

Meeting minutes: 25th teleconference on self-sustenance: Discussion on “working with Government” with Hijli INSPIRATION: Dec 18th: 8:30 pm EDT

Attendees: Chandrayee (INSPIRATION), Padmanava (Irvine/Atlanta), Rajeev (Boston), Chandan (Chicago), Ravi (UFlorida), Fehmida (Cleveland) and Ajoy (UFlorida)

Q1. Can you please give us a brief background on how INSPIRATION started?

Hijli INSPIRATION was started in 1996 by alumni of IIT Kharagpur. I was one of the founding members. From the very outset we have been working with the Indian Government. Only during the last 4-5 years we have started working with other organizations. We usually start in one sector and then several areas get integrated because the various sectors that we work are interrelated. For example if we start with educational projects the other sectors that invariably get involved are gender/ health. We try to organize the mothers and get them involved with the educational projects.

Steps are taken to get the local Government involved with the projects. In urban areas we get in touch with municipality, local bodies and councilors and take their help for running the projects. Now that the West Bengal Government has changed there will be some modifications in the understanding and approach to our collaborative work with the Government. We have projects in Sunderbans, West Bengal in collaboration with JRD Tata trust.

Q2. What kind of educational projects are you involved with?

Most of our educational projects are with bridge schools. In these schools we coach drop out children and help in mainstreaming them to formal schools. Most of the time, registers in Government schools show high enrollment but in reality the everyday attendance is much lower. We help the school and the community by doing a survey of the school students, identifying and keeping track of the children and we share the survey with the local Government. Children are trained by bringing in teachers from Government primary schools so that students can get feedback on what is expected from them in formal schools. We keep in touch with local municipal councilors/karmadhakshya and keep the updated with information about our work in the locality schools. Sometimes with consent from the local Government we use their resources in running bridge schools. Local community members are encouraged to come forward and take initiatives in running the schools. The objective here is to involve the community with day to day activities and ultimately encouraging them to take ownership of the schools. Under the consent of the Government local clubs also take initiatives in maintaining the schools.

Q3. Can you please give us some insight into the courses that you teach in bridge schools?

We usually have programs like accelerated reading and writing to help drop out students catch up with the quality of reading, writing programs taught in formal schools. These courses were developed in collaboration with NGO Pratham based in Delhi and Mumbai. We have implemented these courses in schools located in districts viz. Cooch Bihar, North 24 Parganas, Darjeeling, Uttar Dinajpur, Bankura etc.

Q4. Do you teach students from different grade levels in the same classroom?

We segregate students in groups having similar reading/writing competencies. Their weaknesses are identified, training programs are tailored to meet their needs and strategies are developed to take them to the next level. Thus in one class you can find students from various classes/standards however, they have very similar competencies and weaknesses related to reading/writing skills.

Q5. NGOs tell us that it is often difficult to work with the Government. But you have worked with the Government since 1996. Is it because you have highly qualified people in the board of INSPIRATION and hence your organization gets more importance from the Government?

Yes, that could be one of the reasons why we are successful in collaborative work with the Government. However, we make efforts to work with the Government from the very outset of any project that we undertake. I will not say that it is easy to work with the Government. We have to try hard to make the collaboration work in most cases. It takes some time to identify the Government officials who are helpful and can get the initiative started. Once that is achieved we integrate these people in our everyday activities with the Government and it becomes easier to proceed further with the initiative. For example, the chairman of District Planning Committee (DPC) in Sunderbans was very helpful to us and with his support we have implemented several education based projects in this region. We work in close collaboration with school inspectors and headmasters of the local schools in the Sunderbans.

As with the NGOs, the Indian Government also has its bad experiences working with some NGOs. At one point of time we were told that the Government will only accept NGO projects through UNICEF and will not directly work with the NGOs.

Q6. The Right to Education (RTE) act came into effect in April 2010. According to this act all schools, including those run by NGOs will have to meet the basic RTE requirements set by the Government within 2013. How involved is your organization with the RTE advocacy and implementation?

Now, everything in the education sector is about RTE and its implementation and our organization has started working on this initiative. RTE work in Kamarhati locality is ongoing and we have been successful in bringing together influential people and local clubs to advocate for RTE implementation in local schools.

Q7. Besides education, on what other areas do you collaborate with the Government?

We have worked with the Government in building and sustaining self help groups (SHGs) for women. In this program we bring women together and help them in developing a credit habit. The credit activity may consist of saving an amount as small as Rs. 10 per month. The women in the SHGs are then taught to do internal lending for small business ventures like bori (food item made from lentils) making. Small businesses like these do not require a lot of investment. Once their credit habit is developed we get them involved with the Government. When they show consistent SHG

saving and lending activities they can get bigger loans from Government to set up larger scale businesses. However, overtime we have found this model to be unsustainable in the long run. Sustainable businesses need a bigger platform and this cannot be attained by the SHG model we followed. Now, the Indian Government is trying to implement the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM). The NRLM program involves a mix of different types of self employment schemes and can bring together around 1000 SHGs in one district, thus enhancing the capacities to become a bigger platform for saving and lending activities which individual SHGs cannot attain.

Q8. What kind of Governmental support can the SHGs get?

The Government has initiated various poverty alleviation programs that involve the SHGs. For example the Swarna Jayanthi Shahari Rozgar Yojana (SJSRY) program has been implemented to generate self employment opportunities for the urban poor. This program aims to eradicate absolute poverty from urban areas and its working model involves SHGs.

For more information please look into the following report:

<http://ncw.nic.in/pdfReports/Effectiveness%20of%20Women%20Self%20Help%20Groups%20in%20Micro%20Enterprise%20Development%20in%20Rajasthan%20and%20Tamil%20Nadu.pdf>

Also, the SHGs can access loans from the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) which is a Government enterprise.

Q9. Currently, RTE implementation in the schools supported by Asha for Education is a top priority work that we want to accomplish within the next two years. We are also interested in collaborative work with the Government. Can your organization help us organize and implement these programs?

Yes, of course. It will be a learning experience for us. RTE and SHG are two areas where we have lots of experience. We can design the RTE survey and organize training for RTE advocacy and implementation. As for SHG, Asha can try a new initiative of providing loans to its projects. You can ask projects to raise 50% of the loan amount and Asha can provide the rest as matching grant. Please think about it and let us know how Asha volunteers would like to proceed with these programs.