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BUILDING PARTICIPATORY INSTITUTIONS FOR PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY THROUGH ACCESS TO INFORMATION IN RURAL INDIA

Lessons from DEF's SoochnaSeva and SoochnaPreneur Model

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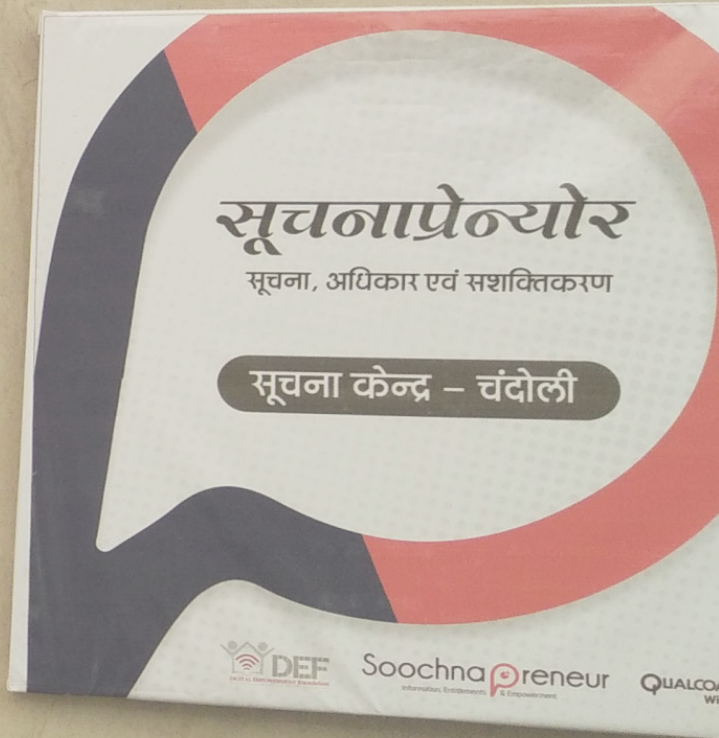
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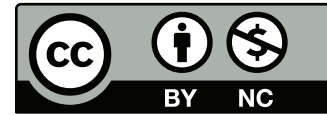




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Abstract

The paper discusses strategies to overcome barriers of access to social protection. It identifies that such barriers could be classified into two types: the first type consists of inflexible structural barriers like political clientelism and elite capture etc. that result from rules and practices of institutions of local governance nested within social institutions that reproduce configurations of power and control. The second type of barrier refers to constraints on agency of individuals that prevent them from claiming welfare rights due to them. This paper argues that a structural change that is required to effect a transformation in how rights to social protection are practised on the ground would be a function of temporality and it could take years to make a dent on configurations of power that lead to practices of exclusion. This does not go on to say that structural change is not possible or undesirable or an unworthy pursuit. In the long term, collective action may be able to affect the deeper levels of rules that structure action and outcome. However, in the short-term, individuals at the operational level may have little flexibility or opportunity to move beyond the rules that are currently constraining their actions. Therefore, on the pathway towards structural change, there needs to be strategies in place that can mediate access to entitlements through amelioration of constraints to agency through the means of a system of participatory practices that can reduce the gap between eligibility and entitlement. This is what this paper calls the politics of the possible. By using lessons from DEF's integrated access to information and micro-social entrepreneurship programmes, the paper aims to translate those learnings into a practical and analytical framework that can be used to work on and strategise the attainment of rights-based outcomes.

Disclosure:

The SochnaSeva project was deployed by Digital Empowerment Foundation with funding from the European Union. The SochnaPreneur project was deployed by Digital Empowerment Foundation with funding from European Union and Qualcomm.



There are broadly two approaches to social protection – a social risk management approach and a rights – based approach

Introduction

Social protection provides vulnerable populations economic means to cope with social and economic exclusion and inequality. Social protection has steadily occupied an important policy space within the international agenda as a result of multiple economic crises over previous decades which have underscored the precarious livelihoods contingent on market and macro-economic cycles (Kabeer & Cook, 2010). In the face of pervasive inequalities and a non-inclusive economic growth, social protection offers a pathway to correct vulnerabilities (Jha, 2013). Though social protection has long featured within many national development policies and agendas, its mainstreaming within the international fora followed after economic crises exposed the precarious and vulnerable livelihoods which came to be at stake in their wake. This stemmed from a recognition of the reinterpreted understanding of poverty from a static concept, or a 'snapshot in time', towards a dynamic one where social and economic vulnerability are subject to interaction between social structural and economic forces (Kabeer, 2010).

There are broadly two approaches to social protection – a social risk management approach and a rights – based approach. The social risk management approach followed by international organisations like the World Bank and International Labour Organisation (ILO) understands the barriers to poverty reduction and sustainable human and economic development as risks and contingencies that can be dealt with adequate planning to insure against shocks. It is about reducing vulnerabilities and helping to smooth-out consumption patterns. This is to help 'at risk' populations move away from informal coping strategies like removing children from school, delayed healthcare, selling of assets in order to deal with shocks like natural calamities, conflicts, policy reforms, health, and unemployment etc. (see Holzmann, Sherburne-Benz, and Tesliuc, 2003). On the other hand, a rights – based approach does not locate vulnerability and marginalisation within an event which engenders risk or risk-taking actions that undermine sustainable livelihoods and future well-being. It recognises the inequalities persistent within the social and economic structure within which populations reside and places positive responsibilities on the state towards ensuring the bridging of gaps towards equitable opportunities. However, even when social protection is guaranteed under a formal rights framework – the bottlenecks and barriers in implementation and public service delivery often prevents benefits from reaching the intended populations (see Akerkar, Joshi, & Fordham, 2016).

India's post-independence constitutional framework aimed to transform social relationships based on historical social structure through the removal of untouchability and prohibition of forced labour, thereby providing the Right to Equality, Right to Freedom, Right Against Exploitation, Right to Freedom of Religion, Cultural and Educational Rights, and Right to Constitutional Remedies. This is complemented by the Directive Principles of State Policy aimed at securing social and economic democracy by directing the State to ensure social, economic, and political justice for its citizens. It attempted to actualise a notion of citizenship where individuals are bearer of rights that are prior to and independent of their social hierarchies (see Kabeer, 2006). Flowing from



these constitutional foundations, India has an expansive matrix of social protection schemes at both the Central and State level. With India having a federal governance structure, social protection schemes come within the purview of both the Centre and the State and both entities have their own set of social protection schemes.

However, the legal guarantee of welfare rights might be undermined by the practices of the State, governance units, and the interaction between State and local configurations of power at the frontline of social protection delivery. At the national level it refers to low spending on social protection by central and state governments. At the level of local governance institutions it involves reinforcement of social barriers to access social protection. In terms of social sector spending, all states together spend about 6 - 7% of GDP while the centre spends about 1 - 2%. At the level of local governance institutions, the political configuration of the local community engender the conditions for process deficits that determine exclusion and inclusion. Thus, even though the socio-economic conditions of different members within a community might be common knowledge to its members, the question arises whether local leaders have enough motivation and incentives to give positive preferential treatment to the vulnerable groups which can have a potential impact on local power configurations and status quo (Dreze & Sen, 1989).

Normative principles and objectives of social protection

needs to be operationalised through a cognisance of factors that determine inclusion and exclusion within the deployment of social protection programmes which prevents its benefits from reaching the intended populations. These include factors like political clientalism (where access to social protection is mediated by loyalty or affiliation with political parties), intersectional marginalisation (where gender, caste, disability are not factored into programme design and monitoring), elite capture (where local elites maintain control over development resources and access to them), inclusion/exclusion criteria (like determining the level of poverty - like India's below poverty line (BPL) measurement - below which individuals qualify for a given social protection scheme or legislation like widows with adult sons in Rajasthan not qualifying for widow pension), leakages and corruption (like leakages of subsidised foodgrains through public distribution centres, misallocations of public works wages), lack of information (lack of information about entitlements and social protection programmes and processes), and transparency and accountability (transparency about decision-making and application processes, set turnaround time for applications, accessible grievance redressal mechanisms etc.) (see Akerkar, Joshi, & Fordham, 2016). Given, the frontline role local governance institutions play within social protection delivery, it underscores that the agency conferred on individual citizens within the guarantee of welfare rights might be constrained within the spaces



of local governance and social institutions. Therefore, though the purpose design of social protection must rely on normative principles, the design and framework of delivery should factor in learnings from commonalities in process deficits within their implementation in rural communities where majority of their intended beneficiaries reside.

At the local level - institutions of local governance operate within the framework of existing social institutions of hierarchies like caste, religion, and gender. This reinforces and reproduces social and economic configurations of power that structure, characterise, and is reflective of attendant marginalisation and inequalities. This nesting of local governance within broader social institutions tend to disincentivise holders of power in the local socio-economic status quo (Dreze & Sen, 1989 read with Ostrom, 2005 & 2007). This, in conjunction with an interplay of the local limiting factors mentioned above, tend to circumscribe access to social protection for intended populations. Thus, a vulnerable individual faces both inflexible structural resistance like political clientalism, elite capture, and corruption etc. as well as constraints to the effective exercise of their agency in the form of access to information. Lack of adequate information about social protection schemes constraints the individual's ability to take a positive step towards availing the same. Within this contextual awareness, the Digital Empowerment Foundation's (DEF) *SoochnaSeva* and *SoochnaPreneur* projects aimed to understand to what extent could access to information help in augmenting agency and empowerment in terms of individual's relational ability to exercise the rights granted under the normative rights - based framework.

Institutions, eligibility, and entitlement: Negotiating politics of the possible

Institutions refer to rules, norms and practices, social codes, and shared strategies that underline social reality (adapted from Crawford and Ostrom, 1995). Social institutions are historical constructs despite the contentions with modernity and reform. They contain remnants of social historical practices that have transmuted to survive legal and constitutional reform. In doing so, they re-interpret and reproduce the configurations of power that enables the maintenance of status quo. Reform and temporality wroughts newer institutions with formal legal frameworks and mandates for social reform. Within the operational context of reforms, new institutions of governance come to be subsumed or nested within social institutions thereby effectively structuring its operation and reformist mandates. The leaders of a village community undoubtedly have a lot of information relevant for appropriate selection. But in addition to the informational issue, there is also the question as to whether the community leaders have strong enough motivation - or incentives - to give adequate preferential treatment to



vulnerable groups (Dreze and Sen, 1989). This gives rise to the barriers in pathways to social transformation for marginalised and underserved populations and results in constraints of access to social protection schemes.

However, the state administration and bureaucracy defines the formal rules and criteria for eligibility for various categories of the population which determines their qualifications under various state and central sponsored social protection programmes (Pelliserry, 2005). These exist as potentialities alongside structural barriers and provides the space for interventions that circumvent and operationalise them. As previously discussed, the individual agency and autonomy conferred upon the individual within a rights - based framework are undermined through the interplay of barriers to access as discussed above. Such barriers to access can be classified into two types - inflexible structural barriers that mediated by social institutions are reproduced through local institutions of governance; and constraints upon individual agency like access to information that, though a function of marginalisation, provides a space for interventions that work towards ameliorating the same. This works to create an operational space to expand social protection coverage by expanding the scope of human agency within a given local institutional context and enabling underserved individuals claim their rights and entitlements that they are eligible for. Further, in order to stabilise such a space in the form of an alternative institutional practice, it requires a system of incentives and a decentering of the flow of information within members of the community thereby enabling a peer-to-peer network of extending social protection coverage. This model is further strengthened by the fact that individuals

depend on their informal networks as a default option.

Access to information helps to negotiate and to an extent circumvent the exclusion by the virtue of individual identity and social identifiers in the local context. Within the local context, eligibility and entitlement work in contestations with each other to mediate 'welfare rights' for individuals (Pelliserry, 2005). Eligibility criteria worked out under formal rights that entitle an individual for a given social protection programme are delimited by local power configurations through a local elite, political, and administrative network. For example, local politicians or power elites, who have succeeded in bringing a public works project or development work in their area, hiring engineers of their choice and migrant workers to do the job (Pelliserry, 2005) or providing work for less than the entitled 100 days of the MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee) Act to save up on additional social security investment in the workers. The gap between formal delineation of eligibility and actual practice of eligibility in the local context and the entitlement delivery contingent on them also follows from asymmetries of information which privileges the status quo. Therefore, mobilising the members of the community, who have first-hand local knowledge, with means of service delivery and an incentive structure based on a sustainable revenue model, to provide access to information on social protection to their fellow members would help in working towards creating an effective operational framework. This can then negotiate with attendant structural forces to ameliorate the local practice of determining eligibility based on arbitrary and prejudicial evaluation of eligibility at the local level.

Access to information helps to negotiate and to an extent circumvent the exclusion by the virtue of individual identity and social identifiers in the local context.





About SoचनाSeva and SoचनाPreneur Project

SoचनाSeva [trans. *Information Service*] is a programme framework designed to have a multi-pronged approach to information service delivery and access to social protection schemes through setting up designated access points. The project was initiated in 2014 in 5 Backward Region Grant Funds

SoochnaSeva Mitras were selected from the communities that they meant to serve and given thorough training in sensitisation and skills training in handling e-governance platform and community outreach and mobilisation.



(BRGF)¹ districts² namely Guna in Madhya Pradesh, Tehri Garhwal in Uttarakhand, Ranchi in Jharkhand, West Champaran in Bihar and Barmer in Rajasthan, to serve the rural citizens and communities with access to information on social protection and entitlements as well digital and e-governance services. SoochnaSeva is a public welfare schemes information dissemination and entitlements based programme platform. It was created to support, strengthen and enhance provisions of last mile access to information and delivery of government schemes and solutions to receive entitlements of the government welfare measures. The access points were called SoochnaSeva Kendras (SSK) [*trans. Information Service Centres*]. SSKs started off with 5 district level centres in its initial period but have come to be located in the panchayat buildings and offer services such as e-governance services (e.g. issuing birth certificates), basic digital services (e.g. using the computer device, printing, and photocopying), providing basic digital literacy, and providing training and space for Bank Correspondents who as agents of commercial banks are responsible for financial inclusion of unbanked rural populations. Panchayats are the last unit of governance and service many villages within a given constituency.

In order to operate the SSK and provide information on social protection and other e-governance services, SoochnaSeva Mitras [*trans. Information Service Companions*] work with central and state IDs like the Common Service Centre (CSC) IDs for the Central Schemes and State IDs like Rajasthan's E-Mitra for the state schemes. CSCs are a multiple service single point model to provide e-governance services in rural areas under the government's flagship Digital India initiative. CSC IDs are given to individuals who have the required facilities to run a CSC and are not geographically restricted. The government has no way of monitoring where a CSC ID holder is operating from. Often CSCs locate themselves in the town or at block level thereby not ending up serving its purpose of bridging digital and information divides since community members still have to travel a considerable distance to access their services. By locating themselves at the panchayat level, SSKs were able to act as a convenient access point for those residing in the villages that come under its jurisdiction. By working with the local administration and mobilising the community, SoochnaSeva managed to act as a mediator in extending social protection coverage.

SoochnaSeva Mitras were selected from the communities that they meant to serve and given thorough training in sensitisation and skills training in handling e-governance platform and community outreach and mobilisation. They organised camps, rallies, trainings, and workshops as effective means of providing access to information to community members. Sometimes these initiatives were conducted through liaison with government departments, banks, and panchayat secretaries which helped in not just providing information about the schemes but also about the processes of their application and grievance redressal mechanisms. These community outreach events encompassed social security schemes, financial inclusion, and MNREGA, though scheme specific camps were also organised. Camps, rallies, trainings and workshops were helpful in large scale outreach to significant numbers - like 200-500 participants at the given event. Apart from these, community meetings were conducted with smaller groups for interpersonal communication and to provide personal attention. Apart from community outreach towards access to information which were more popular for identity card applications like Job Card³, Aadhaar Card etc., the programme also worked on capacity building of local governance institutions like panchayats and panchayat level institutions like schools, anganwadi [*trans. rural child care centre*],

1. BRGF was a programme introduced by the Indian government to address regional imbalances and support

2. Indian administrative set-up: India > State > District > Block > Panchayat (*trans. village council*) > Village

3. Jobs cards are identification required to apply for public works employment guaranteed under MNREGA

The combined populations covered by these institutions were 76,774 out of which 65,536 were successfully serviced.

primary health centre, post office, banks and public distribution centres. The combined populations covered by these institutions were 76,774 out of which 65,536 were successfully serviced. The programme worked closely with 25 panchayats across 5 locations and 5 state panchayati Raj departments to open Panchayati level SSKs to serve as the local access point for people within Panchayat jurisdiction.

The programme also worked on digital empowerment of Panchayati Raj Institutions with the aim of strengthening panchayat level service delivery of citizen services and social protection. This was done with a focus on building capacities and skilling of Panchayat functionaries in order to map local institution, resources, their capacities and challenges, priority issues, and documentation with prime focus on maintaining a management information system for record-keeping. These included digitisation of existing beneficiaries of schemes; mapping and collecting data of potential beneficiaries of schemes; registration of beneficiaries and building a demographic profile; processing of applications; and recording data of final beneficiaries with record etc. This capacity building initiative with the Panchayat as well as community outreach highlighted the need for a social protection scheme bank or repository which resulted in the development of MeraApp [*trans. My App*] which would act as repository of schemes and eligibility criteria that can be used by information service providers to recommend the range of schemes that an individual might be eligible for. This came to be integrated with the *SoochnaPreneur* (SP) [*trans. information*

entrepreneur] project that took forward the learnings of the SSK through an adapted programme delivery to provide last mile access to unreached beneficiaries. Over the project period, the programme reached out to 65,068 households and 260,274 individuals with access to information and linkages to social protection schemes covering 25 blocks and access points in 125 panchayats in India. During programme implementation, it was recognised that the distance to the access point proved to be a constraint in moving towards expanding coverage and providing ease of access not just for information but also for the process of availing the same. Towards this end, the project deployed *SoochnaVahans* [*trans. Information Vans*] to provide access to information in unreached places. It also worked with establishing access points in homes of key beneficiaries in a given village. This along with SSK linkages with panchayats totalled 738 access points. These informal access points formed the springboard from which the promise of the SP model was brought forth. *SoochnaSeva* worked with an ecosystem of stakeholders that included panchayat level institutions, NGOs, rights-groups, and local network to work towards maximum coverage.

The SP project is a mobile micro - social entrepreneurship project which uses MeraApp as a fulcrum. The project was deployed in 2016 in 7 backward districts in 6 states in India which are Rajasthan (*dist. Alwar and Barmer*), Madhya Pradesh (*dist. Guna*), Bihar (*dist. West Champaran*), Odisha (*dist. Bargarh*), Jharkhand (*dist. Ranchi*), and Uttar Pradesh (*dist. Barabanki*). SP translated the learnings from





The programme worked closely with 25 panchayats across 5 locations and 5 state panchayati Raj departments to open Panchayati level SSKs to serve as the local access point for people within Panchayat jurisdiction.

SoochnaSeva to leverage mobility and gender and build sustainability through an entrepreneurship model to reach the as yet unreached and vulnerable populations. This included women, aged, and the disabled who could not undertake the journey to SoochnaSeva access points thereby redefining last mile access. Programme learnings from the SoochnaSeva project showed that fixed access points were not enough to extend services beyond a given geographical ambit. This led to the development of the SP programme. This programme leveraged mobility by equipping SoochnaPreneurs with camera enabled tablets, printer and scanner as well as the mobile application - MeraApp. The MeraApp currently acts as an active Management Information System (MIS), exhaustive repository of state and central schemes, and as a survey tool for DEF's rural SoochnaPreneurs. It is multi-lingual to cater to India's vast linguistic diversity and can work offline in cognisance of unreliable connectivity in India's underserved locations. As per the SP model, the infopreneurs were not attached to a designated access point but were mobile within their communities to reach potential beneficiaries and raise awareness about the schemes they might be eligible for and helping them in applying for and claiming their entitlements.

The SP programme was implemented in two phases - Phase I where selected SoochnaPreneurs were both male and female and Phase II which was female only. Phase II was implemented in recognition of the need to provide alternative livelihood for women in the village and to expand coverage by reaching more women. Phase II was also born out of the contextual awareness that the socio-economic realities of rural India results in the circular marginalisation of women. Women's current economic disadvantage, stemming from social norms, restrict the opportunities for financial autonomy and economic and social leadership. These are self-perpetuated by institutional gaps that further marginalise women in underserved and resource

The SP project has so far reached 200,000+ rural citizens and social protection coverage have been successfully extended to 69,152 eligible and previously unreachable individuals.



constrained settings. This is further compounded by the social demand placed on women of household care and limited family support and low levels of trust in women succeeding in economic activities. The micro-social entrepreneurship model of the SP programme offered women an opportunity of an alternative income source and flexible timings. It also helped in reaching more women members within their communities as a result of local knowledge and personal networks. Mobility and gender played a significant role in expanding coverage to segments of the population that would not normally take the journey out of their home to the access points. By getting personalised awareness within the familiar spaces like homes also helped to raise awareness among women, homemakers and the elderly about social protection they might be eligible for. Women SoochnaPreneurs have easier access to homes than male SoochnaPreneurs and are less likely to drop out compared to men as a result of flitting in and out of jobs. Therefore, female SoochnaPreneurs provided both stability and sustainability towards the models while earning an alternative source of income and moving forward to a degree of financial autonomy.

In both phases SoochnaPreneurs were provided intensive training starting from basic digital literacy to use of digital devices and mobile applications like MeraApp as well as customer service, understanding market dynamics, approaching the market, understanding the information landscape, how to go about their work, the purpose and rationale of the model, training in delivery of digital services. This was accompanied by a rate card for services like printing, scanning, photocopying etc. This led to more than 200 rural youth, especially women, having alternative livelihood opportunities through self-employment. This was done through target identification of institutional gaps in access to information about social protection schemes that otherwise would not have reached the eligible beneficiaries. However, the revenue model was not predicated on access to information alone but also a deep understanding of the lack of basic facilities of printing, scanning, photocopying and documentation that are not available at the village level but are located at considerable distance in the nearest town or city. This usually leads to a very high imputed cost for the community involving travel and loss of a day's wage. By providing these services as well as digital literacy training to the communities at a nominal cost along with access to information, the programme was able to increase social protection coverage as well as provide a source of self-employment to rural youth. The increase in social protection coverage was tracked through a mobile application called MeraApp that served as a dynamic MIS (management information system) for schemes registration and delivery as well as revenue tracker for the services delivered. The proof of concept of the *SoochnaPreneur* model showed how it can be leveraged to address gaps in key areas of social infrastructures in underserved locations and provide an opportunity to diversify revenue streams for these micro social entrepreneurs. The SP project has so far reached 200,000+ rural citizens and social protection coverage have been successfully extended to 69,152 eligible and previously unreachable individuals.

Both SoochnaSeva and SoochnaPreneur model was eventually extended to and mainstreamed within DEF's existing and emerging infrastructures like Community Information Resource Centres and Smartpur to arrive at convergence within DEF's other service delivery frameworks and integrate an ecosystem of development practice. Further, since social protection horizontally affects a number of development verticals like education, health, food security, social security like pensions, and livelihoods etc. its expanded coverage creates an enabling environment for the realisation of further programmes designed within other development areas that DEF services.

By 2015, 48,586 (23,439 male and 25,437 female) individuals were reached out of which 40,820 individuals have applied and received benefits under social protection schemes

Ameliorating constraints on agency

Institutions represent a certain duality in that they both arise from and constrain social action (see Barley and Tolbert, 1997). This results in the range of exclusionary practices engendered by nested local governance institutions within social institutions. However, at the same time it also provides the space for agency to negotiate with structure and affect its impact on social outcomes. Translating the same into action and initiating a system of practice, both the SoochnaSeva and SoochnaPreneur project aimed to ameliorate constraints on individual agency through access to information. SoochnaSeva worked on large scale community outreach through camps, workshops, rallies and campaigns at the ground level to mobilise communities through awareness about social protection and procedure to apply for the same. Using smaller community meetings also allowed it to deliver personalised attention and work through individual issues. Using community mobilisation as the foundation, the SoochnaSeva project also engendered partnerships with local institutions through liaison, capacity building, and sensitisation of critical frontline institutions like panchayati raj institutions to anchor prospective results from community mobilisation initiatives. These were complemented by partnerships with other grassroots NGOs, and administrative officials which helped it to work towards a holistic ecosystem to foster an enabling environment for expanding social protection coverage. By 2015, 48,586 (23,439 male and 25,437 female) individuals were reached out of which 40,820 individuals have applied and received benefits under social protection schemes under various categories like financial inclusion, education, livelihood and employment, health, social security, institutional schemes like those linked with *anganwadi* centres/ health centres/ schools, and Identification Documents with 8056 pending for approval by authorities. SoochnaSeva's initial work in amelioration of constraints to agency through access to information assumed another dimension with the integration of the SP model and MeraApp which led to financial autonomy of the SoochnaPreneurs. The highest



Within this process - oriented framework, it becomes important to analyse the barriers to accessing a certain right - in this case it was the right to social protection.



income earned by a SoochnaPreneur overall was INR 66,466 (~ USD 923) and the highest income earned by a woman entrepreneur being INR 17,500 (~ USD 243). With the SP project currently at maturation stage, a gender impact assessment done by DEF showed women SoochnaPreneurs were more likely to sign up more women. While in instances of public works and development process linked wage labour, elites and administration can and do play a role in inclusion and exclusion of individuals within social protection entitlement due to them, these programmes have been instrumental in expanding access to maternal and child welfare schemes, schemes oriented towards livelihood and towards creation of self-help groups, and labour development.

Participation and practice

Often participatory development has come under criticism as a means to reinforce power structures masquerading as other means and using participation as the guise under which it masquerades (see Kapoor, 2014). This usually surfaces and manifests in participatory decision-making processes like village meetings, for example, where presence quantifies as participation yet decision-making relies on the local elites who control the discussion and decision. Local power configuration give them legitimacy. One of the principal ways for participation is the exercise of agency. And one of the principal ways of exercise of agency is the amelioration of constraints on it along with incentives that nested local institutional practices did not allow. SoochnaSeva built the enabling environment on which SoochnaPreneur's participatory potential could be leveraged. SoochnaPreneur was built on the recognition that frontline personnel are critical to effective delivery of information (Kabeer, 2006). As a result of this, the emphasis was on selecting individuals from the community. At the time of selection and training of the SoochnaPreneurs, the ground team looked out for unemployed youth who would be most impacted through such an intervention. By employing local youth, the model was able to leverage their knowledge of the community and personal network. By creating a structure of incentives through the entrepreneurship model it ensured sustainability of the process. However, a system of practice does not automatically get institutionalised. Much depends on how long it has been in force and how it has been accepted by the members of the community. With participation driven by the micro-social entrepreneurship model, the project served to increase social protection coverage within a given community through community participation. It negotiated and advanced the possibilities that were available within the existing local institutions and the extent to which its effects could be influenced through the negotiated practice of agency. SoochnaSeva and SoochnaPreneur have had a combined existence of 5 years running and have serviced and provided access to information for 200,000+ and expanding through DEF trained SoochnaPreneurs continuing their work and partner civil society organisations wanting to scale up and replicate the model in their own constituencies. Thus, through scale and deepening practice, it has the potential of being an alternative institutional practice within local communities.

Eligibility and entitlement

Where eligibility is a locally determined practice (see Pelliserry, 2005), SoochnaSeva worked with local institutions through liaison and capacity-



SoochnaSeva and its evolution into the SoochnaPreneur programme provide a set of practices for negotiation of structural configurations towards mediation of access that helps in moving closer to the practice of realisation of welfare rights.

building at the compliance level - like for example, organising camps for job card³ applications with the panchayat secretaries apart from outreach camps. Often impactful liaising led to compliance level support from local institutions so that mobilisation through access to information could be connected to the local institutions for support. Once of the primary ways of access to entitlements and social protection was to provide underserved rural populations with the information about them. However, as was realised during implementation, provision of information alone was not going to be enough to mediate access to social protection for the eligible population. Applications involved the filling and filing of forms and a large proportion of the eligible populations are without basic formal education or functional literacy or with the adequate knowledge about which authority to approach for which social protection scheme. Since an individual might be eligible for number of different social protection schemes, application for all which they are eligible might become an arduous task even though they might have access to perfect information. In order to translate eligibility to entitlement, access to information must be complemented with a number of different strategies that ensure that the potential of such information has for ameliorating constraints to agency can be fully realised. These complementary strategies include local institutional strengthening and capacity-building and training SoochnaPreneurs to do the documentation and filing as well as build capacity in general of their pool of beneficiaries towards skills such as digital literacy.

Politics of the possible

The opportunities and constraints individuals face in any particular situation, the information they obtain, the benefits they obtain or are excluded from, and how they reason about the situation are all affected by the rules or absence of rules that structure the situation. Further, the rules affecting one situation are themselves crafted by individuals interacting in deeper-level situations. (Ostrom, 2005, pp. 3)

In order to affect institutional change to reform the structure affecting choices and action outcomes requires changes in the nested structures that determine rule-making at the first level. Following the argument of local governance institutions being nested in local social institutions, this means changes within social institutions and configurations of power. However, changes at more deeper levels are difficult to accomplish, thereby increasing the stability of mutual expectations of

actors within a given set of rules. An example of such a situation is cited in Pelliserry (2005) in his thesis on the politics of the social protection within two villages in Maharashtra - where the beneficiaries were content with losing small amounts of money as kickbacks rather than the entire sum of money even to the point of rebuking an oppositional view with "You are getting something. Why ask for the full money? Is this money from our home or ancestor's home? The government is giving something and you should be thankful rather than fighting". This view was complemented by that of an official who claimed that how difficult it was to manage the office with people clamouring all over for free money. These mirroring views suggest that there were stability in the mutual expectations - that the official was doing difficult work in distributing 'free money' which the beneficiaries must accept with as little trouble as possible to get hassle free access to their entitlement. This shows how even beneficiaries view their entitlements not as a welfare right but as 'free money'. Therefore, there are some rules that are inflexible and unyielding to change. Actions towards change might be viewed even by agents as self-defeating which can take them away from the limited entitlements they currently have access to (Pelliserry, 2005).

This does not go to say that structural change is not possible or undesirable or an unworthy pursuit. However, structural reform is a temporal phenomenon and it can take years to cause a dent on structural configurations that can affect the rules-in-use (see Ostrom, 2007 for rules-in-use vs rules-in-form) on the ground so that they may work in line with the framework of rights aimed at social transformation. In the long term, collective action may be able to affect the deeper levels of rules that structure action and outcome. However, in the short-term, individuals at the operational level may have little flexibility or opportunity to move beyond the rules that are currently constraining their actions. Therefore, on the pathway towards structural change, there needs to be strategies in place that can mediate access to entitlements through amelioration of constraints to agency through the means of a system of participatory practices that can reduce the gap between eligibility and entitlement. This is what this paper calls the politics of the possible. SoochnaSeva and its evolution into the SoochnaPreneur programme provide a set of practices for negotiation of structural configurations towards mediation of access that helps in moving closer to the practice of realisation of welfare rights.

**DEF's
SoochnaSeva and
SoochnaPreneur
programme aimed
to tease out the
elements within
a process called
politics of the
possible.**

Conclusion

This paper has tried to underscore the importance of undertaking strategies to negotiate with structural institutional rules that determine access to social protection for the underserved. In discussing how DEF's SoochnaSeva and SoochnaPreneur programme worked towards these objectives, it aimed to tease out the elements within a process called politics of the possible. Within this process - oriented framework, while the hope remains for structural change towards the benefit of the underserved, it also recognises the importance to develop strategies that can shape the pathways to such a transition. Within such a process, it becomes important to analyse the barriers to accessing a certain right - in this case it was the right to social protection. In identifying the barriers, it becomes helpful to further analyse which one represents inflexible structural barriers arising from deeply rooted nested institutional practices and which are constraints on barriers to agency that can be ameliorated with external intervention. Once the latter has been identified, it is required to first narrow down to the key strategy - in this case it was access to information. With the key strategy narrowed down, it becomes essential to then identify the ecosystem of practices that will enable it to succeed and stabilise and move towards sustainability. Within the context of this paper these were the liaison and capacity building with local institutions, an entrepreneurship model and a system of incentives, documentation and filing, participative practice to leverage local knowledge and being rooted in the community. With the system of practices and key strategies it then becomes important to evaluate to what extent will this narrow the gap between formal delineation of rights and actual practice of rights at the local level (in this case eligibility) and the right-based outcome (in this case entitlements).





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सूचना केन्द्र

सूचना केन्द्र सूचनाप्रेन्चोर द्वारा संचालित एक ऐसा केन्द्र है जहां, सभी प्रकार की सरकारी योजनाओं से संबंधित सूचनाएं एवं डिजिटल सुविधाएं उपलब्ध कराई जाती हैं

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