

Institute for Ecology and Livelihood Action

Employment, Nutrition, Health and Overall Well Being back to Centre Stage

Background:

The blow hot blow cold on the pandemic and its looming threat even as restrictions have been lifted indicate the relative importance health and overall well being are being given by Society. However as one probes deeper, there is sufficient indication to show the complete abdication of respective governments with respect to its responsibility towards its citizens. The lack of/ instability with respect to jobs and even less those with dignity have placed the onus of survival on people/ communities themselves. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 1-3 defined above come in tandem with the next 3 namely SDGs 4-6 (Education, Gender Equality and Clean Water and Sanitation). These six put together and prioritised give a different handle on the remaining SDGs as well. The impact of the pandemic meant that one had to rely primarily on web meetings, phone calls, What's app conversations and emails. This help to test/reinforce issues related to whether decentralised governance had indeed come of age and whether these modern tools were sufficient for communities to get their act together. While the government, business houses and other organisations certainly relied on these, the public at large were left stranded, the impact on government schools and poor and marginal communities not having adequate access to these facilities have been disastrous to say the least.

Since IELA believes that women and children are the worst affected by ecological and social issues, a plan has been put in place that places these issues upfront in relation to any question of empowerment.

In relation to women, the following proposition was placed in discussion with women groups and organisations working with women.

- a. Issues related to livelihoods, nutrition and the relevance of the agricultural systems to meet these needs. How women are involved and deal with this question.
- b. The relevance of the collective approach and knowledge base which women as a group have which can facilitate the process of change in the delivery mechanism. This relates to government schemes in general and the Aanganwadi and mid-day meal scheme in particular.

In relation to children, the need to organise them around the 17 SDGs using the model of Children's parliament has been discussed and put into practise to the extent possible. This has been contextualised in terms of engagement with gram sabha/ ward sabha so as to engage actively with children's knowledge of governance mechanisms.

With this as the base, the larger questions related to empowerment of gramsabhas, the relevance of federations in this empowerment process and the question of regional/ thematic forums to engage on issues related to natural resources, livelihood and governance at District, State and National level have been explored on multiple platforms. Given the close

association IELA has with Akhil Bharatiya Mazdoor Kisan Sangharsh Samiti (ABMKSS), IELA helped guide the National study commissioned by ABMKSS on the same. The output has been discussed in many forums (some facilitated by IELA). The result was a move towards the creation of a separate National Forum to deal with the issues related to marginalisation of tribal, fisher, pastoral and small farmer communities keeping in mind that this marginalisation also leads to the need for wage labour either absorbed under MGNREGA or migration in search of labour. Separately therefore, IELA has been pushing for an ecologically sustainable approach to the use of village labour in MGNREGA and the relevance of community based planning an identification of key issues to be addressed.

As part of the process of empowerment of women, the question of introduction of local foods into the mid day meal scheme and proper examination of the nutritive and health aspects of local foods in the diet have been stressed. This appreciation of communities is then used to evaluate the health and land use policies and develop perspectives on the relevance of local knowledge and traditions in addressing these questions.

Keeping in mind the larger theoretical constructs behind these formulations in the development process, IELA responded readily to an appeal by Xavier Institute for Natural Resource Management to help them with the course on MA-NRM being conducted by the them. IELA used its experience to introduce concepts related to the Millenium Assessment tools and its relevance for ecological and climate change assessments by communities. This is work in progress at the moment and the experience gained will unfold itself more in the years to come.

Another important dimension, is IELA's participation in a workshop on Human Rights and Climate Change organised by Human Rights Law network at Udaipur. IELA used its experience to showcase its understanding on the ecological and related governance conditions in Rajasthan. Follow up on important human rights issues related to forest rights implementation based on ground work done by IELA was also planned.

IELA has been responsible to giving shape to Especioza Trust, which in more ways than one is the parent organisation and inspiration behind IELA. Managing Trustee IELA, used the time and space provided by the lockdown to give shape to his ideas through a series of seven plays brought out in two volumes and a booklet on poetry covering various facets of life. This in turn has been responsible for the quarterly magazine of Especioza Trust which features prominently IELA's knowledge on Ecological governance based on participation of its members in various Local, State, National and International events. The larger understanding reflected in the newsletter in turns guides IELA in its future course of action.

This process of Centering the process of Ecological Governance on women and children now places IELA on an entirely different footing to examine questions related to ecological governance of diverse landscapes, climate change and the basis theoretical formulations related to the correction on historical injustice outlined in the preamble of the Forest Rights Act 2006. This includes the historical understanding of communities on natural resources and governance and reflected in the historical growth and demographics of communities.

Annual Report 2021-22

Agenda for nutrition, health and overall well being:

A study in collaboration with Wisconsin University, USA was proposed and facilitated by IELA. Since the actual study took place with Hanuman Van Vikas Samiti, it is not being reported here, only the outcome is. The points related to this are being reported here.

- a. The study was proposed as part of a larger effort towards women's empowerment of which HVVS, Prayatna Samiti, SPWD and IELA are part of the team working towards this goal.
- b. There are conceptual issues related to the research design. Given our experience we have found that suggestions do not come forward from the people in the same form of rationality that we expect them to. The process of facilitation as we know in relation to NREGA has first started with micro plans made for roads, then expanded to cover NRM and lastly proposals related to common land development came forth. This is due to the fact that external facilitation was required to sort out internal issues preventing full consultation with the communities. In the absence of this, programmes get decided by a limited coterie in the village who have close ties with government and political functionaries and plans designed to suit their interests first.
- c. In the specific matter under question, what emerged was a roundabout route to empowerment covering many facets that could help communities explore their own potential. As the study pointed out, the options that people could come up with by themselves were limited and when directly questioned said that they would be happy to depend on the market for their needs, indicating that they did not see solutions to their own issues within the existing framework. The community however enthusiastically responded to the engagement with IELA as local forgotten options were put before them, jogging their memory. However they did look to IELA for concrete suggestions to specific problems faced by them indicating both a breakdown of traditional knowledge systems and their application to new problems being faced by them.
- d. We call this issue people science interface, where people are informed of the larger issues and concerns and are facilitated to make informed decisions rather than solutions thrust on them from above or limited options given the level of exchange between people and the need to connect to the knowledge of elders which has been sidelined due to the operation of the market forces.

Simultaneous to this and following this exercise, there was engagement with local communities (urban and rural) on this issue in other parts of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Delhi. It has also been noticed that the government and donors are paying attention to the question of development of kitchen and nutrition gardens and incorporation of local foods in the diet of the mid day meal scheme. IELA got an opportunity to develop this further during discussions with XINRM and Social Centre as also partners of the Pune Jesuits. Accordingly a tentative plan has been made with SADDAC in Daund. SADDAC is associated with a

group of 100 women Self help groups having a total of 1000 women from six hamlets of Daund. Proposals for development of model herbal and kitchen gardens on campuses of Social Centre and its partner NGOs was also explored.

Study on Local Self Governance and impact on Communities

Since this study was sponsored and facilitated by ABMKSS, the details are not being reported here. What is of relevance is some of the findings and observations from the study.

a. Tribals, small and traditional fishers, pastoralists, small and marginal farmers are being further marginalised due to the destruction of the habitat (common lands) and traditional management systems on which they depend. While struggles to preserve these spaces exists, the battle appears to be a losing one. These communities are still not yet defeated due to the fact that their survival itself depends on these resources with wage labour and migration not providing adequate options as the government might have us believe from the way development plans facilitating displacement and destruction of natural resources are being put in place.

b. The need for decentralised options and collective response to diverse individual struggles is becoming more and more apparent as Industrial models based on centralised command and control systems do not work. Revival of traditional systems is faced with the additional problems that the process of commodification has placed namely fragmentation of the local communities, replacement of nature based knowledge with market based ones and promotion of individual versus the collective, reinforcing exploitative relations based on centralised command and control systems for profit maximisation rather than meeting community goals.

c. The destruction of habitats is based on the non recognition of the historical relevance of the biodiversity in the life support systems of local communities, rather making them dependant on an uncertain and bureaucratic government largesse for the same.

Restoration of these processes as a part of decentralised ecological governance requires local communities to understand the significance of developments in renewable energy and technology that have the potential to restore aspects of traditional decentralised governance systems in way conducive to ecological restoration of landscapes and enhance employment potential based on the potential for local value addition, reduction of pollution due to the enhancement of potential for recycling through application of nature's cycles at more local levels.

IELA's presentations on Climate Change

Separately as mentioned above, IELA presented it's understanding on the Natural resources and ecology of Rajasthan at a workshop on Climate Change and Human Rights organised by Human Rights Law Network held at Udaipur for activists across Rajasthan. The presentation highlighted the following key elements.

a. The significance of Aravallis as a barrier in separating out the Indo Persian biodiversity from the Indo Malayan ones. Related to this is the relevance of animal husbandry to the

desert/ dryland ecology and the impact of non recognition of the ecological significance of traditional livelihood patterns on the increasing depletion of ground water in the region.

b. In terms of Climate change the presentation pointed to the significance of a twin approach recognising components of local self governance and integrating them in the development of State strategies to combat climate change.

c. Outline of a strategy for rights recognition based on the forest rights act and the biodiversity act, providing due recognition to local self governance principles by local communities.

This presentation was followed up by a similar, yet different (focus on ecology rather than human rights) presentation to participants attending a workshop on Climate Change and ecology by Rufford Foundation.

Collaboration with XINRM, Social Centre and Pune Province of the Jesuits

In response to a request from the Pune Province of the Jesuits, IELA participated in a meeting to facilitate the preparation of their Papal Apostolic Plan and helped XINRM and Social Centre informally to develop the agenda on Natural resource management in relation to the Post graduate course MA- NRM being conducted by IELA. Members of IELA participated as faculty in the first semester for the 2021-23 batch giving 110 lectures during the session. During the process IELA tried to acquaint the students with the UN process related to Sustainable development reflected in the Brundtland Committee report and with the subsequent development related to the Millenium Assessment, Millenium Assessment tools and the Sustainable Development Goals. As part of consolidating this process, IELA is in the process of bringing out a report on Maharashtra, covering major aspects taught to the students. The students were encouraged to come out with assignments that reflected their understanding which will be covered partially in the report brought out by IELA while simultaneously encouraging the students to develop these further in the dissertations they will be preparing in the later semesters.

Other Collaborations and engagement with the Government

IELA is actively involved informally with organisations like GSS, SPWD, Prayatana Samiti on issues related to NRM in general, Forest Rights, Biodiversity Act and promotion of local foods and herbal remedies in particular. These associations along with engagement with CBOs on issues related to forestry, fisheries, pastoralism and sustainable agriculture are the basis for engagement with different departments of the government in Rajasthan, Forest Department and Tribal Department and Panchayati Raj Department in particular.