have by now received information from Lathamala about the forthcoming Program, Project and Training Officers Meeting in September 2008. Following a session at Head Office we have also come up with a new (draft) vision of the place of Myrada in the Institutional Universe that it helped promote. I am leaving for Indonesia today and thought that I should dash off a note as a follow up to these initiatives and to stress that this forthcoming meeting is not just about administration, reports and the like, but about: a) Sharing the new vision and coming to a consensus; b) internalising the implications of this new vision in our own lives as well as in the institutional life of Myrada; c) working out a plan to support all that is required (in terms of staffing, staff skills and attitudes and project management including sustainability), and d) designing a (flexible) strategy to pursue this vision relentlessly over the next 5 years.

If you look at the older vision which was printed in our last agency profile you will find Myrada squarely in the centre. This vision projected the image of Myrada as it positioned itself till 1990. There is nothing wrong with this vision; it was needed to implement programs as well as to promote other institutions of people. Fortunately Myrada did not let “implementing programs” override the second objective, namely - “promoting other institutions”. And because of this clear priority to promoting other - mainly people's institutions but also several NGOs, Myrada has built a strong base over the years which will carry the impact of its interventions far beyond the time when Project implementation ends. The new (draft) vision reads like this: -

MYRADA IS NOW A GROUP

OF AUTONOMOUS SOCIETIES, COMPANIES AND INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS
SHARING A COMMON VISION TO PROMOTE
EQUITY, GROWTH AND SUSTAINABILITY
IN THE AREAS OF

LIVELIHOODS, NATURAL RESOURCES, GOVERNANCE, HEALTH AND
EDUCATION

Myrada is no more at the Centre of this Institutional Universe which it has promoted. It is one among many; some may want to consider it Primus inter Pares (the first among equals); I

have no quarrel with them at this point of time (may be later). Let us consider briefly the areas listed above.

Livelihoods: We have been heavily involved in livelihoods. We did not directly provide money for one or two so-called income generating assets like cows, sheep, wells, etc. (though those projects which started in the early and mid eighties, which had a major implementation objective did this too) - but promoted Self Help Affinity groups. It is the SAGs which have provided the space for each member to develop a "livelihood strategy". We did not move to the next step which is to systematically analyse their decisions so that we can intervene quickly and effectively. We needed a software to do this - since the SAGs alone numbered over 10,000. We now have NAB-YUKTI - please learn to use it. NAB YUKTI helped us to realise that each member of the SAG has her/his own livelihood strategy. We found that over a period of 10-12 years, each member has taken 15-20 loans amounting to a total of Rs 1 lakh to Rs 3 lakh and for diverse purposes. The next step is to evolve a focused strategy aimed at supporting the landless, marginal and small farmers who have diversified their livelihood base and developed livelihood strategies. They need to be able to improve productivity and quality, adapt to changing demands, and to have access to several markets. All of them need to have the opportunity to make use of the technical skills training opportunities we provide through our Non Formal Technical Training Institutes - though these opportunities have to be increased several times in the next few years. Establishing links between the Community Managed Resource Centres and the private sector (the Titan example) and with SAFAL (for sale of vegetables and fruits) are other major areas we need to look at.

Natural resources: We have been involved in promoting appropriate institutions and technology to manage natural resources. Our watershed strategy is well accepted – we have strategies to “make the water walk”...but not enough to “bring the soil back to life”. Hence organic farming, integrated pest management, compost, vermicompost, rotation of crops, bund planting, regeneration of wasted lands etc. are major areas waiting to be explored. We have good examples already in Myrada; spread them. As for alternate energy resources and the need to use available resources (especially water and power) more efficiently – we have much to discuss and plan.

Governance: We have promoted good governance within our organisation as well as within the CBOs that emerged through institutional capacity building and mentoring them to develop and maintain appropriate organisational and financial systems. Now we have to move into the Gram Panchayats if our efforts are to be sustainable and to have a larger impact. Again we have examples – a small first step in Bonthi and Chincholi. Let us learn from these experiences. The back up communication support that can be provided through V-SAT, FM Radio, etc. are in place but will require extension and financial support.

In health and education: there are several examples to be analysed and learnt from; we have identified some of them earlier in Kote and Dharmapuri; but there is much more that can be done.

Note: For those interested in some suggestions for future initiatives in these areas, I have written a major paper for a Seminar in Bhubaneshwar. If you are interested in a copy and are serious about reading it...do ask this office to send it to you.

Yes, Myrada has promoted institutions. But we cannot claim that promoting institutions took up all our energy and resources. There were times and projects where implementation

dominated. Fortunately in some of these projects the committed and experienced staff of Myrada who held leadership positions managed to keep the balance and at the same time keep away from politics.

Promoting institutions is not easy; it requires an attitude which can be summarised briefly as “realising that the poor have strengths and identifying and respecting them” since this is the reason for their survival. So let us listen to them and learn from them and then in all humility build on these strengths but at their pace and in an environment where they set the agenda. This is why Myrada promotes “Appreciative Inquiry” which does not start with an analysis of people needs which immediately places people's dependence in the core design of the project and ends up in standard schemes that have to be implemented; the strategy of the project is then to respond to needs not to strengths. Needs are more easy to cope with a standardised response; strengths keep shifting and need space to grow. It also does not start with a problem tree analysis. The poor are aware of their problems; do not keep rubbing them in; we have to immerse ourselves in their lives to feel with them and then try to understand them. We need to be in a constant state of learning.

There were times when we do (and did) not listen and learn; there are times when we have become “alienated”... middle age and success brings with it complacency and a certain degree of “psychological deafness” which ends in alienation. Our mode of transport is fast – we speed past problems to arrive at the "problem tree analysis seminar"; our mode of transport is noisy and keeps out the sounds of the surroundings. Some projects in which we are involved with are becoming increasingly demanding of data, data, data. Our staff in the field are busy collecting data – a good example are the Soukhya and Samasthe projects; but they are not the only ones; other projects with Government funds are catching up. These project are what I call “mining projects” they mine data for the benefit of others living far away and not to improve the effectiveness of the program. Why do I say this? Because the more we mine, the less we get feedback or analysis from the management within the country. I have not seen a single theoretical analysis of the data we have provided in these projects.

However the obstacles to “listening, seeing, feeling” and later “analysing” are not all from outside. They are within us too. I pointed out some earlier – like a middle age attitude; others are more structural like the organisational vision which places Myrada at the centre and may not be valid for the future. This is why we have tried to express a new vision. It is not entirely new; it has evolved over the past 10 years and it is time that it is depicted and displayed and discussed. Even during the past twenty years we have oscillated between periods of listening and periods of complacency. During the 80s and early 90s we listened – the SAGs emerged. In the middle 90s we stopped listening...we were more taken up with administration and internal issues relating to staff; later towards 2000 and beyond we started listening again...the CMRCs merged.

Why do we need this new vision?

- To realise that Myrada is no longer the Centre: Many Societies, Companies and Informal Institutions have emerged in all our projects and even beyond. Many of our staff have become Executive Directors and Member Secretaries of Governing Bodies of these institutions. The concern is whether they will continue to share Myrada's mission to promote growth, equity and sustainability and add their own components to this mission. The greater concern is whether they will understand that as Executive Directors and Member Secretaries they have lost their independence and security and the freedom to

- To realise that Myrada has survived because it has listened to the poor, helped them to form their own institutions, adapted to their own agenda: Myrada did not impose a single ideology or strategy. It is not religious, it does not adhere to any political party; hence its resources do not come from these sources which are ample and growing. Myrada attracts resources because it is way ahead. And the other Institutions which have spun off must follow this example. Unless all of us remain ahead, we will die or become irrelevant. And to remain ahead we have to move continuously. This is only possible if we learn and respond to people. Myrada does not consider one ideology as the only one and right way. It believes in the dictum that “I am right and you too may be right” without subscribing to any philosophy. It has promoted hundreds of small NGOs and thousands of people's institutions and now it has to place itself within this institutional universe – where it is one among many. Radical ideology whether religious, political or Marxist places itself at the Centre; it closes ones eyes and ears to changes in reality which anyway moves along and leaves behind static frameworks of philosophy to console those left behind, to justify their irrelevance and often harmful actions and to reward them in the future life.
- To realise that Myrada is like the private sector in development: We once had the experience of an Insurance officer from a Government sponsored company who lamented that he had spoken several times to Myrada to promote a certain policy but there was no response. We pointed out that we had presented this policy to people but no one was interested and that he resembled a company that was trying to sell a soap which no one wanted perhaps he should change the soap. I hope that Myrada and the other Institutions promoted do not ever try to sell a soap which no one wants. Look at the soap please and do not blame the people who have no obligation to buy some policy or even a scheme, which may be heavily subsidised by government but is of no long-term use to them. Like the private sector, Myrada and the other institutions have to see, feel, listen constantly. Unlike the Private sector, Myrada has to promote other institutions of the poor, PRIs and NGOs and even MFIs - not kill them with aggressive competition.

I may be wrong; but Myrada is still a good and healthy place to work in. True higher salaries are available in the more exotic sectors like IT, but many are discovering that the need to keep to Tokyo time, to US time and EU time is having a serious impact on their health. But let this “easiness” not lead us into “complacency”.

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