

**RAISING PUBLIC HEALTH CONCERNS IN INDIA:
A CASE STUDY OF 'MEDIA FOR RIGHTS' PROGRAMME**

By

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About the program

Name of the organization: Vikas Samvad

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Abstract

Despite being the fourth largest economy of the world, India is an ironic example of malnutrition and underdevelopment. The Indian state has introduced a large number of welfare schemes with the help of various national and international agencies in order to eradicate the problem of malnutrition. However, these efforts have not been able to bring remarkable change in the overall scenario. As a noted economist highlighted in his study that there is a wide disparity within Indian states in terms of underdevelopment. Madhya Pradesh, the Central Indian state has been one of the most backward regions in the country. The media for rights program of Vikas Samvad, a non-profit organization based in the capital city of Madhya Pradesh has made an effort to raise the issue of malnutrition in general and child health in particular through its media advocacy program. The Media Advocacy Program is targeted towards involving media persons in raising these issues at the local and regional level. Vikas Samvad¹ has been playing the role of a link between the people who are affected with these issues and the media.

Objectives

- a. To address the problem of malnutrition in the state*
- b. To raise the problems of child malnutrition*
- c. To generate awareness about women health issues*
- d. To ensure effective implementation of all nutrition related schemes*
- e. Reform and expansion of the public distribution system*

The Problem

Despite being one of the fastest growing economies in the world, the problem of low human development has been a serious challenge for policy makers in India. Amongst these the challenge of public health is one of the most difficult one. In spite of a large number of state run health programs, a relatively vast health infrastructure, and a significant spending of the national budget on health i.e. approximately four percent, India continues to remain one of the poorest performing countries on the public health indicators. Child malnutrition and maternal mortality rates in India are highest in the world. Even amongst its own neighborhood, which are otherwise

¹ Vikas Samvad is a hindi word which means dialogue for development. The media for rights is considered as an integral part of such dialogue. However, this dialogue has many facets which includes intearaction between non governmental organizations, voluntary sector and media as well.

extremely unstable and vulnerable countries, the public health indicators are better than that of India.

According to the World Health Organization in 2009, Under Five Child Mortality Rate in India (66) was higher than Bangladesh (52) and Nepal (48). Similarly, the Maternal Mortality Ratio in India (230) is higher than China (38) and Sri Lanka (39), and slightly lesser than Pakistan (260). One of the major reasons behind the poor public health system in India has been its state centered mechanism to monitor the emergence of threats to public health. Drought affected regions are most vulnerable to serious crises of public health including malnutrition, starvation deaths etc (Sainath 2006). The public health system in India suffers from the problem of corrupt government machinery, lack of adequate checks, and ineffective monitoring systems in a poor shape. Scholars have argued (Gupta *et al* 2009: 3) argued that India needs to learn from the developed world experience and build a public health system which acts “proactively before the health threats lead to outbreaks, instead of merely controlling outbreaks once they occur. This requires the Health Department to directly provide many services, as well as giving technical support to other agencies and regularly monitoring their services to assure that they meet health standards.” In a comparative study of India and China in preventing famine caused deaths, Sen and Dreze (1991) have shown how India’s democratic institutions especially its media and political opposition groups have played a crucial role in pressuring governments to take a serious note of famine and its impacts. They argue that “The adversarial participation of newspaper and opposition leaders is,..., an important part of the India famine prevention system.”

Strategy adopted

The program is based on a four point strategy:

First, to use the constitutional approach through the constitutional bodies like the Supreme Court of India and to use the Right to Information Act;

Second, alliance building with various non-governmental organizations and voluntary organizations;

Third, knowledge generation amongst the civil society organizations and media organizations;

Fourth, mainstreaming the issue in the political discourse and the public policy circles of the country through media advocacy programs.

In order to implement these strategies media advocacy was considered as the best and most efficient medium of communication. However, unlike the conventional strategies of media advocacy programs in which media persons are invited and information is shared with them on various issues, the Vikas Samvad program was based on the idea of training the media persons and making them sensitive to such issues.

The Case

Adopting rights based approach to development the Vikas Samvad has been working with various media-persons especially young journalists under its program Media for Rights since 2001. The program is based on the concept of media-civil society interaction as a prerequisite for strengthening democracy and achieving development. India has accepted that Right to Development is a necessity for active citizen's involvement in achieving sustainable democracy. For this purpose it has adopted some aspects of development as constitutional rights whereas many

Foundation

- Started working in 2001 with a Stringers Training program and covered grassroots journalists, young people and NGO workers in the series of trainings.
- Learnings motivated Vikas Samvad to rethink – who is to work with?
- Changed to strategy in 2004 and decided to work directly with the Mainstream Media *Persons*.
- Became an independent institution in 2006.

others are accepted as legal rights. The Right to Compulsory Primary Education has been inserted in the constitution as a fundamental right. On the other hand the Right to Work and Right to Information have as been regarded as legal rights with new laws. The acts related to these rights have established strong institutional structures for effective implementation of the objectives of these laws. Two more legislations, the Right to Food and Right to Time Bound Delivery of Services are also in the process of finalization. However, these rights cannot be ensured unless there is an active involvement of civil society and media as whistleblowers. The Vikas Samvad program is a unique program as it attempts to sensitize media on the one hand and works as a facilitator between media and civil society on the other. It is believed that the present day media has been focusing more on the issues of entertainment and spiritualism than on

political and social issues. A drive for media sensitization is required to make media an active stakeholder in the process of development. For this purpose the Media for Rights program was launched. This program has five major components:

First component is a media fellowship program. In this program every year 15-20 young journalists from various media organizations and universities are selected. Usually these are mid career journalists who have recently started their career in some media organizations. Although the selections are made on an all India basis screening but at least one or two journalists are selected from various districts of the state who have been working closely on the development issues.

The names are selected by a committee which consists of media personalities who have been working on various developments related issues. Every year the program has a different theme related to any challenge of development. All selected students are taken to one selected place in the region. Within this area students reside in some local area so that they can experience the daily life. Besides, students are also taken to nearby areas which are identified with some development related challenges. Students are encouraged to interact with the local journalists and people's representatives or other people.

This exercise gives a firsthand experience to the journalists of development related issue which exist in the remote or rural areas. The students are also engaged in day long deliberations with senior journalists and academicians. The objective of such deliberations is to make students aware of various concepts and issues of development which otherwise they are not aware of. In other words these are more technical sessions.

Second component is organizing various media forums at the district, state and national level. In this forum media persons are invited to express their views on various issues. These forums functions in a pyramidal manner. Firstly these forums are organized at the district levels where local journalists are encouraged to participate. In these forums the journalists are given an opportunity to express themselves. In the second step few journalists are selected from the district forums and invited to take part in the state level forums. Here they are provided an opportunity to interact with the state level journalists of various popular newspapers and

television channels. The objective of this interaction is to train the local area journalists for writing the news piece in such a manner so that it becomes publishable at the state level. During this entire process special attention is given to the fact that the objective of this training should be to promote journalists to cover news related to underdevelopment and malnutrition. Special efforts are made to ensure that the journalists should not adopt the market oriented strategy where focus is on promoting popular news items. Besides, emphasis is also given on informal interaction amongst journalists.

The third stage or component of Media for Rights program is preparing an 'info-pack' for media persons. It has been observed that once the training program is over the trainee usually forgets the objectives. In order to make sure that the trainee continues with the objective of the workshop, the Vikas Samvad organization also works for an information package for those journalists who have attended its workshop. The organization helps these journalists in providing any information related to development issues whenever required. Under this info-pack, apart from maintaining track of media reports, the government publications, non-governmental organizations' reports or other scholarly publications are provided to the journalist. This support helps the journalists in developing their argument in the writing. Besides, it also makes the news item weighty.

Fourth component of the Media for Rights program is training for field based knowledge creation. The objective of this program is slightly different from the workshop related field information. Under the workshop schedule the journalists are taken to various places for some time only. This much time is not adequate for them to completely grasp the grass root level difficulties and problems. Hence in order to give a detailed and in depth understanding of grass roots underdevelopment challenges, the organization organizes a field based knowledge creation program. Under this program the organization arranges a journalist's stay in any village or other locality for few days, preferably a week or so. Meanwhile he is provided necessary support by any local journalist who is attached with the Vikas Samvad. The journalists are taken to various people and organizations working in the area to understand the problems of the particular region.

The Fifth component of the Media for Rights program is an assignment based involvement of journalists. Those proposals which are considered good by the jury are given a chance. This

program has been made for those journalists who are interested in the development related issues but have not been able to get the fellowship or any other program. Under this component these journalists are given any assignment on concerned issues. Under this assignment a problem is given, the journalists have to cover a number of stories (usually five) within the given time. This assignment has a definite strategy. It encourages the participant to go for a field based story along with larger policy dimensions instead of just covering a story in the newspaper. Besides, a report, apart from the coverage given in the print media, also has to be submitted with the organization which is evaluated by the committee of journalists. This helps the journalist in gaining the knowledge of the issue. On the basis of recommendation of the committee the journalist is provided monetary incentive and also given a chance to take part in other activities of the organization. It helps in connecting the organization with the journalists. Besides, it also helps in promoting various journalists who are not able to join the workshop.

With the help of the five points strategy of media involvement in ensuring development through people's rights Vikas Samvad has been quite successful in bringing the civil society and media together.

Results

Following are the accomplishments of the media advocacy program in the last four years.

1. The organization could successfully raise the issue of child malnutrition in the state. Vikas Samvad raised the issue through various media forums that there is no authentic data available with the government on child malnutrition. It also claimed that the condition of children is worst in the state as compared to other countries. This issue was raised with the help of those journalists who had already attended the workshops organized by this organization.
2. A strong media campaign on the issue of child malnutrition and women health was initiated across the state. This led to increasing awareness amongst people about the problem. It had also shown the failure of government in implementing various child and women health related schemes like Mid-day meal program, Integrated Child Development Scheme and others. The organization itself organized large scale surveys in the villages. The focus was

those villages from where any local reporter reported a child death due to malnutrition. By this the organization successfully challenges various government claims of improvement in public health in the state.

3. As a result of this campaign the political leadership, especially the opposition parties started raising the issue very strongly. This created a pressure on the government to look into the matter. The Chief Minister assured that he himself will look into the matter. Besides, prior to the 2010 assembly election all major parties included the issue of child malnutrition in the election manifestos. The ruling party i.e. Bhartiya Janata Party declared that if it comes back to power it will bring a special policy for child development in the state.
4. Apart from the immediate policy level changes the Media for Rights program has successfully generated a concern for serious development related issues amongst the young journalists countrywide. Its active involvement with media has not only provided an institutional mechanism to media to come up with substantial news items related to underdevelopment challenges but also the civil society has become an active partner with the media. Besides, the program has also provided a platform to media persons to critically look at their relevance in the society. The media persons have to face lot of accountability related question when they go to field visits. This has further generated a new debate on media ethics in the country. The Vikas Samvad program has been providing an opportunity to media persons to look into various issues which are more important than the day to day market, economy and bollywood issues.
5. Vikas Samvad in a period of 7 years facilitated 2789 stories on the issue on Malnutrition and Child health through a network of field organisations; it also made value additions in around 1200 stories (which were not directly facilitated by VSS). In the course of action Vikas Samvad could facilitate 5570 stories in mainstream media, which includes Print and Electronic Media.
6. To understand the issue from its real side, organization conducted 29 studies, prepared 181 information packs, 15 alert notes to ensure the continuity in discussion, debate and change process. It also has 39 publications on Child Rights, NREGA, Welfare Programs, Displacement and Child Rights, Gender and Food Security, Climate Change, Hunger, Poverty and on other segments.

7. It started working with 4 journalists individually in the year 2004-05, now have a full institutional but informal structure with the support of 230 Journalists, with whom Vikas Samvad interacts, shares data and information, adds value to their stories with a perspective, makes effort to link them with local grassroots organizations, facilitate field visits and involves them in fact-finding processes. It is now not only VSS calls journalists, it is they, who make calls VSS for something better.
8. Through media forums, VSS has engaged 345 Journalists in last 6 years, out of which 230 have become a part of informally operated VS Media Forums. These are the main users of information and analysis generated by the organizations. We have learned that if you try to engage media, when you have an event, it will not appear as friend, but if we engage them in the process, they are the creative soldiers.
9. Vikas Samvad has been very focused on the need and importance of Data and Informations from the reliable and authentic sources. This group has been filing Right to Information applications from the very first month when RTI Act was passed in the year 2005. A total 893 applications seeking information from Department of Health and Family Welfare, Women and Child Development, Education, Tribal Development, Mining, Public Relations, Medical Education, NRHM, Rural Development and Panchayat Dept., Water Resources, Agriculture, Food and Civil Supplies, Social Welfare etc have been filed. More than 19000 pages of data gathered and this information was used in 24 issues based studies, 109 information packs and other advocacy actions. We would also like to mention the fact that the organisation again followed a continuous process under RTI, in case on not receiving informations from the first level, we moved to First Appeal level in 201 cases and then to State Information Commission, which is the second level appellate authority in 181 cases.

Lesson learnt

The Media for Rights program has shown how media can be a useful channel for sensitization on underdevelopment issues. Besides, the program has also shown that the right training and guidance is necessary to make media a people friendly institution. In a democratic set up media can be a useful pressure group. In Madhya Pradesh the government has been forced to look into various public health related issues which were raised by the Voluntary sector on the one hand and media on the other. The Media for Rights program has also shown that interaction

between media and voluntary sector has to be multi dimensional in nature. A conventional training approach, which focuses on using latest technologies and class room teaching, is not adequate for developing a sensitive media.

Acknowledgments

Prashant Dubey, Sachin Jain, Peter Hoontis, Shailza Singh

Funding organizations

Sir Dorabji Tata Trust (SDTT), United Nations International Child Education Fund (UNICEF), Child Rights and You (CRY)

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