

EMPOWERING PANCHAYATI RAJ

STRENGTHENING LOCAL GOVERNMENTS
SUSTAINABLE SETTLEMENT NORMS ◆ JAAGRATHA SAMITHI



VILAPPIL AND PANANCHERY
GRAM PANCHAYATS



SEWA- KERALA

STRENGTHENING LOCAL GOVERNMENTS
Sustainable Settlement Norms ◆ Jaagratha Samithi

A brief report on the project

by

**Vilappil and Pananchery
Gram Panchayats**

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VILAPPIL GRAM PANCHAYAT

The Vilappil Panchayat is situated east of Thiruvananthapuram city. It is a special grade Panchayat in the Nemom Block and one of the remaining green belts adjacent to the increasingly urbanizing settlements of the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation. The Panchayat is well known for the people's struggle, in spite of which the Corporation managed to establish a waste dumping ground in the Panchayat which is alleged to have ruined a perennial stream and the lives of the people around it. This has become a serious threat to the drinking water availability and public health. The contamination of water in the wells around the waste management plant is severe. While it is still a Panchayat, its proximity to the city Corporation makes it both a feeder and a receiver of the city. Yet it continues to have its basic rural characteristics.

Geographically the area consists of hills, slopes, valleys and streams, with different kinds of crops and livestock rearing. Out of the 2,137 hectares of land only 245 hectares are used for agricultural production including a fair extent of rubber plantation. When farming failed to provide regular employment to the traditional farm workers, they started migrating to other avenues like constructions of roads and buildings and even as domestic servants in the city.

According to the 1997 Panchayat Development Report, the population of the Panchayat was 28,446 spread in 15 wards. In this 22,318 are literate; 16.26 per cent of women and 47.75 per cent of men are employed. Nearly 13 per cent of the total population belong to the SC/ST communities. Of the 800 SC/ST families 95 per cent are landless.

Since 2000, three of the wards of the Panchayat experienced extreme drought conditions causing problems to the farming community including those dependent on animal husbandry and also on the poorer families who have to struggle for drinking water. Two other wards also faced water shortage though not to the same extent.



Map of Vilappil Panchayat

PANANCHERY GRAM PANCHAYAT

Pananchery Gram Panchayat is one of the largest Panchayats in Thrissur district. It is located in between Thrissur Corporation (west) and Palakkad district (east). A third of it's land is reserve forest. Many important Central and State Government institutions like the regional station of Central Plantation Crops Research Institute, the Banana Research Institute, the Kerala Forest Research Institute, the Kerala Engineering Research Institute, the Forest Information Centre, the State Seed Farm, the Peechi Wild Life sanctuary and the very Peechi dam itself are located in this Panchayat. Institutions like the Kerala Agricultural University and Veterinary College are close by.

Other general information on the panchayat:

Area	- 141.71 sq. k.m.
Forest area	- 41%
Population	- 37116
Female population	- 18833 (51%)
S.C. population	- 3405
S.T. population	- 780 (11%)
Total Number of wards	- 18
Number of woman reservation wards	- 6
Number of S.C/ S.T reservation wards	- 2 (one man and one woman)

Agriculture is the backbone of this Panchayat's economy providing employment to a good number of people. The land is rich and fertile, suitable for all kinds of agricultural activities.

Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA- Kerala)

SEWA-Kerala is a women's membership organisation initiated in 1983 in Trivandrum. It provides a common platform for women to collectively grow and socially respond to issues that poor women face in society. There are presently over 1000 members.

SEWA grew out of a need of women who were losing their work in traditional industries like agriculture, basket making and fish vending. Despite struggles through their existing unions to safeguard their employment, eking out a livelihood in such occupations was increasingly difficult. Encouraged by the 'decade on women', a few women activists made this attempt to help marginalized women find work collectively in the growing service sector.

SEWA drew inspiration from SEWA-Gujarat which was formed in Gujarat in 1972 to organize women in the unorganized sector. SEWA grew at the confluence of three movements; the labour movement, the cooperative movement and the women's movement. Participation in the movement gives women strength and visibility, and recognizes their social and economic contribution to the household and society. SEWA is the largest women's trade union in India.

SEWA's base is the village level Vanitha vedhis (women's forum). Women who desire to join SEWA first become members of these vedhis by actively participating in its activities. Meetings are conducted once a month in all these village groups. Regular visits are made by the village level workers in each of these villages. Social, political and women's issues are discussed in these groups. Women get to know the nature of the organization here and then become members by paying a membership fee.

SEWA, being a grassroots women's organisation, has been questioning the ongoing development paradigm which is violent in its impact on the environment and on women as well as on all marginalised people.

It came forward to partner with two Gram Panchayats, Vilappil and Pananchery. The former was to work towards norms for sustainable settlements in the Vilappil Panchayat. The latter was to demonstrate the formation of *Jaagratha Samithi* (JS) or Vigilance committee which is a Panchayat level committee to act against violence on women. Though mandatory in a Panchayat, they had not been formed anywhere.



Interaction with Panchayat committee



Developing sustainable settlement norms in a participatory way

PART 1

TOWARDS ESTABLISHING NORMS FOR SUSTAINABLE SETTLEMENTS: VILAPPIL PANCHAYAT

The concept of a sustainable settlement is a feminist approach to development where life and livelihood are the central concerns, an approach where the people interact between themselves and with nature in mutually sustaining ways. Such a holistic approach redefines power relations within and between communities which keep the interactive process both dynamic and participatory.

A. The Launching Phase

The programme 'Towards Establishing Norms for Sustainable Settlements', being an ambitious one, focussed only in a few wards in the beginning in order to build up an understanding, methodologies, and a local team that could expand this to the entire Panchayat in due course.

1. Long term Objectives

1. Assist the Panchayat to come up with broad guidelines and a management plan for evolving a sustainable settlement pattern;
2. Add substance and strategy to the existing democratic and participatory mechanisms;
3. Empower the Gram Sabhas with a sound understanding of their rights and responsibilities and to have a creative say in the settlement pattern;
4. Develop simulation models with actual data about the interaction of aspirations, attitudes, needs, and resources of the Panchayat;
5. Constitute teams of skilled resource persons from within the community;
6. Help people develop water conservation practices and bio agriculture;
7. Help people develop sustainable and viable livelihood projects based on availability of resources and skills.

2. Short term objectives

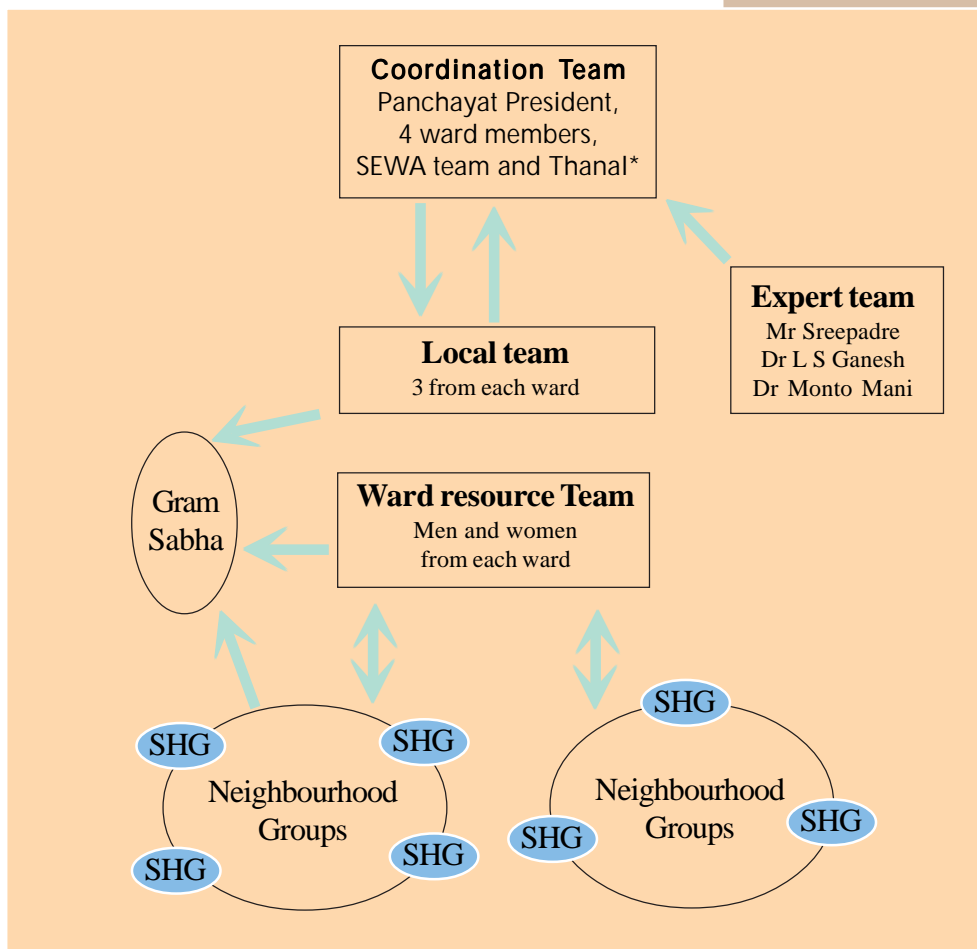
1. Assist the elected Panchayat Members to understand various components of sustainable settlements;
2. Work initially in four wards by training volunteers and making resource maps, both physical and human, and helping them use the maps in local level planning;

3. Experiment in a few locations on building neighbourhood communities that understand the need for resource management in their areas so that water conservation methods and sustainable farming methods could be evolved;
4. Organise capacity building workshops for the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) so that the local production activity is sustained and they become one of the building blocks of decentralised planning



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3. Organisational Structure



*A local NGO focusing on environmental issues.

4. Components

- a. Developing the resource team – The SEWA and the local team
- b. Input sessions –
 - b.a) For ward and Panchayat members
 - b.b) For farmers- both men and women
 - b.c) For SHG members
 - b.d) For youth



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Developing sustainable settlement norms by local expert team by using resource maps



Training on organic farming

- c. Resource Mapping
 - c.a) Physical resources
 - c.b) Human resources
- d. Field Applications
 - d.a) Rain water harvesting and recharging of ground water
 - d.b) Bio farming
 - d.c) Participatory Gram sabhas
- e. Material Development –
 - e.a) On concept of sustainable settlement issues
 - e.b) On bio farming
 - e.c) Creative educational posters
- f. Documentation, social audit and dissemination – to keep the process transparent

a. Building a Team of 'Barefoot Experts' at the Local Level and in SEWA

While SEWA was the partner organisation, THANAL, offered technical advice and SEWA also drew on professional inputs from experts on water management, bio agriculture, social audit, and building sustainable settlement models.

The programme envisaged creation of a team of bare foot social technicians/organisers who would be the resource persons in wards once the programme was over. The process of giving the team a feel of the programme and developing their skills was initiated with a simulation exercise on development politics vis-a-vis resources. This led to a debate on sustainable livelihoods and helped the local team work out for themselves the kind of development they wanted for their community.

b. Input Sessions

In addition to these were the various participatory rural appraisal initiatives as well as inputs from professionals and activists.

The elected representatives introduced the programme to the participants in the ward meetings. Interested persons surfaced from among the participants. They then attended an intensive session on agriculture and its problems, and on working towards sustainable agriculture. The session encouraged people to think about agriculture from the angle of food security, soil and water conservation. The local team met regularly to read and increase their knowledge.

Similarly, there were ward level input sessions on rejuvenation of water sources, measuring water levels in wells and making of bio pesticides and compost. These were followed up with house visits, motivating households

to take up these activities and methodologies and for actual implementation of a few model interventions in aforesaid areas. Later, sessions were organised on methods of organic agriculture, water regeneration and sustainable agriculture as a living system.

People individually did undertake some experiments. Those who were already 'converted' stayed on, looking for support and encouragement and to share ideas. The success rate was fair. Feedback from the people revealed that though the Panchayat brought many projects more support is to be given for local employment and livelihoods. A series of workshops for Self Help Group (SHG) members on understanding development and the Panchayati Raj, were also held.

A session with the youths witnessed more female participation. The inputs were on understanding the nature of development and the role of the Panchayat in developing a plan to meet people's needs. They also gave suggestions for implementation of the sustainable settlement norms that were prepared by the field workers.

c. Resource Mapping Exercise

The **physical resource mapping** was undertaken in two phases. The first was through an input on PRA where the tools of PRA were presented. It gave the local organisers a means to observe local resources and to evolve a methodology for people's participation. The exercise also gave them detailed information about the area and how the people perceived the problems. It was also a way of explaining to the people what the organisers were doing and why.

The digitised maps took time because things had to be redone for accuracy. It was difficult to assess with the available skills the actual percentage of land under each category. More detailed information could be collected when required.

The purpose of **human resource mapping** was to get a complete picture of the resources and the interaction between the physical and human resources in the Panchayat. The analysis was expected to facilitate the planning of programmes, whereby, the people's skills, and physical resources could be utilised in ways that lead to sustainable livelihoods.

A few interesting and useful findings emerged like 9.8 percent of the households were landless, people preferred cash crops to paddy and vegetables, a variety of occupational skills were spotted but over half the population were coolie workers, majority of the younger generation had no technical



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*" to create
a healthy generation
through a lifestyle
that is
responsible and
sustainable"*

... this was the
local group's definition of
a sustainable settlement



Campaign on
water harvesting



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“The idea of this project was to light the lamps showing new ways ahead. This has been achieved through the eight little lamps in the wards which can now keep burning to keep the programme going”

– A Panchayat Member



Input session on water harvesting and sustainability

education and would find it difficult to find jobs unless they had special skills, majority of them were in construction, tailoring, and computer fields. Only 18 per cent of those who worked outside the home had work throughout the month. While a large number did not join any workers' organisation some joined the agriculture workers unions, constructions workers union, and tailors union. In the working age group only a meagre six percent took part in all gram sabhas. The main reason cited for non-attendance was the holding of Gram Sabhas during working hours.

A questionnaire survey was conducted among the families mostly of the Below Poverty Line category (BPL) to gain an understanding of the energy requirements and sanitation. The objectives were: (1) to know about the sources of fuel / energy use, (2) the average quantity of fuel/energy consumed by the families, (3) efforts for conservation of energy, (4) the sources of water for drinking/washing /animal husbandry purposes, (5) quantities of water consumed, its shortage and pollution aspect.

All the surveyed families were dependant on firewood/ coconut shell/husk for cooking. None used renewable energy options like biogas/solar energy. The majority of the families depended on their own wells for drinking and cooking purposes, while 10 households depended on tap water. Most of the women travelled only 1-10m for water needs, but few had to travel up to 1 km. Majority of the women reported water shortage, especially during March-April-May. Thus, these resource mapping exercises provided the knowledge base for the team that collected the data. The team felt it was necessary to develop norms for the management of the prevailing land use which caused several problems related to health and unemployment.

It was also realised that greater awareness about the role and responsibilities of the Panchayat was important if decentralisation was to become a reality. The Panchayat members had to be better informed and aware of the space and scope for their intervention in the development efforts.

As coolie workers dominated the workforce, the focus should be on generating more working days by improving agriculture. As a neighbourhood of the city, it could create worker/labour bank. The Panchayat could organise programmes for the upgradation of skills so that people like electricians and plumbers with license would be able to take up professional contracts under supervision. The Panchayat could help people with tailoring skill to become more professional as there is demand for good tailors in the city. Creative alternatives in energy development can be promoted as people had access to biomass that is not being used properly.

d. Field Application

These field applications were mainly in the areas of recharging of wells and in organic farming. Several people renovated the wells on their own and initiated organic agriculture. The schools too responded positively and wanted more inputs for the students.

The produce from the gardens found local demand in the temporarily organised market. Later they supplied the produces to the THANAL organic bazaar. The producers were happy that their labour was appreciated and they got a fair price. They also found market for some of the traditional fruits and vegetables not usually found in the market.

The interest in organic farming and the exposure for the Panchayat members led to a Panchayat-level workshop on agriculture. Subsequently, the Panchayat decided to formulate an agricultural policy. A group of concerned citizens, began to meet regularly and started work on this.

e. Developing Materials

Three pamphlets were prepared on the following themes: Basic concept of the programme, Bio farming and Gram Sabha. Four posters on water were also made.

f. Social Audit

Photographs, reports, publications and accounts of the programme were displayed /circulated for public scrutiny. In the feedback, the participants appreciated the work done but felt the lack of integration of these programmes. The decision to limit work to four wards invited criticism. The norms on sustainable settlements in the context of the resource maps were presented. The norms that they worked on related to land use, agriculture, water, waste management, and quarrying. Each norm had a rationale and they suggested ways to execute them.

5. Reflections on the Process

i. Interaction with the Panchayat

Project implementation was limited to four wards but efforts were made to interact with all the Panchayat members. A one-day session was held where the role of the Panchayat members in local level planning was stressed. The members were challenged to rethink their roles as real leaders with a vision. They were upset that the programme did not cover the entire Panchayat. After due explanation, they demanded the extension of at least, water and bio farming interventions to all the wards.



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"I was shocked to see my husband sprinkle DDT on my vegetable garden. He did not help me with the garden but when the vegetables appeared, he felt they had to be protected. I shouted and made him stop it."

-A participant



Social audit- lead by Panchayat members



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“Earlier I spent all my free time before the TV. I have lost interest in it now. Now serials irritate me and the advertisements make me angry.”

Response at the end of the first half year



Bio-pesticide making training

ii. Interaction with the Community

Interactions with the ‘key informants’ about the programme yielded varied responses. There were ward meetings, distribution of pamphlets on the programme, input sessions for interested persons on the various components and direct field interventions in water and organic agriculture.

The efforts to develop the concept of local clusters for exchange of seeds and sharing of experiences did not succeed due to the hurdles caused by heavy rains. Efforts to attract the men were not successful. The people seemed to realise that the present development model was not conducive to the environment as well as the well being of the majority. Some of them undertook interesting experiments on their own, in regeneration of wells, organic farming and biogas. These individuals were invited to monthly general meetings that later grew into the Citizens’ Forum.

iii. Building up the Local Team

Great care was taken in building up a local team as this was crucial for sustaining the work.

- a. Women were forthcoming and showed great willingness to learn. Besides the technical inputs, the project taught them to be punctual, to maintain records, do evaluations, and report back. They learnt about resources and how to map them; techniques of organic farming and water regeneration. All of them executed these aspects in their homes so they could speak from their experience.
- b. All of them recognised the need to ensure more male participation in the programmes.
- c. Since most of them came from the SHG background, they interacted mainly with similar women. They found it difficult to relate to a larger group.
- d. While the women were keen learners, this kind of work required community organisation skills which needed longer time to develop.

Towards the end of the year, the participation and interest of men in the programme increased through a door-to-door campaign. This was visible from the increase in the number of men in the Gram Sabha.

iv. The SEWA/THANAL Team

The collaboration between two organisations with different skills helped them to learn from each other. The SEWA team

was under stress initially due to time constraints. The physical resource mapping consumed a lot of time and energy. The inputs of systems analysis could not be integrated into the ongoing work. The prevailing work schedule did not provide the required time for serious thinking. The collective and detailed planning that went into the project planning exercise helped to keep the focus in spite of the intense work schedule.

v. Own Learnings

We learnt a great deal about decentralised governance, as our euphoric support of the concept was challenged by hard ground realities. Making decentralisation a political programme requires more than ideological commitment. The main findings were:

- a. Lack of prior understanding and little exposure to creative ways of initiating meaningful programmes, resulted in the members becoming mere executors/contractors of government programme.
- b. The Panchayat members could not relate freely with all the people in their wards, and this gap created hurdles for local participation and planning. The reasons for this were the nature of the schemes planned and the focus on the BPL groups. Even the SHG activity was confined to the BPL groups. While this was necessary, no other forum was available in the Panchayat for deliberations. Thus the Gram Sabha turned out to be a mere technical exercise.
- c. The exposure programme made the members realise that they had a lot to learn and also the fact that their Panchayat area was so fertile.

B. Interim Phase

At the end of the first phase only the programme foundation was laid. The local team was equipped to carry its experience to the rest of the people. The Panchayat elections took place in October 2005, just when the first stage of the programme was coming to an end. More Panchayat Members also seemed interested. The new President announced that the Panchayat was ready to conduct the Women's Status Study. The lack of interaction between different social strata in the Panchayat created snags and adequate rapport could not be established with the non-BPL groups. The monthly discussion group became an apt forum for discussions on broader development issues and for strengthening the institution of the Panchayat.



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Bio farming- A woman at her local beans farm



Training on organic manure making



Campaign on organic farming



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Input session on
Gender and sustainability



Group work on
Gender Status Study

1. Interaction with New Panchayat Members

The Panchayat considered the programme as 'ongoing' and since two thirds of the members were newly elected, an input session was organised. The session introduced the significance of Women's Status Study. The session reached a general consensus about the need for a Women's Status Study in the Panchayat.

2. Women's Status Study

Great mobilisation of women has taken place at the local level in the past one decade as a result of the People's Plan Campaign. A broad spectrum of women stood for elections. But a lot more remains to be done to improve the women's status in society. The Study attempted to:

- 1) Understand how women looked at themselves, their role in society and their expectations.
- 2) Assess the access that women had to resources and how they managed them.
- 3) Examine the space that women had in decision making, be it in their homes, over their bodies, and in society.
- 4) Understand how men see their roles, and thus explain the nature of gender relations in the panchayat.
- 5) Interpret the data using a gender lens – highlighting how the information located women vis-a-vis men and provide a tool to interpret the society in a more gender-friendly manner.

Developing the awareness of the enumerators about gender inequality was the preliminary step. The selection of the sample was done through a wealth ranking by the volunteers, based on criteria that were collectively decided. Focus group discussions were organised with both men and women of different strata, for more qualitative information. The report was published after ratification by the Panchayat. Following are some of the findings:

- 1) A general internalised subordination of women to men existed. Among the poorer class, however greater sharing of domestic labour, access to family resources and more freedom in decision making prevailed.
- 2) Mobilisation of women and their participation in public life through the process of decentralised governance brought many positive changes to their lives.
- 3) The educational advances have not succeeded into enhancing women's status.
- 4) Dowry was on the rise regardless of woman's

- education or economic status.
- 5) Preference for a male child was reflected in the child sex ratio-beginning to be favourable to males. Some women admitted that they underwent abortion for this.
 - 6) Women's awareness of rights and how progressive laws would be helpful, was limited and hence their reluctance to make use of them.
 - 7) Adolescent girls felt very insecure with increasing public harassment and felt extremely controlled both at home and by the general norms regarding their mobility and exposure in society.
 - 8) Women's performance in public office revealed that they were more bound by the priorities of the political party they belonged to rather than the needs of women. Women's voices get least consideration as political parties are male dominated.
 - 9) The public institutions that were created locally like anganawadis, schools, and Community Health Centres were of prime importance to women considering that 40 per cent of them were still poor. These institutions could however, be better managed to render services in more women-friendly ways.
 - 10) The Panchayat could prepare a perspective plan, possibly a Women's Development Report, highlighting how women's status could be improved in the coming decade as it was indeed a slow process.

3. Monthly Meetings of Interested Citizens

An effort was made to develop a group of concerned citizens who could play an active role in assisting the Panchayat members to function in a more democratic manner, with the group as a source of ideas as well as support at the local level. After the social audit, an attempt was made to make the discussion process a regular feature and this culminated in the formation of the Janakeeya Vikasana Samithi.

4. Documentary on Garbage Dump

The garbage dump was documented as it was the biggest issue and struggle of the Panchayat. The people were keen that the documentary reached various parts of the city so that people realised the problems inflicted on this Panchayat. The management of garbage was becoming a headache for several local bodies and a State-level meeting was held on the issue. All this added to the relevance of the documentary.

The film was screened in several schools in the neighbouring areas of the panchayat to create awareness on the need to reduce waste. This led to school eco clubs and sessions in



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Sustainable settlement model-
Domestic bio-gas plant



A green village changed as
dumping yard of city's waste



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Round table discussion on Sustainable Settlement Norms with experts



Handing over the resource map to Panchayat President by local expert group

four schools of the panchayat with additional inputs on water regeneration and waste management. This helped to get the children involved in the programme and the schools were also very responsive.

5. Round Table on Sustainable Settlement Norms

In order to equip ourselves for the next stage of the programme, the SEWA team planned to hold further discussions on sustainability issues with a wider group of friends and clarify many points. How could all the material gathered be used more effectively in development planning? How normative could a panchayat become? What tools existed to pursue this?

A group of persons was invited to a session to reflect on these issues and provide insights. The findings of the field work in the Panchayat and the norms developed by the field workers were presented. The group felt that such a process, if taken forward by the Panchayat, would have a far reaching effect. The dynamics of political interests, people's aspirations as well as other forces were also discussed. It was clear that the Panchayat could define its norms, provided it had the support of the people.

6. Handing over Materials to the Panchayat

It was an occasion to hand over the digitised maps, to exhibit the documentary film and discuss how it could be used. The general findings of the Women's Status Study were presented to the Panchayat Members and other interested citizens. The copies of all the printed material and posters on water management were also handed over. There were deliberations on the possible programmes for the future.

C. Concluding Phase

For a concluding phase of the programme, it was proposed to work on some of the aspects that had emerged during the first stage, making the whole panchayat as the area of operation.

1. The Objectives

1. Develop a process of evolving norms for sustainable settlements in the Panchayat through the creation of a Citizens' Forum (an informed pressure group) that will be the link between the local wards and the Panchayat working groups, thereby improving the quality of the Gram Sabha and that of the development planning processes.
2. Develop in a participatory manner a Women's Development Report, based on the Women's Status Study, that will promote gender awareness and help

the Panchayat to plan in a gender sensitive manner. This will include skill development of women for income generation.

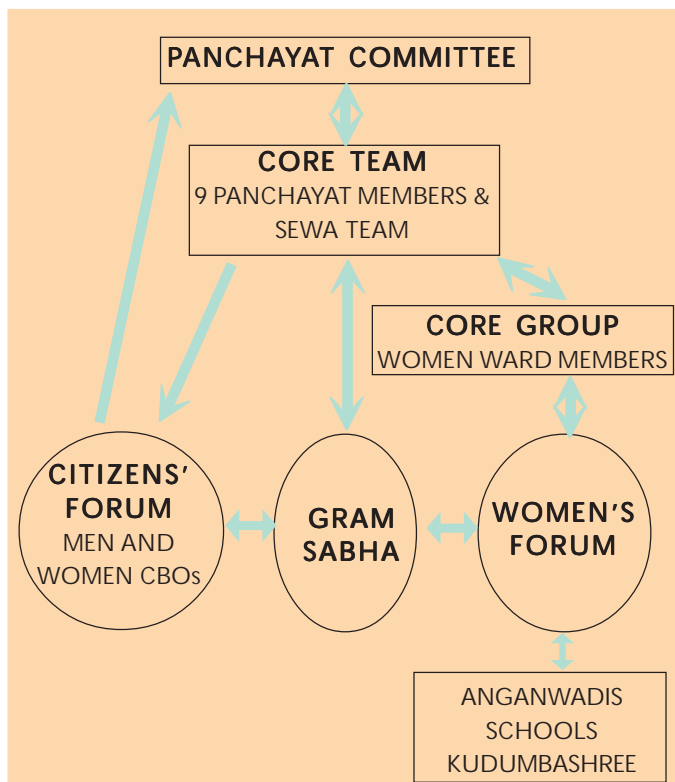
3. Create individual and collective models of biomass-based livelihoods and local markets.
4. Provide skill upgradation for plumbers and tailors and assist the Panchayat to develop a technical service agency that will provide local employment and also meet urban requirements.

2. Impact on Panchayati Raj

The project aimed at encouraging greater participation in local level planning and decision-making and bringing transparency to panchayat programmes. It sought to work through the Citizens' Forum, to influence the panchayat processes. It aimed at making the Gram Sabha more participatory. While women members would be assisted to bring out a Women's Development Report, efforts would be made for a future Panchayat Development Plan based on the Norms for Sustainable Settlements that would evolve through this process.

The social audit process would help build an understanding and a process that is accountable and suits the local resources.

3. Organogram



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Sustainable settlement models
- Marketing organic vegetable products



Input on Jaagratha Samithi



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One of them remarked:

"Yes, we should have some adolescent education as young people are exposed to all kinds of vulgarity these days. Young men take out their frustrations and other things on young women. I was actually surprised to see in Kottayam, several young couples talking between themselves in a church compound. We were told that that was a marriage preparation course. We too should have something like that and should start in the schools".

4. Components

i. Interaction with Panchayat Members:

The Core team: Once the programme as a whole was accepted, the core team, made up of 5 Panchayat members and the SEWA team, met seven times to plan implementation. This was a formal process with an agenda, minutes etc. at which the planning of the work took place. It was also a platform to clarify ideas and sort out differences between the Panchayat and the SEWA team.

The Panchayat members: In the course of the year, there were 5 sessions with the Panchayat committee members in which various subjects were discussed with inputs from resource persons on Decentralisation and the Panchayati Raj Act, Management of the transferred institutions, the role of the Panchayat in Development, perspectives of sustainability and the need to impact the 11th Five Year Plan, the findings of the gender status study and Women's Development Report.

Some of the Panchayat members also participated in the input and interactive sessions organized for the partners of SDC-CapDeck. This was an important interactive process but unfortunately not all members had the opportunity to benefit from this process.

The Women's core team comprised of women who either participated as investigators in the Women Status Study or were active members of ADS (Area Development Society) and CDS (Community Development Society). They were the main resource for the inputs for the Women's Policy. The core team was recognised by the Panchayat to work on the Women's Development Report (WDR). The core committee held deliberations on how to make transferred institutions women-friendly. They identified a few issues and

Water harvesting- Field training in association with NSS unit of Loyola collage, Thiruvananthapuram



areas for intervention – like the Anganawadis, LP School, Primary Health Centre and the Sub Centre. The women presented this in the Panchayat Committee.

Women ward members did speak out about the problems they faced at the work place and at home. SEWA gave them several inputs to provide an understanding and ideas about actions they could take and the importance of their standing united to get recognition for themselves and their proposals. But they could not make much progress on these matters as it was their first year in office. The group wanted to continue functioning as it wanted to play an active role in monitoring the ongoing programme.

ii. Forging links with the Panchayat Working Groups

Efforts were made to include the Panchayat Working Groups in the programme to ensure that they were aware of the new developments and to involve them in development planning. The members were offered help to work in a more participatory manner through the Gram Sabha.

iii. Citizens' Forum (CF)

The CF realised that they could not leave all decisions to the Panchayat Committee alone. Several of them were ward members earlier. The CF and the Panchayat together planned to convene a special Gram Sabha on the proposed land fill, to transform the garbage dump- but it never materialised.

Later, the CF formed the Vilappil Citizens' Development Forum. The base was expanded as the Panchayat members suggested names of suitable persons. They did this because they were helped to realise that it would provide them with a team of knowledgeable persons who could help them plan and monitor the work in their wards.

Several inputs were provided on issues of sustainability in the local context and on ways in which democratic decision making could be encouraged through Gram Sabha. More detailed inputs were given on aspects of sustainability like matching human resources with natural resource use, sustainable energy use, and waste management. Aspects of gender and development received focus in the third quarter and development of norms for sustainable Vilappil was taken up in the final leg.

The CF worked in a non-partisan manner and gave their time generously. One of the areas they found very difficult to digest was the Women's Status study and the feedback from the women CF members. As some participants were men of the older generation, changing their perceptions was difficult. The younger group decided to meet separately towards the end. The CF formed a core team to go deeper into some of these issues. The CF was expected to continue even after the conclusion of the project.



**STRENGTHENING
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Exposure visit to see Bio gas plant at Kadakkal Panchayat



Water Campaign at schools- Students with posters on water harvesting



**STRENGTHENING
LOCAL GOVERNMENTS
SUSTAINABLE SETTLEMENT NORMS**



Gender awareness class



Input on Women and Law-SHG women



Women's Development Report presentation by Chairperson, Welfare Standing Committee

iv. The Citizens' Working Group

The core team looked intensively into certain issues like the health problems and the running of the transferred institutions. It made representations to the Panchayat asking for a larger debate on these issues. The team also met the Health Minister to draw attention to the poor functioning of the Health Centre. The team worked intensively to perfect the norms for sustainable settlements based on the outline that was created in the larger CF. The formation of such a forum was only to strengthen the activities of the Panchayat, provide advice, assistance and monitoring services if called upon, and certainly to play a watch dog role.

v. Enhancing Gender Awareness

This component was meant to popularise the Women Status Study undertaken by the Panchayat. The conclusions were shared with the data collection team to know whether they matched the field experiences. The process made the team realise that they had a document which facilitated working with members of ADS and CDS. They made valuable suggestions to make the transferred institutions more gender-friendly. The interaction also made them aware of the way patriarchy worked and how violence on women was happening. As a result, they realised the significance of Jaagratha Samithi (JS) and were keen to set one up in the Panchayat.

The Status Study was discussed in detail with the Women Panchayat Members before presenting the draft to the Panchayat. The process was so empowering that the members expressed the desire to continue to meet as women members. It took a while for them to understand how the Women's Component Plan (WCP) could be utilised to meet women's strategic needs.

Input sessions were organised for ADS and CDS members and Women Panchayat Members on the following themes: Findings of the Women Status Study, participatory trainings, workshops on gender concepts, gender and women's development, Domestic Violence (Prevention) Bill, JS, and the Women's Development Policy developed by the women's core group.

Post submission, the Panchayat convened a meeting of friends to comment on the study and on the Women's Policy. The session made valuable suggestions regarding the format of the report and the possible action the Panchayat could take on it. The Panchayat proudly owned up the report at the session and claimed that it was the first Panchayat to develop a Women's Policy.

The study provided the space and basis to look at women's issues in a more concrete manner, differentiating between practical and strategic gender needs, and to eventually come

up with a women's policy and suggestions for creative inputs on gender awareness. In the end, the ability of the Women members to influence the general decisions of the Panchayat was heartening. They managed to budget Rs 5,00,000 for gender-specific work.

vi. Skill Upgradation

The human resource mapping carried out in the former phase revealed that the available skills lacked marketing potential. Hence it was suggested that the most common skills like tailoring for women and plumbing for men should be promoted. The women members were keen on tailoring and they proposed the repair of electrical home appliances as well. Training in tailoring was conducted with the assistance of the Women's Polytechnic, Kaimanam.

vii. Creation of Sustainable Settlement Models

This component, required a long processes. Discussion were held on growth-oriented development dependent on market factors and the possible alternatives. This was followed by a series of zonal meetings on constructive application of organic farming and water regeneration techniques. Those who were interested in organic farming did not have access to land while those who possessed land were not interested in farming. They learned about the benefits of conserving and sharing seeds, developing nurseries, and producing organic pesticides.

The training in bio-farming motivated the learners to start farming activities. A market for bio farm products was organised during the Onam season. It had its share of setbacks due to incessant rains. People lost the seeds and their interest. Ensuring regular supply of seeds was a problem.

In spite of the water shortage in some wards, motivating men to participate in the regeneration of wells was hard. A work camp with students of the Loyola College helped

Field training on Water harvesting



**STRENGTHENING
LOCAL GOVERNMENTS**
SUSTAINABLE SETTLEMENT NORMS



Water harvesting- Model for ground water recharging

"In the first year when I grew my own vegetables my children did not fall ill. In the second year, I gave less time to my garden, had no vegetables and my children began to fall ill again. So now I will stay at home and continue my work in the ward because I can easily earn up to Rs 1000 a month. I can also pluck the coconuts of people close by and make some money. I do not need to buy milk, gas, and firewood. For the rest my husband brings home money"

A woman participant



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Skill training-
Coconut tree climbing



Skill training-
Pattern design and dress making

activate the process with the support of Shri. SreePadre. Several processes were set in place that would bear fruit in the future.

Banking on the bio-mass concept seems to have succeeded to an extent. It helped families realise that bio-mass could be easily regenerated and that it provided livelihood.

People were enthused by the energy conservation measures. The hay boxes became an instant hit. The bio-gas plants also created interest but they were costly. SEWA team developed one that cost less and required less space. For the poorer households, 35 smokeless *choolahs* were installed with the support of ANERT (Agency for Non-Conventional Energy and Rural Technology).

The training given to women on milking of cows and fodder production caught on. Following the training in fodder growing, the project managed to encourage quite a few families to grow fodder by distributing the seedlings. In order to promote coconut production and its viability, SEWA proposed to train women to climb coconut palms with the help of an appropriate device developed by a farmer and propagated by the Agricultural Department. Two women underwent the training successfully.

A programme for awareness creation on water conservation was initiated in five schools. Posters were distributed to all public institutions. Nature clubs were visualised in the schools. Since teachers showed interest this would be followed up even after the closure of the project. A substantial number of informative booklets, a set of posters, and a CD on waste management were produced.

The most disappointing aspect of the work was the disinterest of men. The women, however, were keen to participate even without the permission of the husband. Even young boys were disinterested in the water regeneration work though it was their mothers and sisters who fetched water from the wells. Patriarchy was so deep rooted even among many of the otherwise socially active men.

viii. Exposure Programmes

One of the ways to encourage Panchayat Members and citizens to empower themselves was through exposure visits. The members and the representatives of Citizens' Forum visited Karakulam Panchayat and the Grameena Patana Kendram to know how to manage the Panchayat office and transferred institutions.

The Panchayat members and the representatives of ADS and CDS visited Pananchery Panchayat, Thrissur to learn about the functioning of Jaagratha Samithi (JS). The Vilappil Panchayat initiated action for the formation of JS and made a budget allocation for the same in the next budget.

The representatives of Citizens' Forum visited the Kadackal Panchayat to see the bio-gas plant. The Panchayat wanted to emulate this work and made a budget allocation for it. The volunteers' team and Citizen Forum representatives visited the Centre for Appropriate Technology, Nagarkovil to learn different local technologies.

ix. Enhancing Participation in the Gram Sabha

Zonal meetings were held on the role and scope of the Gram Sabha and the members of the Citizens' Forum made it a point to attend all the sessions.

x. Documentation

The Women Status Study was finally printed together with the Women's Development Policy and made available to all in the Panchayat and so were the findings of the Human Resource Mapping of the first 4 wards. A pamphlet on energy and another on the norms developed for sustainable settlements were prepared.

xi. Building up of a Local Team with Technical Skills

The local team was heavily stressed due to shortage of staff. However, they felt that the entire experience was rewarding and that they learnt a great deal.

Building up the local team was important as the Panchayat could draw on them in the future. Several input sessions were held for the team together with exposure programmes. Individual as well as collective reading and discussion on certain relevant subjects were held. They were also helped to take classes both in the community and in the schools. There were also different exposure visits which instilled confidence and provided motivation.

xii. Social Audit

The Social Audit was conducted by the Panchayat and was attended by Members, the Citizens' Forum, and women who participated in the trainings. The participants spoke of the advantages, what they had learnt and the difficulties encountered if any. All the material produced, the accounts and other reports were displayed for the public.

Was the local government strengthened and was there greater participatory democracy? We ourselves realised how powerful the Panchayat Act can be, if used effectively and consciously.



**STRENGTHENING
LOCAL GOVERNMENTS
SUSTAINABLE SETTLEMENT NORMS**



Exposure- Jaagratha Samithi experience sharing at Pananchery Panchayat



Poster campaign on harvesting water



Inputs to youth on Sustainable Settlement

PART 2

PIONEERING THE JAAGRATHA SAMITHI (JS) IN PANANCHERY GRAM PANCHAYAT

1. Introduction

Pananchery Gram Panchayat, one of the largest Panchayats in Thrissur district is adjacent to the Thrissur Corporation. Agriculture is the backbone of the Panchayat's economy, and provides employment to a large number of people.

Various reports illustrate the women's status as very poor; their participation in socio-political and cultural fields as negligible. According to the Panchayat Development Report and other Plan documents, the important problems of the women in the Panchayat are wage discrimination, lack of nutritious food for pregnant women, lack of mother and child welfare activities, violence against women, rising dowry demands, unemployment and lack of involvement in social and political spheres.

Most of the projects for women's empowerment focused on employment and income generation and were implemented through the SHGs. But in reality, most of these activities were limited to savings and credit programmes.

It was decided to not only raise awareness on gender issues in the Panchayat but also to facilitate a process by which the *Jaagratha Samithi* (Vigilance Committee) could be created. The constitution of the JS was made mandatory but none of the Panchayats was keen to do it. Though conceived as a legal institution, it could also be an organ for women empowerment. SEWA therefore thought it could use this occasion to demonstrate how violence against women could be dealt with at the local level and how the Panchayat could effectively make changes in the situation of women by establishing a *Jaagratha Samithi*-cum-Family Empowerment Forum (JS-FEF).

2. Objectives

1. Help the Panchayat create a multipurpose centre for women with a view to help them to handle their own issues effectively and help them to work towards more equal relationships between men and women at home and in the community, thereby improving the quality of life in the families and the society, particularly for women.
2. Help in the comprehensive development of women as well as their self emancipation through local programmes, and to forge linkages with other broader platforms and



Second Anniversary of Jaagratha Samithi and inauguration of Women Development Centre - Pananchery Gram Panchayat

movements like the Kerala Streevedi and Streesakthi, at the district and State levels.

3. Create a local group of volunteers with skills and commitment to sustain these efforts in the Panchayat

3. Programme Components

1. Data collection / quick study to gain an understanding of women's current status and the serious problems they face as well as their suggestions on how to handle them.
2. Training: to help develop gender consciousness through a series of sessions
 - Workshops for Women Panchayat members, leaders of SHGS, *Mahila Samajams* and other women's groups, selected retired women government officials, social workers, female teachers from Peechi and Pattikkad High schools and Higher Secondary schools.
 - Gender sensitisation for male Panchayat members, police, leaders of political parties, youth clubs, other organisations youth wings, male teachers from Peechi and Pattikkad High School and Higher Secondary Schools (H.S.S.).
 - Training in counselling to selected men and women volunteers.
 - Seminars for students of High Schools and Higher Secondary Schools and young farmers.

It was expected that the trainings would help the target group understand the way patriarchy worked in the society and the different needs of women as a whole. This would help women improve the quality of their participation in the Gram Sabhas, which could ultimately equip them to intervene positively in the Panchayat activities like project preparation, implementation, and monitoring.

The educational institutions would be the second arena of focus. But due to time constraints the project would concentrate only on the higher school students and teachers.

4. Action

- a. Formation of vigilance groups at ward level.
- b. Formation of JS-FEF at Panchayat level.

It was expected that the *Samithi* would be created just after the first phase of the programme. Subsequently all other programmes proposed in the project would be carried out under the guidance of the JS.

- c. Formation of mobile counselling centres at ward level so that the members of the centres could visit the persons and families in need.



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NATURE OF COMPLAINTS/ CASES IN PHASE 1

Total number of cases/ complaints in one year	371
Civil	123
Criminal	117
Family issues	126
Suo moto	1
Financial matters in SHGs	4



**STRENGTHENING
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A 38-year old unwed mother approached the Samithi with a complaint about the unwillingness of the father of her child to accept the child. The defendant lived in another Panchayat in the neighbouring district. Notices sent by the Jaagratha Samithi to the defendant were not responded to. The Sub Inspector of Police who is a member of the Samithi then contacted the Police Station under whose jurisdiction the defendant lived. Thus the Samithi could get the defendant to appear before it. He accepted the fatherhood of the child, with his own wife and cousin as witnesses. He finally agreed to support the family and gave a written undertaking that this child will also be given a share of his property along with his other children.

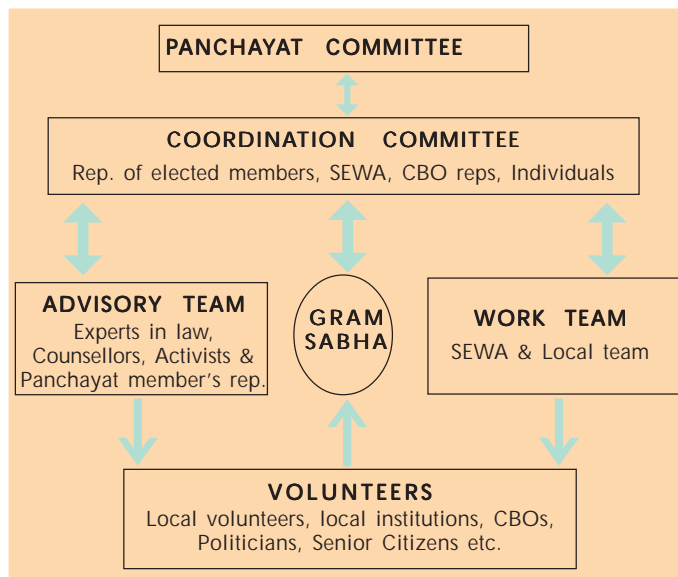
- d. Formation of a counselling centre at Panchayat level.
- e. Formation of a legal information and legal aid cell at Panchayat level.
- f. Formation of a women's library that would be a multipurpose centre.
- g. Linking the centres at different levels with other groups and networks and to the social work departments of colleges, if possible.

This would ensure continuation of support, even after the project period.

- h. Formation of a "gender desk" at High Schools and Higher Secondary Schools.

The Panchayat was expected to prepare a comprehensive project that could be implemented in two phases, within the next two years. In three years this would ensure institutionalisation of these processes at the entire Panchayat level.

Organogram



a. Data gathering on the status of women

A questionnaire survey was conducted to understand gender issues and the status of women in the Panchayat at five workshop-cum-data gathering sessions. The workshops focused on grasping how the status of women was assessed in the society and aspects of gender violence.

The data gathered was revealing as some quantitative assessment could be made. It is to be noted that 75 per cent of the participants felt that neither equality nor equal opportunities prevailed between men and women. This was evident in the management of finances, decision making,

and domestic work. As many as 96 per cent admitted that women were victims of sexual harassment even within the family and 91 per cent admitted that they keep the violence they experience a secret, though 67 per cent knew about the law on protecting women. The need for JS to curb violence against them, was expressed by 93 per cent of them.

They suggested that the following norms should be adopted for a healthy family atmosphere: non-violence, mutual understanding and acceptance, equal participation in decision making, equal efforts in income generation between men and women, equal participation in domestic work, democracy within the family.

b. Training sessions

To create a coordination committee, seminars were organised to present the findings of the study. This interaction with the community was a means of spreading awareness about the programme. The representatives to the coordination committee were selected at the end of the seminars.

The Panchayat Coordination committee comprised the following: District, Block and Gram Panchayat members, Panchayat Secretary, SC promoter, ICDS Supervisor, CDS Chairperson and Vice Chairperson as ex-officio members. The panel was to build up good rapport between the Panchayat and the public in the process of the formation of the vigilance committee.

From among the coordination committee members, a core group was created to meet regularly and for greater efficiency. The panel functioned as a catalyst as well as a pressure group.

In order to generate gender awareness in the Panchayat, a series of workshops were organised, both for men and women. These workshops helped to develop an understanding on the working of patriarchy in the family, community, and society, to help both men and women understand the root causes, and help them acquire skills to overcome them and work collectively for a society of gender and social justice. This also facilitated the people to realise the different needs of women, children, and the society as a whole, and the teachers to understand their role in the socialisation process and to develop different skills and methodologies of gender and social justice-based socialisation processes. The workshops instilled the values of gender and social justice in students.

At the end of each workshop, a volunteer team was formed at the ward level and each developed a plan of action. The



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Justice D. Sreedevi inaugurating the Anniversary celebrations of Jaagratha Samithi Pananchery Gram Panchayat



**STRENGTHENING
LOCAL GOVERNMENTS
JAAGRATHA SAMITHI**



Panchayat to Panchayat Sharing of experiences - Azhutha Block

sessions were followed up with house visits and personal discussions with the participants in the Neighbourhood Groups.

c. Impact of sessions

- Requests for more such sessions were made by the participants
- Great enthusiasm was visible in sharing the learning
- Many participants came with a negative attitude towards women's issues, but went back with a vow to work for women's rights
- The participants took the initiative to convene meetings at local levels
- Regular pre-marital counselling courses was proposed.

d. Model Jaagratha Samithi

Apart from the workshops organised by the State Women's Commission and SDC-CapDeckK, a consultation was organised in Pananchery to frame the structure and rules for the model JS-FEF. The JS was envisaged as a broad platform for the empowerment of women rather than a mere statutory body. It was not meant to be an alternate dispute redressal forum but as one that could also function as a truly empowering forum. Through this process, the bye-laws of the JS were prepared and presented to the Panchayat, where they were unanimously approved.

e. Campaign on Violence against Women

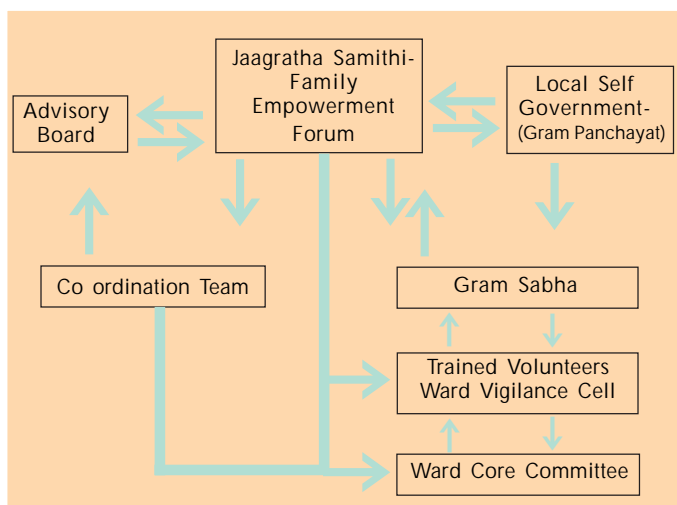
The volunteers and groups in the wards were involved in the International Campaign on Violence against Women. The campaign highlighted the objectives of the project with the focus on JS. The report of the Women's Status Study was circulated during the campaign. The material became the theme of hot debate among the public, especially the men.

f. Jaagratha Samithi

The JS was finally established in December 2005. The inauguration witnessed massive people's participation. The projected perspective was to make the JS an integral part of the Panchayat, that the idea of justice to women be part of all Panchayat programmes. Women were envisaged to participate in the Panchayat activities, bringing a gendered understanding into the Panchayat programmes.

Sub-committees were formed to oversee the functioning of the Legal Assistance Cell, the Gender Desks, and the library. The convener of each sub-committee was responsible for reporting its activities.

5. Structure of the JS-FEF



a. Members of the JS-FEF

Jaagratha Samithi functions were regulated by the byelaw prepared by an expert committee and approved by the Panchayat Governing Body.

The chairperson of JS is the President of the Gram Panchayat and the ICDS Supervisor is the convenor. The members of the *Samithi* consisted of all the women representatives of Gram Panchayat, the Sub Inspector of Police, a woman advocate, and three women social workers (One is reserved for SC/ST Community).

Sub centres /Sub committees	Members
1. Complaint cum legal advice cell	Elected Women members-2 Police Sub Inspector Activist Representative-1 SC/ST Representative- 1 Woman Lawyer -1
2. Gender Desk At Panchayat level	Elected Women members-2 Education Experts- 2 Persons interested in gender and social education- 2 District Panchayat Member (From this Panchayat)-1 Teachers Representatives-4 Students Representatives-4 PTA Representatives- 4 (More than 50% are women)
2 (a) Gender Desk at Schools	PTA and Mother PTA Presidents, The Ward Member, The Block Member, Persons interested in gender and social education Teachers' representatives, Students' representatives, Members from Panchayat- level Gender Desk
3. Library-cum-Training Centre	Elected women members-2 The Block Panchayat Member (applicable only if the member is a Woman)-1 Persons interested in library movement (Women) Persons interested in gender and social education (9 Women activists)
4. Ward Vigilance Cell Members	Chair Person - Ward Member or an elected person in the presence of ward member Convenor- Anganawadi teacher 5 to 11 trained members (More than 50% women)



**STRENGTHENING
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Illicit brewing of liquor was a major problem faced by the people of one ward of a Panchayat. The Ward Jaagratha Samithi took suo moto cognizance of the issue. The members met with the persons involved and served notice to stop the activity. A second round of notices was later served. The Ward Samithi referred the case to the Panchayat Jaagratha Samithi. The Panchayat Jaagratha Samithi discussed the case and sought help from the Circle Inspector of Police. The police conducted raids and put a stop to the activity.

While the Sub Committees would focus on specific activities, the JS would do the overall coordination. The Complaint Cell would concentrate on case hearing, legal advice, counselling, field enquiry, the activities of ward level vigilance cells, and core committee. The Gender Desk Sub Committee was responsible for the formation and functioning of Gender Desks in schools. The Library-cum-Training Centre functioned as a resource centre and would undertake various trainings like gender training, pre-marital course for youngsters, legal literacy programmes, and public relations programmes, in association with government departments and educational institutions, and encourage women to read gender-related books.

b. The Advisory Board

The Board comprised of a team of experts in law, health, counselling, agriculture, gender, social justice, human rights, and child rights. The JS-FEF could seek advice as well as support from the advisory board members.

c. Legal Aid

This was a facility to assist those women who otherwise had no access to legal assistance in times of need. This legal aid cell comprised advocates, social activists, and Panchayat representatives, who could help women understand the nature of the complaint and then direct them to the concerned departments for further assistance.

The workshop created widespread awareness about the *Samithi*. By the end of the year, 201 complaints were registered. Of these 88 were civil cases, 54 related to family issues, and 49 were cases of a criminal nature.

Of these, 115 cases were settled by the JS. Fourteen cases were directed to the court, 27 to the police station and 5 cases were taken up with the different departments concerned. At the end of the project period 30 cases were being followed up.

The sessions were a learning process for the committee members as advice and support was to be given in keeping with gender-just norms and not under pressure of the prevailing social norms.

d. Response from the Public

Most of the respondents were women who had suffered oppression and violence. They came to the office and poured out their grievances. While the majority of cases were personal, there were also women who came seeking support to restrict alcohol, and to ban pan masala and other drugs consumed by the youth. Women from the neighbouring Panchayat came to seek help and guidance, which showed the acceptance of the programme.

e. Achievements

- In spite of the short time, the JS-FEF was created in a participatory manner with the knowledge of the Kerala Women's Commission. It is now a recognised, undisputed institution in the Panchayat and a model to other Panchayats and the Women's Commission.
- Change in attitude was reflected in the more gender-just way of analysing issues in the JS and local ward committees
- Women began looking more critically at certain cultural symbols used by women.
- Men started asking for more trainings, and several initiatives were taken by training participants to organise sessions at their local level
- The confidence of women registered a marked increase
- Vigilance Cell members took the initiative to raise family issues as social issues, with positive interventions
- The Panchayat owned up the programme and made fund allotment for the programmes of JS-FEF
- The programme created a group of volunteers with skills and social commitment to work for the Panchayat. Their activities at the ward level supplemented the work of the Panchayat Members which was reflected in the Gram Sabha
- The ex-members, especially women, came forward to work voluntarily for the JS-FEF because they looked at it as an institution through which they could continue their work for the people as well as the Panchayat.
- Institutions like Kudumbashree and Sarva Siksha Abhiyan expressed the need to work with JS-FEF.
- The wide acceptance of the Vigilance Cell members was proved when many of them were elected to the Panchayat.

7. Reflections

On the whole, the programme was marked by the genuine participation of people. The training modules were received positively. The sessions helped transform the initial negative reactions of the men. Once they were convinced, they participated wholeheartedly. The Panchayat Committee as a whole and the ward members individually, took active interest in the programme. As part of owning up the project, the Panchayat agreed to make one of its buildings available for the JS functioning. The Plan proposal of the Panchayat included a two page report of the JS-FEF. Plan fund allotment was made for the legal literacy campaign, to establish Ward Vigilance Cells and other activities. The Panchayat took up strengthening of the JS as one of its major activities. Our experience also showed that without the groundwork and environment creation, the functioning of JS would have been rather superficial.



STRENGTHENING
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JAAGRATHA SAMITHI

"In our Panchayat, the Jaagratha Samithi is able to safeguard the rights of poor women as well as get involved in their welfare."

Lilly Francis, President
Pananchery Gram Panchayat

SDC CapDeck

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) is Switzerland's international cooperation agency, under the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs. SDC supports sustainable development and seeks to improve the living conditions and quality of life of disadvantaged people in the South and East.

In India, starting with technical collaboration in livestock improvement in Kerala in 1963, SDC progressively expanded its activities to other geographical areas and to other fields such as natural resource management, rural finance and employment, rural energy and housing, decentralisation and local governance, empowerment and social justice, human and institutional strengthening and humanitarian aid.

SDC has been cooperating in these fields with a variety of partners, notably community based and non-governmental organisations, research and education institutions, central, state and local governments.

The Programme on Capacity Development for Decentralisation in Kerala (CapDeck) of SDC was conceptualised to support capacity building for the democratic decentralisation process in Kerala.

As part of this, SDC collaborates mainly with the Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA). Starting with support for the transition from a campaign mode of capacity building to an institutionalised form, the KILA-CapDeck project developed a decentralised training system under the leadership of KILA and platforms for sharing of experiences on decentralisation and for co-ordination of activities.

The CapDeck Programme also supports people-driven and people-centred decentralised democratic governance by empowering the citizens and their democratic bodies to play a more pro-active role in local development. Strengthening Gram Sabhas, developing Panchayats as real institutions of local governance, motivating Community Based Organisations (CBOs) and other institutions for strengthening Panchayati Raj, mainstreaming gender in decentralisation and empowering the marginalised through Panchayati Raj, form the broad framework on which the local initiatives under the CapDeck's Panchayati Raj Empowerment component are designed and implemented. These interventions are carried out through Panchayats, NGOs, academic institutions, local government associations, Kudumbashree, State Women's Commission and other civil society organisations.