

EMPOWERMENT FROM BELOW: **SELF EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT OF GRASS-ROOTS** **WOMEN'S COLLECTIVES**

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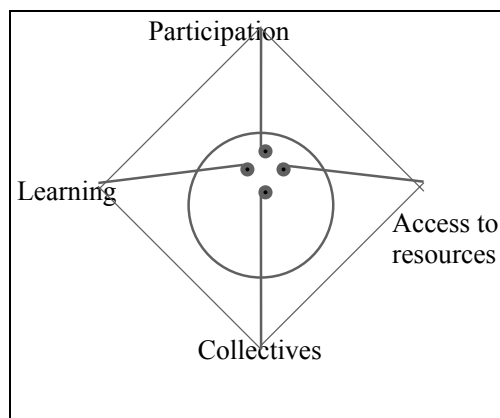
This paper aims to share the insights from a unique experiment at women's empowerment through networking, self-education and collective action, vis. the *Swayam Shikshan Prayog* (SSP), and pull lessons (from the same) on capacity building for women's empowerment.

We write from the experience of SSP as participants and facilitators of this self education process. Women's groups, elected members and organisers have traveled the path of empowerment in the last decade. Today, this ever growing spiral includes thousands of women's collectives among the rural poor in several states linked through an information and learning network.

INTRODUCTION

In spite of over three decades of attention by the Indian state and international agencies to "integrate" women in mainstream development, women from poor communities¹ have either been left out of these processes, or have derived little benefit.

Mainstream development is equated with promoting economic growth models. In this context, anti poverty programs are viewed as a safety net for the poor. Recognising that the process of growth bypasses the poor in the short run, the government considered it necessary to formulate specific poverty alleviation programs for generation of a certain minimum level of income for groups in poverty (The Planning Commission, 1992). Amongst the poor, women are seen as doubly disadvantaged by their class and gender identity, and since the 1980s special programmes have been designed for them.



These programs seek the participation of women and poor communities as 'beneficiaries'. At best, these interventions have made a cosmetic shift from the earlier welfare approach, which stereotyped women as reproducers and home managers to viewing them as "efficient channels to deliver goods and services to the poor"². They rarely focus on social goals of empowerment.

¹ Marginalised groups among the rural and urban poor include women among landless labourers, marginal and small farmers, informal sector. Dalit, Muslim, and tribal women are disadvantaged by their caste, religious and ethnic identities as well.

² The national and global approach to micro finance is an example of this efficiency approach. Micro finance programmes perceive women to be efficient channels for delivery of credit to the poor, ignoring issues of access and control over credit and income, and leaving women to bear the burden of repayment.

In the recent years, the socio-political context has thrown up opportunities for people's participation. There is greater chance that the poor and women can represent their priorities in mainstream development. Opening up of spaces in local government institutions and the mushrooming of self help groups are twin opportunities that allow for participation.

Alternatives in the field, show that "given the space and support, poor women can reflect on their situation, articulate their position and challenge injustice. They can break out their situation of powerlessness and gain control of their lives" (*IDS 1991*).

In the last decade, SPARC Society of Promotion of Area Resource Centres and later, the SSP network was founded to explore / examine ways in which professionals can partner with grassroots groups to address survival concerns of the poor. It was believed, that when women's groups address community concerns, get a chance to harvest lessons from the successes and failures in everyday life. We recognized that how this collective learning on issues occurs, is important. The process of learning within groups, is often the basis for creating knowledge.

Empowerment strategies for women need to address practical community concerns and women's gender interests. Resolving survival issues of communities is a starting point for emergence of leadership at the grassroots. The belief is that issues of concern to poor women act as a springboard for effective mobilization.

Recognizing this, SPARC created space within communities of urban poor, for women to explore what their needs were, collectively design, execute and manage programs to resolve issues. As women's collectives gained control over resources, they expanded their choices and that of communities. This was the kickstart to a process of empowerment of poor women.

It is shown that if the process involves and educates poor women centrally it succeeds in addressing practical and strategic interests / needs.

It was interesting that when the Swayam Shikshan Prayog network initiated by SPARC it began as an exploration with a group of organisations who sought to examine the reasons for failure of income generation programs for poor women. For the first time, field organisers and poor women were part of an exercise, that questioned the focus, choice of skills and funding of economic programs for women.

Organisations and collectives in search of alternate ways of working with poor women on economic issues, decided to network through informal learning exchanges.

The networking process between local women's collectives in the rural areas, served to end the isolation that small groups faced, while evolving practical learning tools that addressed issues in the context of economic survival.

"Swayam Shikshan" meaning learning from others and reflecting critically on one's own experience. The process of networking created learning opportunities for small and medium sized organisations and women's collectives working on issues of economic empowerment in rural Maharashtra.

The network, primarily, sought to build the capacities of women's groups to address concerns, access and manage resources, and become active participants in and arbiters of mainstream development processes. Since SSP's formation in 1988, NGOs and women's collectives have participated in and eventually designed a variety of learning fora, including melavas or information fairs, shibirs or workshops and study tours, that have taken women's collectives on the path of empowerment.

In the last few years, SSP has strived to build a partnership with women's groups towards building a district wide alliance of community actors. SSP's goal is to create an environment that allows women and communities to engage with institutions. The political space created, gives women's collectives room to maneuver, create alliances and negotiate for improved access and gain control over vital resources. Armed with capacities and skills, women's groups act as an effective springboard for poor women to enter local planning.

Today, after ten years the SSP network has many organisations and women's groups who form the resource pool. These groups have experimented with and adapted learning tools be it peer exchanges, study tours. Each of these tools has a clear method, goal and outcomes.

Guiding principles

Recognizing best practices

Diffusion of innovations by women leaders

Peer learning among groups

Women 'own' the learning agenda

Learning spiral is inclusive and growing

Integral to this learning process were **savings and credit groups** (SCGs), which were perceived to be both an effective agency for social mobilization as well as a supportive space for poor women to learn about collectively mobilizing, managing, and exercising control over resources.

What is it about SSP learning process that makes it unique. We believe that while training addresses specific needs of groups, the holistic development of grassroots women's groups requires **active exchange and networking with peer groups**. Consciously promoted by the Swayam Shikshan Prayog network, the strategy advocates the creation of informal learning fora for poor women. All existing fora such as Gram Sabhas, village committees and local planning fora within districts are explored to allow for active intervention by women's collectives. The strategy employed to actualize this aim is **a multi-tiered and multi-issue** one that simultaneously catered to the **different levels of involvement of women's groups**.

Creating an learning environment

Spaces for participation by women: Within communities, handling of local issues, participation in local committees and hence information is in the hands of men. Women and esp. poor women are excluded from community decision making on key issues such as housing, credit and infrastructure. Creating space for women to participate, means reorganization of communities and renegotiation of gender roles.

Community issues are women's issues

Women concerns revolve around practical issues. When women's collectives address community issues such as access to water, access to natural resources etc. they acquire skills of designing and managing programs. These initiatives allow women's groups to test their ability to tackle multiple issues, and with multiple stakeholders and build *capacities as advocates of change*.

Women's eye view

In our experience, the way poor women perceived problems were different. Moreover, they saw the need to involve a range of groups and institutions. Often, women's everyday experiences were at the core of their analysis on community issues. "Who do you approach for loans in emergencies? Who gives you credit and on what terms?" These and other questions led to search for alternatives on credit. Similarly, in the earthquake hit areas, women were concerned about safety and security and did not view housing as a "brick and mortar" strategy.

Critical mass for transforming agendas

The SSP networking leads to alliance building between stakeholders. The belief is, that a critical mass of actors is essential to transform local agendas. As the learning spiral includes multiple actors, building alliances ensures that women's networks are on to negotiating platforms.

Women as teachers

SSP's facilitation ensured that the more educated - NGO representatives or officials did not dominate the learning process. Knowledge gained by women was visible when officials visited groups. What is key to the entire process is that women were viewed as generators of information as the people who will inform the nature, content and priorities of the learning and dialogue process.

Learning and empowerment process

Addressing practical needs Women's collectives invariably begin by addressing practical or survival needs. The process of addressing practical needs often goes through various stages: forming collectives, articulation of needs, collective action on community issues, design interventions, access and manage resources. Women's groups begin with savings and credit issues and move on later to addressing a wide range of practical needs. Their participation in learning fora leads them to take action and build linkages with institutional actors. Addressing practical needs such as credit, housing, basic services, etc. provides the basis for poor women's collectives to take on community leadership roles. To illustrate, women's groups forced village panchayats to respond to problems faced by women - drinking water, child care, health centres and schools. By doing this, they reframed village priorities.

The struggle for everyday survival is the arena for ***collective action by women***. Savings and credit groups women experience a sense of confidence as they are able to access loans for emergencies. The group (usually twenty to fifty women,) strengthens the economic base of the groups and equips them with skills to take on productive activities. Groups provide women space to come together, voice common needs and take collective action. The collective space allows women to address common concerns and analyze everyday experiences.

The process of critical thinking accompanies every self education program and facilitates women to move several steps. Mutual support and trust are key to learning within collectives. Collectives or groups once empowered with information and awareness proceed to establish linkages with institutions to access resources. Similarly, poor women are entering Panchayati Raj institutions and local planning bodies. But women's presence alone means nothing - it could be merely tokenistic. Getting women to govern implies that they have the skills and capacities to access information, mobilize and manage resources and interact with multiple actors.

Upscaling initiatives When women's collectives mature they move from collective action to building capacities to access and manage resources. These initiatives often represent community solutions for long standing problems. Every summer, women and communities, in Latur district, led protests against the indifference of officials to the acute water shortage. At a cluster meeting, women from ten villages decided to take the problem in their hands. They mapped the water sources came up with points for immediate action. Water was a common resource, women argued. Residents were mobilized to contribute water taxes and a plan made with the Gram Panchayat to bring in additional resources.

Learning tools

The informal structure of learning exchanges, allows women to weave in multiple issues and concerns. Sharing stories of success, allows for other groups to rethink their strategies. More important expansion and upscaling of initiatives is supported by the large network of groups.

A cluster of 10 to 15 villages is ideal ground for networking between women's groups It allows women's groups to meet regularly, just as the group allows women meet at their convenience. Often, cluster learning events are structured around organic relationships that already exist among women and families in a set of villages.

- ***Sakhi shibirs*** or mini exchanges at the cluster are the wheels on which the network runs. These events, take women out of their own villages. The confidence gained by traveling to nearby villages takes women a step closer to dealing with administration offices at block and district. In the same way, shandies or weekly markets are used to foster exchanges on enterprise and trade between groups. Cluster networks also encourage the experienced groups to lead the learning process, and train and monitor the activities of nascent groups.
- The ***Sakhi Panchayat*** fora initiated by SSP provides opportunities for interaction and dialogue. It creates the "women - support for women" elected members (who may otherwise feel isolated).When women voice concerns of the poor, and that of vulnerable groups in gram sabhas, local governments are forced to review their priorities and include women's concerns.

Earlier, these women subsidized delivery of services, be it water, fuel to their households, now the same women lead community initiatives.

- ***Melavas:*** Melavas or information fairs are festive occasions in which women disseminate and celebrate their achievements. For uninitiated groups, melavas are a place to get to

know what women's groups are doing. Melavas have been responsible for the formation of many savings and credit groups. For the experienced groups who organise melavas, it is an opportunity to show their leadership skills and share their experiences with new groups. Melavas bring hundreds of women from different areas together. They promote visibility and recognition in the district and act as a negotiating platform for the network of women's groups. The weight of the critical mass of groups is key to transforming local policies.

- **Study tours:** Study tours expose the women to new activities and new ways of doing things. Innovations in watershed development, use of new technologies by communities, federation building processes, and training of women masons are a few examples of such activities. Transfer of know-how and adoption of innovations occur very rapidly after a study tour. As the people who have succeeded with such innovations are women belonging to similar background as themselves, the confidence to try out these innovations at home increases. A week of living and traveling together also builds solidarity amongst group leaders and NGO workers.
- **Dialogue workshops:** Dialogue workshops are structured to facilitate interactions of women with taluka/block and district administrations. The workshops set the stage for direct dialogue between women and the administration on specific schemes and problems. They lay the foundations of future community-state partnerships.
- **Learning and convergence approach to governance:** Training events are semi-structured events which seek to strengthen knowledge and skills around specific issues and concerns. It is operationalised through a resource team of NGOs and women's groups. Horizontal training processes, which emphasize peer learning, allow for mutual exchanges around issues. Further, it is more conducive for up-scaling interventions than vertical training programmes, wherein a dependency is created on trainers from outside. State officials, bankers, new groups and old groups also participate in training programmes. The involvement of multiple actors serves to clearly define new roles for each actor.
- **Pilot experiments:** Currently few projects actually demonstrate the active involvement of women and communities in planning and in managing local resources. There is however now greater scope for such involvement, as most development projects now have a clause requiring community and women's participation. There is hence a need to encourage women to experiment and show ways through which they can participate in, and manage a, range of survival related projects or programmes like drinking water supply projects, community toilets, community centres, roads and basic services. Women may need to be supported during this pilot phase.

Though the overall thrust of most self-education processes or events under SSP has been on strengthening survival strategies of women from marginalised communities, it is possible to distinguish between three distinct objectives of self-education: *self education for development, self-education for local governance and self-education for empowerment.*

Self-education for development is geared towards enabling women to learn from each other as to how to: i) identify priority survival needs, ii) map resources available for addressing these, iii) decide which technology is best suited for addressing their needs, iv) plan in a

participatory manner so as to address their needs, v) strengthen their skills to translate their plan into action, mobilize community resources, and manage and supervise activities collectively.

Self-education for local governance encourages poor women and men to learn from each other information, knowledge and skills central to exercise political power, vis. information on i) the roles and powers of local self governance institutions, of elected representatives, and of the Gram Sabha, ii) provision for reservation for women within local self-governance institutions and its implications, iii) activating village committees for micro-level planning and decision making, iv) mechanisms for decentralized assessment of needs of marginalised groups and participatory micro-level planning & decision making, v) mechanisms for monitoring quality and efficiency of basic services delivered by the local self governance institutions.

Self-education for women's empowerment encourages women to learn from each other i) the benefits and functioning of groups or collectives, ii) innovative ways to identify, articulate and prioritize their survival needs such as credit, housing and basic services, iii) participatory ways to identify solutions for addressing these needs, especially in a manner which challenges the existing gender based division of labour and spaces, iv) how to mobilize resources from government and local self governance institutions at different levels to address their needs, and v) mechanisms to finally own the services and programmes. As the women's collectives move along the empowerment spiral, there is a visible demonstration of change. It includes more and more women and collectives who then constitute a critical mass, and can transform the communities they belong to and change local development agendas.

ASSESSING GAINS FOR WOMEN

They have moved on from being beneficiaries to active partners who are shaping development processes in their settlements. One of the questions before us is how do we assess these processes in terms of gains for women?.

The following is hence just an indicative listing of the different ways in which the SSP has impacted the lives of women, using some of the indicators on status of women developed by WOPRA³ (Batliwala, et al, 1998):

- *Expanding women's mobility:* Perhaps the most visible impact of the learning and networking process has been increasing women's mobility and exposure. For women who had never stepped out except to visit relatives, or to work in the fields, being part of events be it a study tour, or melava, women felt the opening up of a new door or window in their lives. Each of the learning fora as brought women out of their homes and villages and exposed them to alternative ways of living and being. Some They had to break many rules. Sometimes they came, accompanied by husbands, fathers, to meetings. Later, when women were harassed, taunted by family members for roaming around with other women, they convinced such members using the argument that their newly acquired knowledge and skills would contribute to the economic and social betterment of their families and communities. Once exposed to the outside world, the travel bug has bitten

³ The six indicators of status developed by WOPRA include: women's control over labour and income, women's control over private assets, women's control over public resources, women's control over political spaces, women's control over physical mobility and women's control over bodily integrity.

many a women, and the more experienced ones encourage and give advise to the new ones as to how handle resistance and gain support of men.

- *Expanding women's control over labour:* The different learning fora initiated by SSP have strengthened women's struggle to challenge the existing division of labour, and valuation of women's work. In the earthquake hit districts in Maharashtra, over one thousand women were trained to monitor quality of earthquake resistant housing. Women construction labour moved on to be trained masons. The construction sector is largely dominated by men.
- *Expanding women's control over public resources:* The SSP network has also changed development agendas, resource allocation patterns, and management of public resources in many ways. Between 1991 and 1994, the weight of the network in six districts was used to ensure that funds for income generation are easily accessed by women groups. Direct dialogue with district and state resulted in linking DWCRA to other schemes, most important, policies and practices were changed in favour of poor women.
- In 1993, with the Latur Earthquake, SSP got involved with the Earthquake Rehabilitation Project. It was soon invited to be the Community Participation consultant in 1300 villages of Maharashtra, which enhanced women's ability to influence the disaster relief and reconstruction programmes in the area. Housing programmes, savings and credit programmes, public distribution system, non-formal education programmes, and health and sanitation programmes were all designed and implemented with the active participation and management of poor women from the area (SSP, 1999b).
- In the neighbouring state Gujarat, Utthan and Mahiti with their partners engendered the problem of drinking water. The drinking water problem (faced in particular by women given their household roles) was placed at the centre of the development agenda in the state. Regeneration of water sources is the main plank of the state driven programme in drought prone Gujarat. However, the politics of water determined its use in industry, agriculture or other sectors.
- *Expanding women's control over produce and income:* Some of the women's savings and credit groups/collectives have started managing ration shops under the public distribution system. Loans from the group help reduce dependency on money lenders, while other groups have used income generated through the process to pay the deposit to run a ration shop under the PDS. Such initiatives have not only increased food security.

The impact of belonging to a large network on women's control over their own wages and income. Women's bargaining and decision making power within the family has increased as the attitude that "they are only women, what do they know" is giving away.

- *Expanding women's participation in community institutions and decision making:* Women's presence in traditional and non-traditional decision making bodies is a means by which women's participation gets institutionalised. But women's presence alone could merely be tokenistic. For effective participation they need to be backed by strength and support from collectives.

- *Expanding women's exercise of political power:* A related impact of the SSP networks has been strengthening the ability of women to exercise their political powers. Through mass information strategies several women were motivated to contest Gram Panchayat elections in Latur and Osmanabad districts of Maharashtra through the SSP networks. With support of the village level collectives and cluster level networks of SSP⁴, women representatives of Gram Panchayats are no longer just candidates acting out instructions from husbands or male community leaders. They play a key role in micro-level planning, design and layout of community infrastructure, choice of management systems, and mobilisation of community resources (human and material). The women representatives and the women's collectives have also contributed to making the Gram Panchayat representatives more accountable to the Gram Sabha. In this way they are also transforming the agenda for governance, and ensuring that the survival needs of the poor are given priority.

These are just a few examples of the impact of the SSP network and its members. But what they collectively point to is that fora for women to come together and learn from each other can definitely engender mainstream development process. That is, they can definitely bring poor women and their concerns into the center of development agendas and processes.

LESSONS:

There are many lessons which flow from the SSP experience.

Women belonging to poor communities can learn from their everyday struggle for survival. Mutual support groups and their networks, provide a platform for women to organise themselves, articulate their priorities and take collective action. In particular, women who have crossed social boundaries and struggled for their rights, can inspire change. Creating opportunities for self education where education is seen as a life skill is then the starting point for a capacity building strategy.

At a national exchange titled, Engendering development, over one hundred women leaders reflected on the numerous ways in which women have sought to gain greater control over resources.

Despite the diverse range of experiences, women claimed "ownership" of the learning processes. At the end of a three day event in Bombay, Soumini Devi a woman leader from Bihar, described what she felt "Some things I learnt with my eyes, some I learnt with my ears and other things I learnt with my heart."

Learning exchanges between women's groups, wherein women sharing similar concerns come together and learn from their individual and collective experiences. Over the years, several learning tools have been designed to address concerns by grassroots women. For e.g. community surveys could be form the basis for dialogue with officials. Women leaders teamed up to assess progress in the village sanitation programme. They found leakage of funds, unused toilets, ignorance of families on health issues. A feedback meeting was

⁴ A unique effort in this direction is the creation of the "Sakhi Panchayat fora" which provides opportunities for interaction and dialogue amongst women and elected representatives of Panchayats, and for women to extend support to elected women representatives.

arranged by SSP and women trained to present the data. Creating this space for women's groups to dialogue was part of SSP's strategy to forge community state partnerships.

Creating a platform for self-learning, catalyzing the process, and providing information as and when necessary are some of the key roles that NGOs play. Study tours and exposure visits act as a springboard for action by community groups. The NGO has to play a role in matching the learning agenda with that of the groups. In forging new partnerships or linking groups to resource institutions, SSP creates an environment for multiple stakeholders to dialogue with each other.

SSP's experience shows that we need to relook at concepts around learning or education. Education should be seen as a life skill, one enabling those undergoing it to negotiate the world from a position of strength. It should be seen as a process of facilitating critical reflection and questioning of social norms, structures, and existing systems of knowledge. Education should thus not just be seen as a strategy for picking up skills to read and write. This approach contrasts with the formal or banking approach to education, wherein the so called "educated" merely deposit various sets of information and skills on the so called "uneducated". Unfortunately, the banking approach dominates the educational efforts in the country. There is clearly a lack of sensitive educational effort to mobilize rural women and involve them in the educational processes that help them to critically reflect on their lives (Ramachandran, 1998).

At another level, the SSP experience and that of several grassroots efforts challenges the dominant thinking within the feminist/women's movement and amongst gender specialists on what issues are worthy of being labeled as "women's issues". Since the 1980s, personal issues such as violence against women, reproductive health rights etc. have dominated to the exclusion of survival issues of poor women. To illustrate, shortage of water, fuel or lack of toilets affects women. These are perceived as community issues and not as women's concerns.

Similarly, gender-specialists prioritize strategic gender needs over practical gender needs such as credit, housing, and basic services. Addressing strategic gender needs is seen as appropriate in the empowerment framework. Such polarization of issues and needs does not take into account the complexities that surround women's empowerment.

Learning for development needs to address practical, strategic and transformatory needs of women and communities. Collective struggles around practical gender needs lay the foundation for the emergence of mutual trust and mutual support, and builds women's capacity to take on community leadership roles thus challenging social norms and hierarchies directly. That collective strategies to address practical gender needs can lead to strategic outcomes and contribute to women's empowerment is neglected by both the women's movement and by gender-specialists working on development issues.

Everyday experiences of tackling survival issues offer the greatest potential to explore self education processes. Poor women are caught in a daily struggle for fuel, fodder and wages, and they hardly have any time for anything else. Going about their daily chores in isolation, they are unable to share their experience of oppression with other women, and are therefore unable to tap their collective strength. Their well defined social roles and norms governing interaction leave little room for education and critical thinking. Self education for poor

women goes hand in hand with addressing practical needs, moving from private to public spheres, family to community/public roles and from traditional to non traditional sectors. Collective action around survival issues can hence enhance the time they have to learn, break their isolation, and challenge social norms and develop new identity.

Collective action could range from spontaneous one time protests, to ongoing village level activities like savings and credit, managing basic services and so on. Though one time spontaneous demonstrations and protests may succeed, sustaining initiatives requires that women meet regularly, take decisions, resolve conflicts and continually learn new skills. Apart from being a member of a local group at the village or slum level, it is also important for women to feel that they are part of a larger network or movement. Interacting regularly with other women's groups serves to energize women's efforts. Other groups become part of informal support networks that help not only to reaffirm ones own work, but also to provide a range of localized approaches and activities from which to learn. Very often what one group in a village is struggling with can be successfully accomplished by the pooling of resources by ten groups working together. Federations of women's savings and credit groups have been able to leverage bank loans where smaller groups would have found it difficult.

Another key lesson from the SSP experience is the need for women to take men within the family and in the community along, to the extent possible, in their struggles. The re-negotiation of gender relations within communities is a protracted process whose starting point is usually resistance from men as women make the transition from merely working on community issues towards managing and controlling resources. Women are generally aware of this and hence choose to start by addressing issues which benefit the community as a whole before taking on areas that have a potential for conflict within the household. While in urban areas women start with addressing issues related to basic amenities, in rural areas they generally begin by addressing income and livelihood related issues.

Engendering development refers to the process of women move on to taking initiatives for governance, creating spaces for decision making and finally engendering structures and institutions in the environment.

Women's presence in community decision making bodies afford space by which women's participation gets institutionalized. It begins to become the rule rather than the exception to the rule.

To illustrate : women enter community level institutions education committees, water committees or village panchayats. Women's presence in non-traditional spaces such as masonry work, hand pump maintenance etc. can transform their position in traditional community spaces.

Mainstreaming Women's Concerns

Accessing government schemes can also be strategically useful in creating mechanisms that make state institutions more accountable to women. Aside from the direct and more obvious benefit of accessing state resources, these schemes provide opportunities to understand and influence with hierarchical institutional structures. For collectives and NGOs working with Swayam Shikshan Prayog in Maharashtra, accessing the D.W.C.R.A, a state poverty alleviation scheme, became an opportunity to explore meaningful partnerships with state institutions.

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