

Not without men

Creation of the women's wing of the FFA-AP in India

The process of the creation of a Women's Wing within the Federation of Farmers Organizations of Andhra Pradesh (FFA-AP) started in 2008, when the board made the official decision to establish a special Women's Wing within the structure of the federation. In this process three organizations are involved: the FFA-AP, Passage (Dutch Christian social women's movement) and Agriterro, dutch agri-agency. 'Our dream is to become a strong tree with a lot of fruits', expressed one of the leading women her ideal after the decisive workshop in 2008. At present, three years later, the Women's Wing is functioning in three districts of Andhra Pradesh, India, and has a growing membership.

The FFA-AP, a 'mixed' men and women member organisation, was founded in 2000 and represents about 2000 farmers' organizations in nineteen of the 22 districts of Andhra Pradesh in India.

India is a country of strong contrasts. It is one of the fastest growing economies in the world with a rapidly increasing population (actually 1.2 milliard). This economic growth excludes merely the women and men in the rural areas. Almost half of the female population in Andhra Pradesh is illiterate and basic services, such as health care, are lacking. Data from Indian government indicate that 28% of the population lives below the poverty limit, a poverty which is more rural than urban. Andhra Pradesh is amongst the poorest states of India.

After the decision for the creation of a Women's Wing was taken, a bottom-up process started based on the existing situation. UNDP in consultation with the Indian government had promoted the so-called Self-Help Groups (SHG), but at the moment the Women's Wing started in 2008, those groups were barely functioning through lack of follow-up. FFA-AP has taken up this system of SHG and started to strengthen these groups. Their capacity building concerned for instance simple bookkeeping and administration. Training also helps them to improve their income generating activities: but covers also more social issues as health and hygiene. Training is always based on the specific wishes and needs of the women. One women group will decide to go into poultry production, while another one wants to sew clothes and a third one wishes to process legumes and fruits.

Besides in training FFA-PA provided strong lobby work in order to get banks restart accepting opening bank accounts for the self help groups. Now, Self Help Groups can have access to cheap credits, after 6 months of saving.

The project started in 27 villages in three districts in the state of Andhra Pradesh. More than 2500 women organized themselves in groups of each about fifteen women. The groups meet twice a month and discuss all kind of social topics, schooling for children, women's rights, good nutrition, etc), they open a bank account and undertake economic activities. This dual focus on social and economic empowerment responds very much to the women's needs. A lot of trust and confidence has been built between the members of the groups.

Now, three years later, the results of the project of the Women's Wing are remarkable. The Women's Wing is now functioning on the mandal level (a mandal consists of three villages) and starting to function on the district level. At this moment there are 3600 women organized in 240 SHGs in 27 villages, in 9 mandals and in 3 districts. All these groups have followed a basic training on livelihood activities and there is a huge ambition to start

entrepreneurial activities on a higher level: mandal or even district level. And on the agenda for the next two years is the development of two economical activities: the Dairy Cluster Project and the consolidation, on the district level, of the selling and labelling of home made products, like shampoo, candles and chutneys, made by the SHGs.

Still, this is not an easy process for the women. Availability of time is a big constraint, because being organised requires time, and not all groups are able to save their money for 6 months, sometimes urgent matters oblige them to take their money from the bank. But the advantages expressed by the women are huge: they're no longer isolated, but able to meet and exchange with other women, their income has increased and through this financial injection in the household they are more respected by men. Although most men are positively supporting the organisational structuring of women, there are till now some women who don't get permission of their husband to attend meetings. But once being organized, women stand stronger and are able to intervene for each other. In case of domestic violence for instance, two women are designed to talk to the husband, which in a lot of cases ended the violence, as it is punishable in India.

FFA-AP was able to conduct this process with the financial and advisory support of Passage and Agriterra. Passage, with other rural women's organizations one of the founding members of Agriterra, is realizing her solidarity work through Agriterra, as a development organization. There is a narrow collaboration between both organizations. Passage is working also on the awareness raising of her members. This is done for example by articles in Passage's magazine 'Motief', presentations at meetings of the different branches but also by national projects. A part of the financial support for the Women's Wing project is raised by her members.

Agriterra is a so-called agri-agency, founded by the Dutch farmers' organisations and supporting producers organization in many developing countries in the world. She actively promotes the farmer-to-farmer approach of which this Passage – FFA-PA is a clear example. The idea is that farmers, male or female, all over the world understand each other and speak the same language.

What success factors can be distilled from this project?

- * A first important point is that the whole process of the establishment of a Women's Wing has started after a unanimous decision of the board. In the ongoing process there could be referred to this decision when needed.

- * All stakeholders, FFA-AP, Agriterra and Passage, were right from the beginning intensively involved in the process. The first project proposal has gone around five times between the three organisations and has been reformulated several times before it was finally approved. This has taken a lot of time and discussion, but it ended up to make the process very sustainable.

- * Every year two persons from Passage have gone to India for advisory support on the institutional aspects and the bottom-up organizing of women. These missions were prepared in consultation and with technical advice of Agriterra. Once in India groups were visited, numerous exchanges took place, several workshops were organized in order to accompany the process. The advisory missions had a specific bottom-up approach as well: starting at local level, visiting the villages, followed by sub-national workshops which resulted in concrete recommendations. Through the regular visits the follow-up of the recommendations has been monitored.

- * the chosen approach has been gender-oriented from the start. This means that there has to be recognition of the specific role and needs of women within producers organisations and that these needs should be integrated in the overall policy and programme of the producer organization. As one woman from Passage stated: women's needs should be

mainstreamed instead of 'man'-streamed. This resulted in the choice for an independent women's wing within the FFA-PA, with its own personnel and budget.

* It should be realized that the above described process is a one of change. Change in household relations between man and women, but also at the different organizational levels of the FFA-PA. Such a process needs time to reflect , good facilitation and highlighting of good examples.

In perspective, the challenge for the coming years is to institutionally anchor the women's wing within the federation and to make them able to mobilize sufficiently financial support. This last challenge is particularly urgent as the project from Agritererra and Passage will finish at the end of 2012.

Anyhow, FFA-AP in collaboration with Passage and Agritererra induced a number of processes of economic and social empowerment through organisation of female members, which has strengthens their position within the producers organisation and which will undoubtedly continue after the project has finished.

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