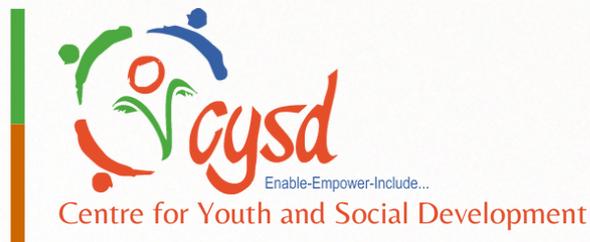


Social Sector Advancement Through Federations

National Conclave on Social Sector Federations/ Collectives,
4th & 5th October 2023, Bengaluru

Organised by



Dhwani Foundation &
Centre for Youth and Social Development

Contents

1	Overview	2
2	Context Setting	2
3	Celebrating Successes	3
4	Challenges Faced By The Sector	4
5	Governance In Federations – An Insight	5
6	Key Findings - Challenges	6
7	Key Findings – Suggestions	7
8	Way Forward	8
9	Annexure	10

Overview:

Civil society in India is at a crossroad today. Ever changing landscape, regulatory framework, and diminishing role due to larger role played by Govt in implementing social sector programs, have created greater challenges to the sector. During such a time a consortium of civil society organizations that represents the interests of its members and that can speak in an united voice, is the need of the hour. While many federations have been in existence for a while, a platform to bring them together was critical.

Dhwani Foundation, a capacity building organization based out of Bengaluru and Centre for Youth and Social Development based out of Bhubaneshwar, came together to create such a platform. The conclave on Social Sector Federations / Collectives - 'Social Sector Advancement through Federations' was conducted over one and a half days in Bengaluru.

The conclave saw enthusiastic participation from over 20 top social sector leaders in the country.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE PROCEEDING

Context Setting

Dhwani Foundation representatives, Mr. K N Gopinath and Mr. Vijay Kulkarni, briefly dwelt on the current situation in the social sector which is facing bigger challenges. A need was felt to get representatives of major federations/collectives of the country under one roof to discuss and deliberate on the current status, and ponder on the way forward. Mr. Jagadananda from CYSD came together with Dhwani Foundation to set the conclave in motion to start engagements among various federations/sector leaders. The forum aimed at providing a free space for participants to exchange thoughts and ideas in the interest of the sector. For most people, it was the first time that they had come together to discuss the role of federations/collectives in advancing the cause of the social sector.

Mr. Jagadananda who facilitated the deliberations, reiterated the close level of interdependency between federations and its member CSOs. Civil Society's contributions through innovative solutions to complex societal problems was commended. He applauded the efforts of the social sector and general public of our country which resulted in pathbreaking movements like Self Help Group (SHG), Watershed, and work in water & sanitation which have led to larger programs like Rural Livelihood Mission and Swacch Bharat Mission, legislations like Right to Information Act, Forest Act, Right to Education Act and many more.

However, due to knowledge deficit, lack of standards, lack of positive narrative about the sector's work, and lack of database of functioning CSOs, their work resulted in several challenges for the sector.

Mr. Jagadananda J summed up by setting possible expectations from the conclave:

- Understand the purpose around which networks or federations were set up? What are the practiced values? Can the group learn from each other?
- Best practices in individual organisations that can be shared to build a mutually acceptable standard.
- Avenues to Strengthen Federations

Celebrating Successes:

Civil Society organisations thrive on impacting the society, but seldom do they celebrate their successes. The gathering felt like a positive narrative that was imperative, and took some time to seek and applaud successes of few of the federations present in the forum.

Atul Kumar from Leprosy Network spoke about the creation of first community radio network and advocacy for its growth that resulted in creation of legislation on this issue. Today there are over 600 community radio stations across the country that are much appreciated by the community.

A federation of organisations working towards eradication of leprosy when there were not even CSOs working in this area is also a huge accomplishment.

Harsh Jaitli from VANI dwelt on the success of the 'Whatsapp Revolution' post Covid. CSOs that were reluctant and reticent in talking about their successes, started sharing success stories through Whatsapp which resulted in creation of newsletters around this by VANI. These newsletters were shared with a wide audience including NITI Aayog and had a twofold benefit – CSOs learnt to communicate in simple language and overcame their reluctance in talking about their achievements. VANI has been the member of many Govt committees via which it has contributed to discussions on policy formulation and implementation.

S.R.Hiremath traced his journey from starting a NGO -India Development Services (IDS) at Medleri. He explained how AVARD started by Jayaprakash Narayan inspired him to start FEVOURD-K (Federation of Voluntary Organizations for Urban and Rural Development - Karnataka). Hiremath narrated his struggle to bring erring politicians and bureaucrats to book through his institution Samaj Parivartan Samudaya. Apart from being courageous at our work, he said, Purpose, Approach and Values are most important.

T R Raghunandan applauded the success of MNREGA which is the largest and one of the best run poverty alleviation programs in the world that has seen unprecedented success

Sphere India has been working diligently on the ground in Manipur facilitating dialogues between the warring factions. Sphere has also successfully created network in Kerala which has been formally recognized by the Kerala Government after the floods

RRA – This network has worked on influencing policy and programs of Govt of Orissa. Nature of investment designed by network and adopted by Orissa government resulted in investment of over INR 2000 crores towards Orissa Millet Mission. Andhra Pradesh drought mission – Network designed programs resulting in INR 5000 crores being invested by the Andhra Pradesh Govt over a 10-year period. So, influencing Govt expenditure on a particular sector is also possible.

Challenges Faced By The Sector

The verdict was unanimous. Civil Society in the country is facing unprecedented challenges today, the extent of which was never faced before. Few of these challenges that the participants articulated are listed below:

Various Issues faced by the sector and CSOs in the country today:

- **Fear Psychology** – Reluctance to bring attention upon themselves even for the good work being done
- **Grassroot CSOs are struggling** - While medium to large CSOs are relatively well off, grassroots CSOs severely hampered by unaddressed capacity building needs, lack of funds and talent are struggling to even exist
- **Low organization resilience** - Lack of corpus and institutional depth are resulting in many CSOs shutting shop when faced with crisis
- **Lack of standards** especially in HR makes it difficult to identify and retain talent. M & E methodologies are devised by every organization thus, lacking standardization for the sector
- **Lack of solidarity** within - CSOs fight their individual battles
- **Excessive use of jargons** complicates the messages that CSOs wish to send out. Simplicity is the key
- Experiences and data are not documented and shared across the sector through a central platform
- **Weak Public Narrative and lack of visibility** - Negative stories are highlighted but successes which far outweigh the failures are seldom showcased by media
- **Claims by Government departments** – Claims on eradication of issues by government authorities compound the problems for CSOs who find funds drying up for an issue where acute need still exists
- **Existential Crisis** - Contravention to government laws sometimes results in withdrawal of many permissions, threatening the very existence of the organisations
- **Overregulation** - Regulations are becoming more and more stringent which results in organisations facing difficulty to keep pace and function effectively.
- **Lack of support system** - Organisations, especially newcomers, struggle due to lack of a navigating system, training, leadership guidance etc.

Governance In Federations – An Insight

A strong governance mechanism is the foundation for the success of organisations. In Federations, due to the nature of their composition, governance becomes a gamechanger. The forum saw some participants sharing insights on the functioning of their federations.

- **Sphere India** has an elected body of representatives who govern the federation. Sector wise committees and an enriched member engagement program – capacity building webinars, program newsletters, and sharing of performance metrics in general body are some highlights. A Common Minimum Program (CMP) strategy guides its operations.
- **Sa-Dhan** an industry body with 230 members gets 30-40% of its corpus through membership fees. Pitching itself as an SRO – Self Regulatory Body has given Sa-dhan much credibility in the sector and among its members. Independent directors from bodies like NABARD add to its credibility. Board members serve for 2 years and can choose to be re-elected. The SRO Committee works independently from the board and whenever required even goes against its own members. Its findings and research reports are accepted by apex financial body – RBI. Transparency is the mantra here with strict adherence to a detailed Code of Conduct checked through periodic code of conduct audits (COCA). Capacity building through knowledge dissemination, webinars are regularly undertaken along with regional, state and national level conferences.
- **LOCAL** – This is an entirely member led process with members defining accountability charter, utilization of funds as well as feedback and complaints. Shared principles i: e transparency and accountability are critical to their functioning across 13 states. Accountability to the community is a unique feature of this federation
- **GRAKOOS** – This federation started from within the community with MNREGA workers. Block level, Taluka and State level committees also exists. 1 day wage from the members is taken as an annual membership fee. Additionally, 60% women and SC/ ST representation in its 11-member committee is unique.
- **RCRC** – Unregistered body with 96 members spread across the country barring 5 states. 7-member committee includes 3 elected members with a 3-year tenure and 4 founding members. Long term strategy with contributing members who have a sense of ownership is its strength. Joint programming and joint research – credible evidence (partnership with IIM Ahmedabad) is generated and shared with government bodies.

- **Goodbye Leprosy** – State level bodies have created national association. 5 organisations are part of this federation. Secretariat works through grants – no membership fees are collected at present.

Key Findings - Challenges

Federations were conceived as a lifeline for CSOs fighting their individual battles. While there are numerous NGO federations/collectives across the country who have been able to accomplish successes with respect to advocacy and other initiatives, there are several issues that federations are grappling with. Listed below are the challenges that the participants articulated at the forum.

1. Top 5 challenges faced by federation – Climate challenge, Governance Challenge, Democracy Challenge, Livelihood/ Survival Challenge and Demographic Challenge
2. Lack of Clarity in Purpose
3. Inability to engage the members constructively
4. Lack of visibility and good narrative for the sector
5. Knowledge Deficit – no sector reports on achievements. State of civil society report does not exist
6. Capacity building of members is a huge gap area
7. Duplication of networks mar the rhetoric
8. Built on weak foundation – members don't have ownership. Some networks lack clarity on who its members are.
9. Members behave like beneficiaries
10. Resource crunch – financial as well as human resource talent
11. Grassroot coalitions fizzling out



Key Findings – Suggestions:

Members & Community Related	Governance, Management and Operations	Collaborations	Need of the Hour!!
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reestablish connect with members. Serve the most vulnerable • Improve outreach. Maximise enrolments to the federations. Should ensure 80% membership of eligible CSOs • Accountability to the community must be the biggest metric • Policy needs to be framed on managing conflict and member expectations • Build community level champions • Treat community as ‘Co-partners’ as against treating them as ‘Subjects’ • Innovate and leverage strengths of members for greater good 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formalise existence through registration for existence in perpetuity • Define purpose of federation and its CMP – Common Minimum Program for clear direction • Ethical Foundation: e Values critical for the core of a federation • Strong and evolved Leadership needed to take vision forward and innovate • Secretariat critical for professional operations of a federation • SWOT analysis and Strategic Plans is a must • Fundraise for the federation and also members wherever possible. Do not compromise on the federation’s core purpose/ activities in this process • Code of Conduct and COC audits mutually beneficial 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Umbrella Federation body - need of the hour for coordinated and enhanced impact • Positive Narrative - Case studies of federations to be published. Specialised federations’ successes to be evaluated and learnings imbibed • Work together to create a platform for collation and dissemination of sector related information • IT, Financial Management, HR tools’ standardization and sharing among members will be beneficial to them while setting standards in the sector • Credible associations for improved visibility (e.g.: IIMs). Learnings from functioning of corporate federations good to imbibe • Improve Visibility for sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence based Policy Advocacy with government is the need of the hour. However, break it into small doable points for better success • Advocacy with donors equally important • Work with government as against trying to build parallel structures. Know when to approach and when not to • Parliament watch, Judiciary watch – a good avenue to explore • Social Security for sector workers is critical • Federations to become self-regulatory bodies for members • Use ‘Media’ to get message across and maximise impact • Need longitudinal research to build evidence.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial and Programmatic Accountability required • Specialised and clear vision provide for greater effectiveness (e.g.: Sa-Dhan) • Processes for internal governance, rotational leadership culture, defining relationship between stakeholders is critical • Involvement of atleast 20% members through the formation of sub committees. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Database of social sector organisations • Recognise 'Intersections' to work with organisations even if ideologies do not match fully • Explore possibility of replicating tried and tested models like 'Sa-Dhan' to maximise impact, including becoming SRO for the sector • Identify 'Collaboration vs Competition' opportunities and leverage Federations to explore role as 'Think tank' for the sector as against restricting themselves as networking bodies 	
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Way Forward:

The conclave is envisaged as the first among many such discussions to bring about a consensus on the path to be taken by federations. The deliberations were very effective and gave insights on the pressing problems the sector and federations face.

Some suggestions are noted below:

1. Explore possibility of a survey on NGO Federations akin to the survey conducted by Dhvani on Industry Federations.
2. Study on collapse of some NGO Federation bodies in the country.
3. Capacity Building for federations is the need of the hour. Need for organisations like Dhvani to undertake this activity.

4. Norms (parameters) for federation members' code of conduct need to be standardized if Federations are to act as SROs and become certification authorities. Can these norms be defined?
 5. Civil society is at crossroads. Deliberate the role of federations to overcome this challenge.
 6. Identifying and documenting innovations made by Grassroot organisations.
 7. To build positive narrative about the sector through the works of Federations/Collectives.
 8. To create a single platform where the achievements of the sector players could be stored.
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ANNEXURE

Participants

S no	Name of Organisation	Name of Participant
1	Centre for Youth and Social Development (CYSD)	Mr. Jagadananda J
2	Samaja Parivarthana Samudaya & FEVOURD K	Mr. S R Hiremath
3	The Coalition for Food and Nutrition Security	Mr. N.M Prusty
4	Sphere India	Ms. Lee Macqueen
5	Sphere India	Mr. Vikrant Mahajan
6	Voluntary Action Network India (VANI)	Mr. Harsh Jaitli
7	AREDS (Association of Rural Education and Development Service) & Tamil Nadu Land Rights Federation (TNRLF)	Mr. L. A. Samy
8	National Foundation of India (NFI)	Mr. Biraj Patnaik
9	Avantika Foundation	Mr T.R. Raghunandan IAS (Retd)
10	APMAS Mahila Abhivruddhi Society	Mr. C S Reddy
11	Sa-Dhan	Mr. Somesh Dayal
12	Financial Management Services Foundation (FMSF) India	Mr. Alex Mathew
13	Humanitarian Aid International and LOCAL (Local Organisations' - Coalition for Advancing Localisation)	Ms. Tarini Ross
14	Responsible Coalition for Resilient Communities (RCRC)	Mr. Kashi Nath Metya
15	GRAKOOS (Gramina Kooli Karmikara Sangha)	Ms. Swarna Bhat
16	Goodbye Leprosy (Leprosy organisations Network)	Mr. Atul Kumar
17	Samajika Parivartan Jana Andolana	Mr. Y Mariswamy
18	Society for Community Health Awareness, Research and Action (SOCHARA)	Dr. Thelma Narayan
19	Revitalizing Rainfed Agriculture Network (RRAN) & Director, WASSAN	Mr. Sabyachi Das

ANNEXURE

20	Child Rights Trust	Mr. Vasudev Sharma
21 - 25	Dhwani Foundation	Mr. M.J.Aravind, Mr.K.N.Gopinath, Mr. Krishna Kumar, Mr Rabbi Jayakaran, Mr. Vijay Kulkarni,

Profile of National Conclave Participants Downloadable



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Centre for Youth and Social Development