BUILDING A BETTER WORLD: THE CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY OF COVID-19

Editors **Peter Taylor and Mary McCarthy**

Community Leaders and Decentralised Governance: Tales from the SEWA Field[*][†]

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Abstract The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown in India resulted in women informal economy workers being out of jobs and with no social security blanket to rely on. Women community leaders therefore worked with the state to reach out to the most vulnerable and marginalised populations. This resulted in decentralised units where decisions are made at the community level in a collective fashion including critical and diverse stakeholders, in collaboration with state authorities. This model works best where locally developed networks with high levels of community trust exist that enable community leaders to reach communities in distress quickly and effectively, ensuring that relief and aid is delivered to those who need it the most. Additionally, women coming together to advocate for themselves **as women workers** allows for us to build back better with a key focus on marginal populations such as women at the bottom of the pyramid.

Keywords grass roots, informal sector, women workers, decentralisation, SEWA, community, leadership, Covid-19.

1 Introduction

Anuben, a street vendor from Gujarat, had not worked in four months as of August 2020, and could barely find enough food for her family of ten. They had been given a ration from the Public Distribution System (PDS)[3] but it was insufficient and had insects in the staples. She had not received any financial help or compensation from the government, and added to this, there was also anxiety about the spread of Covid-19.

Anuben exemplifies the struggles of workers in the informal economy.[4] A study on the preparedness of the informal economy (SEWA Bharat 2020) for a potential lockdown found that an overwhelming majority of families employed within it would have

been unable to sustain their current status quo if a lockdown were in effect for longer than a week due to not being able to afford basic amenities such as electricity and rent, amongst other things. India's lockdown, however, extended another five months. During this time, food became a scarce commodity for most families, access to primary health care was limited, and finances to afford access to better facilities was non-existent.

The nature of informal settlements (Singh, Sharma and Nagpal 2020), which house over 45 per cent of the Indian population, further complicated the ability of the population to prepare for this indeterminate and prolonged lockdown and health pandemic. While the Covid-19 lockdown made it difficult for the government to reach populations almost literally on the margins of society, even at the best of times, the social security net in India is erratic and missing for those on the absolute periphery. Through the lockdown, the state was unable to reach most citizens in need of assistance, even where social security measures were theoretically available. What **did** work, however, in these unprecedented times, was the stepping up by community members to safeguard the interests and needs of the informal economy.

2 Lessons from the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)[5] model: decentralisation and community-based governance
We look to West Bengal (India) for an example of the successful mobilisation by community members to supplement a weak state apparatus to take care of community needs. Informal economy women workers were left with no way to feed themselves and their families and in need of building back their homes after Cyclone Amphan became an additional crisis.[6] After waiting on rations and relief to reach their rural community for a few weeks, the workers realised that help and support was still a while away and mobilised themselves to approach their local *panchayat* (village council). After a series of negotiations, the *panchayat* agreed to contract out mask-making for the community to these women. The women learned how to stitch masks from each other and the elder women in their families, and began selling these in bulk to bring resources and thereby food back into their community.

This raises the key question for us: how can communities become more participatory in their own governance and thereby bridge the gap between the state and vulnerable populations? Drawing on the examples set by SEWA's cadre of grass-roots leaders (called Aagewans), we note here lessons for community-oriented governance rooted in equitable **power-sharing** through processes of decentralisation (SEWA Bharat 2020).

2.1 Women movers and shakers
A leader among their peers, Aagewans share the same precarious conditions as the informal economy women workers they represent and mobilise. These grass-roots leaders have, over the last five decades, built up community leadership models

(*ibid*.) that draw on solidarity networks to ensure that the state is able to reach every citizen, thus filling the gaps that have emerged on account of a democratic deficit on the part of the state. In SEWA's case, it is the Aagewans who have stepped forward to carry on the work that their communities need, and become advocates and champions for the women around them; and by extension, their families, enabling the market and the state to reach those who would be neglected otherwise.

Aagewans have been doing organisational, developmental, and entrepreneurial work across India for the last five decades. Through the Covid-19 lockdown, Aagewans have played an (additional) critical role in identifying areas of need within communities, leading relief efforts, and strengthening support networks to build a broader platform for lobbying with the government on behalf of those in the informal economy. They have also continued their year-round work in ensuring that communities have adequate documentation related to social security, are integrated into the financial and banking system, and can access community resources such as clean water and waste disposal, all made even more critical by this crisis.

For instance, banking correspondents in Punjab took over the additional responsibility of documentation and linkage work in border areas of India–Pakistan, where the reach of government services is minimal. Through their interactions with the communities in these areas, the correspondents realised that these communities were being neglected in all relief efforts due to a lack of documentation on their part. The correspondents helped bridge the gap between citizens and government services by supporting them in getting the required paperwork in place for pensions and welfare benefits and submitting insurance documentation on behalf of communities. Jayantiben, a banking correspondent under the SEWA-Sarthak programme in Uttarakhand,[7] has been helping the community around her to access banking services as well as benefits from government schemes, despite the lockdown and the difficulties that arise in commuting due to the state being hilly. She has even gone to the extent of providing doorstep banking services to people who could not come to her Customer Service Point by getting a pass under the SEWA-Sarthak programme and visiting them using her own family car (Jayantiben 2020).

In another example, which highlights the need for these leaders to be women, Aagewans were the first to notice within a week into the nationwide lockdown, that access to menstrual hygiene products was increasingly becoming a challenge due to a strangled supply chain.[8] SEWA Aagewans and staff mobilised and collaborated with private sector organisations to arrange for the distribution of over 75,000 sanitary napkins across six states in India, proving to be critical essential frontline workers.

2.2 Changing dynamics of the Covid-19 lockdown

The condition of migrants was another major concern in India with a large percentage of them unemployed due to the lockdown and left with no means of returning home (Iyer 2020). As migrants by definition are not rooted in a community due to the precarious nature of their employment and residential situation, a decentralised model would presumably not work to safeguard their interests. However, what we noted through our primary interviews is the ability of a decentralised and community-based governance model to work in tandem with large-scale operations such as the safe transportation of migrants, across large distances, back home. Sarabjit Kaur, who lives in Punjab, for instance, identified needy migrant families, specifically those who were not surveyed by locally elected officials, to ensure that food rations reached them, and due to this, these families received ration kits on a priority basis. In yet another example of organising and mobilisation, the national network of Aagewans communicated amongst themselves to make sure that migrants and those stranded away from home for work were looked after and their needs met. Staff members from SEWA Rajasthan and SEWA Delhi ensured that immigrants from Bihar were housed and fed, until transportation back home could be arranged for them by their families or by the government.[9]

What is of significance here is not the absence of state power but instead, decentralised units where decisions are made at the community level in a collective fashion, and stakeholders making the decisions that affect their lives. This is done **in collaboration with** state authorities (mostly sub-national but with the potential to become scalable).

We draw examples of successful collaboration of the state with both SEWA (with the Odhisha state government) as well as non-SEWA actors (the NRLM-SHG model) to showcase the effectiveness of such partnerships. The Odisha state government[10] is a great example of a proactive approach to tackling hunger through the lockdown, by relying on local community sources of leadership. Being unable to reach every citizen on its own with limited resources through the crisis, the Odisha government handed over power and resources to the local *panchayats*[11] to ensure that cooked food was provided to all who needed to be fed. This was done as *panchayats* have the most relevant information about what their community's needs are, especially during a crisis such as the Covid-19 lockdown where state representatives cannot visit any local sites.

Aagewans in Badhigaon (Odisha) partnered with the *panchayat* and took over the responsibility of collecting the rations, feeding and distributing amongst the community, all the while maintaining health directives. Meanwhile, the *panchayat* could focus on negotiations with the state, setting up directives for economic activity, and channelling community concerns and feedback

to the state government. Our interviews with the Badhigaon community revealed very little hunger through the lockdown and a quick resumption of local business, exemplifying the potential of this decentralised, power-sharing model that centres people and ensures that the marginalised are able to access their schemes.

The NRLM-SHG[12] model is yet another example of this kind of public–civic collaboration that allows for civic society to close the last-mile gap that the state is hard pressed to do. This cadre across states like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh have been the 'barefoot' responders through this crisis in many parts of India – mobilising *en masse* to stitch and distribute masks, running awareness campaigns on social distancing and other preventive measures, working with ASHA/ANM[13] workers to ensure health outreach, responding to domestic violence reports, and in some cases, supporting state governments in data collection (e.g. skill assessments of returning migrants) (Kejrewal 2020).

3 Conclusion and recommendations

This is not to say that the model works perfectly all the time. We see much higher success in areas where SEWA has been working for around five to ten years, the community is very engaged with their leaders, and the leaders in turn have built very strong relationships with local bureaucracies to enable smooth execution and implementation of policy and government schemes. These result in locally developed networks with high levels of community trust that enable SEWA to reach communities in distress quickly and effectively, ensuring that relief and aid is delivered to those who needed it the most.

What must be noted is that these developed local networks are not related to pre-existing mobilised political cadres at the grass roots (e.g. Kerala and West Bengal due to their communist legacies). This is due to the fact that the organising being done here is **by women, for women**. Women coming together to advocate for themselves **as women workers** is still a radical notion, and even more during crises when women return to work at much lower rates than men. For instance, in the past, women from low-income households have typically entered the labour force, while women from rich households have often exited the labour market in response to economic crises. In contrast, men's labour force participation rates have remained largely unchanged (Sabarwal, Sinha and Buvinic 2010). This has only been compounded during Covid-19 where

> while men are more likely to see their working hours reduced (54 per cent of men vs 50 per cent of women), more women have lost their jobs or businesses as a result of Covid-19 (25 per cent of women vs 21 per cent of men) (Azcona *et al.* 2020: 5).

It, therefore, becomes even more critically important in these times to bolster community participation by women workers, and

increase their interface with the government, to ensure that their voices are included in efforts to build back a better world, post pandemic, and allow the gains from these times to sustain in times of peace.

Notes

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3   India provides staple foods at subsidised rates to economically weaker individuals in India via the PDS.

4   Informal economy workers can be defined as those who do not receive a fixed contract/salary for the work they do and neither do they have access to social security benefits. Examples of informal labour would be the work done by domestic workers, construction workers, and street vendors amongst others.

5   The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is a movement of women who make a living in the informal sector of India's economy. Since its founding, SEWA has relied on a decentralised model to mobilise women workers and address their needs, especially those that are being neglected by the market and the state, by investing power in local communities (see **SEWA website**).

6   All data represented are drawn from a series of data collection done over eight states, 15+ trades, and 70 Aagewans (community leaders). It is a part of ongoing data collection efforts for research and programmatic purposes.

7   A programme implemented by **SEWA Bharat**, in partnership with the State Bank of India, to employ and train banking agents.

8   Additionally, menstrual hygiene products were not initially labelled as essential products in India (Business Wire India 2020).

9   Similarly, SEWA Bengal and SEWA Kerala mobilised resources to support Bengali immigrants working and stranded in Kerala.

10 Building on decades of successful disaster mitigation and relief strategies.

11 Local governing bodies in villages in India.

12 National Rural Livelihood Mission–Self Help Group.

13 Accredited Social Health Activists/Auxiliary Nurse Midwives.

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