

Special session UNTFSSSE conference

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SEWA: Self Employed Women's Association

<http://www.sewa.org/padmashri.asp>

Reema Nanavaty leads Self Employed Women's Association's (SEWA) economic and rural development activities reaching out to seventeen million women and their families across India.

Today, we are all standing at a point where development and decent work have become two different sides of a coin. The neo-classical economical models adopted world over and more so by the developing countries has been able to rope in high percentages of growth in the developing countries. But this development has come at a cost of growing inequalities, vulnerabilities and poverty. It has led to the concentration of power and profits at the top of the value chains whereas transferred the risks to the poor informal workers at the bottom of the value chain. It has also led to a steep increase in the informal sector.

Realizing this disparity and race to the bottom scenario prevalent in the world of work, the UN has adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015 that provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. These SDG's recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests.

It is a matter of pride that all member states have realized the importance of these SDG's and are working in their individual capacities to meet them. However, we at SEWA strongly believe that while country Govts. do have a major role to play in achieving the SGD's through policy frameworks and other programs, the private sector, citizens of the country, workers and their organizations should also share this responsibility.

At SEWA, we strongly believe that for a better, just and dignified future of work for all, there is a need to adopt a holistic approach to work – one that would reduce vulnerability, increase accountability, generate

full employment, and build on a human scale where voices can be heard, and problems are shared and surmountable. Such an approach would build an economy that aims at prosperity for all, based on new meaning and contract of work; new correlation (Anubandh) of work; and locality of work.

On these lines, all of SEWA's initiatives are designed to not only address a particular need / demand of our members but also adopt an integrated holistic approach to women's work. And in this process, they fulfill not just one or two but over 9 SDG's. Let me give you a few examples:

This is the story of Vijuben, a salt-pan worker from Nimaknagar and also the story of the 15000-poor salt-pan workers (Agariyas) in Little Rann of kutch (LRK). Life for these women was full of challenges like lack of access to - working capital, - direct market, - affordable credit, - clean and efficient energy, exploitation by trader's cartel, uninhabitable working conditions etc. for the past 3 to 4 generations.

These salt-farmers used diesel-powered pump-sets for pumping brine – an integral stage of salt-making. They spent over 80% of their annual income in purchasing diesel – leaving them with barely enough to feed their family for the rest of year. Also lack of access to working capital, trapped these poor salt-farmers into vicious circle of debt and poverty.

In 2014, as a solution to these challenges faced by its poor salt-pan worker members, SEWA piloted its energy initiative called Hariyali that focuses on facilitating affordable access to clean, green energy alternatives for SEWA's members. Through Hariyali, SEWA designed and piloted an innovative financial model to facilitate affordable access to solar pump-sets for 5 salt-pan workers. Inspired by the success of this model, today Hariyali has facilitated solar pump-sets to over 1100 salt-farmers in LRK region of Gujarat.

Affordable access to solar pump-sets to women salt-farmers through Hariyali has not only led to savings in diesel cost, but also an increase in the quantity and quality of salt production. It has led to an asset creation in the name of the women, thereby increasing her bargaining power within and outside her family. Increase in income has helped these poor women workers come out of debt and poverty, thereby enabling them to provide better nutrition and education to their children. Access to clean, green energy has improved their working conditions.

Switching to clean, green energy solution has also led to a decrease in carbon dioxide emission of approximately 13000 Kgs per year per salt-pan worker. **Thus, it has led to a cumulative reduction of over 13000 tons of CO2 emission per year – a minor yet firm contribution towards India's NDC's.**

While, we are working towards further scaling to reach more and more salt-farmers in this region, we are also piloting setting-up a micro-grid using the idle panels of the salt-farmers of LRK during non-salt season. This will lead to localized electricity generation which can be fed in to the main grid – thus generating an additional source of livelihood for the poor salt-pan workers using their own assets. This is what we at SEWA call "Just Transition"

By setting-up micro-grids at village level for decentralized production and distribution of energy – completely owned and managed by rural workers themselves – SEWA aims to make the workers not just consumers of energy but producer, user and managers of energy. It will not only solve the energy access issues of the rural areas, but also lead to generating green livelihood opportunities in rural areas, curb rural out-migration, mitigate poverty through asset creation, reduce the carbon footprint of villages and above all provide income security to poor rural informal workers – this is what we call the future of work.

Let me tell you about another such initiative of SEWA – we call it the SEWA Trade Facilitation Center. In 1985, SEWA was invited by the Govt of Gujarat to work in the dry and arid Patan District of Gujarat to help solve the water scarcity issue. Due to frequent droughts and lack of access to water and thus agriculture and animal husbandry, the women in this district migrated year on year in search of work to sustain their families.

SEWA was quick to realize that these women workers were skilled in traditionally embroidery, but they did not see this skill as marketable. They rarely used this craft for commercial purpose. Occasionally traders did come to purchase their craft, but paid very little. Thus, despite having skills, the women were hardly earning INR 75 per month, working as casual laborers in Govt. MNREGA projects.

Therefore, SEWA started working towards developing these traditional skills of these artisans to make it marketable. SEWA worked towards creating a sustainable system where our artisans receive education along with the re-skilling, up-skilling and skill diversification so that their existing skills in their traditional occupation may be used for generating alternative livelihoods.

On these lines, SEWA facilitated number of production-cum-training up-skilling sessions for these artisans. Gradually, craft became the only source of livelihood for many of these people, most of whom had never used it earlier as a means of sustenance. We also started marketing the products by organizing exhibitions in major cities.

As more and more artisans came forward to join SEWA, to generate a steady broader market for the artisans and to enable integrating them higher up in the value chain, SEWA organized over 15000 women artisans into the **SEWA Trade Facilitation center - a not-for-profit company completely owned and managed by poor women artisans themselves**, where these women use their traditional embroidery skills to create garments for national and international designers and fashion houses.

By setting up **STFC**, SEWA **ensured that the artisans had work throughout the year by directly linking them with markets and retaining almost 65% of the value at the community level**. Today STFC supports around 35000 artisans throughout India with the twin objective of preserving their traditional skills and providing them livelihood security.

In the year 2007, SEWA helped the artisans of STFC launch their own brand “Hansiba” – a brand with far higher value due to the fact that it is **a brand solely owned and managed by the artisans themselves**, to promote and create a market for their traditional skills in the urban market. All the products under this brand are hand embroidered and hand crafted, **65% of all sales go directly to the artisans, and the artisans themselves are the shareholders and suppliers of the Company**.

Hansiba manages its sales and marketing through its 2 retail stores (Ahmedabad and New Delhi) and it also strives to broaden the artisan’s market access **through online retailing. Today STFC along with Hansiba an annual turnover of 40,018,890 INR.**

The poor artisans once barely earning INR75 per month are now able to earn an average income of INR 5000 – 7000 per month. Due to work security ensured by STFC, artisans no longer have to migrate year on year. This stability has enabled them to educate their children. Women artisans exposure to the world

outside their villages has created awareness about importance of education for girls – leading to artisans now educating their girl child in the rural areas.

To help its members keep abreast with the changing market demands and technology, STFC facilitates skilling programs at regular intervals in various areas like Skill upgradation, Stitching, Designing, Cataloguing, Photography, Branding and positioning, Costing, Marketing and Sales etc. - thereby facilitating all-round development of the artisans making them capable to run their own enterprise sustainably.

Hariyali and STFC are just two of the several initiatives that SEWA has designed and implemented over the past 4.5 decades in its endeavor to facilitate full employment and self-reliance to its members. And through these various initiatives, SEWA has also been able to fulfill its responsibility as a responsible workers organization by **contributing to UN DESA's 12 out of 17 SDGs to some extent** as in

SDG 1: End poverty - SEWA's initiatives like Hariyali, STFC, RUDI, agricultural campaign, etc. worked towards strengthening the livelihoods of its members, thereby strengthening their financial conditions and helping them break the vicious circle of poverty and indebtedness.

SDG 2: Zero Hunger – SEWA's agri-business enterprise RUDI focuses on providing food-security and nutrition security at village level – at the same time establishing a farmer-owned and managed agri-business supply chain. Its child-care initiative also provides healthy nutritious food to children as well as pregnant and lactating mothers.

SDG 3: Ensuring healthy lives - Agricultural campaign promotes organic farming. This has led to a considerable reduction in health hazards especially poisoning for the smallholder farmers who are directly in contact with harmful chemicals and pesticides. Similarly, child-care initiative provides safe clean atmosphere to children of tobacco workers, thereby reducing their contact with tobacco dust.

SDG 4: Promote lifelong Learning - Through its “manager ni school” initiative, SEWA has trained more than 90,000 smallholder farmers in areas like organization effectiveness, life education, disaster preparedness and many more. This has led to enhanced livelihood and employment opportunities. Also, ongoing vocational training programs like ones conducted by STFC prepares the young generation workers for the platform-based employment opportunities.

SDG 5: Achieve gender equality – All of SEWA's initiatives are geared towards the poor women workers in the informal economy. They aim for development and growth of a family as a whole under the leadership of women. Also on these lines, SEWA has worked towards inclusion of women's name in land title documents and farmer's field book. This entitles women to various govt schemes and initiatives and strengthens her bargaining power.

SDG 6: Water and sanitation - SEWA's water campaign facilitated easy access of water to rural farmers and promoted local community's participation in spreading awareness about water, hygiene and sanitation. The campaign also created awareness amongst women to move away from open defecation and encouraged them and their families to use toilets.

SDG 7: Access to affordable energy - Through Hariyali, over 1100 salt-farmers have switched to clean solar pump-set for salt production thereby reducing the cumulative carbon dioxide emission by over 13000 tons per year.

SDG 8: Sustainable economic growth and decent work for all – All of SEWA’s initiatives are geared towards creating a just, decent and dignified future of work for not only its members, but for her family and for her community.

SDG 10: Reduce inequalities – At SEWA, we come together as poor, as women and as workers – therefore, we do not discriminate by caste, religion, color or work. Also, by organizing its members in to their micro-enterprises, where members themselves are owners and managers – stakeholders as well as workers of their own economic organization, SEWA has tried to address the issue of inequality from its root.

SDG 11: Sustainable Communities – Through its integrated approach SEWA strongly tried to promote the “decentralized production and distribution of goods and services” or in other words the “100-miles principle” which will lead to equitable distribution of ownership of economic resources, and greater control – thereby enabling good sustainable society based on holistic view of work. It would strengthen local markets and local skills and make markets more accessible to women, thus strengthening the economic role of women. It would increase the value of non-monetary work, including all forms of community and service work – thereby establishing a new form of economy – the economy of Nurturance.

SDG 13 – Climate Action – Through its agricultural campaign, SEWA promotes sustainable and organic farming, thereby trying to reduce air, water and land pollution. Its Waste-pickers cooperative ensures 60% segregation at door-step, thereby ensuring efficient solid-waste management. SEWA’s Hariyali initiative focuses on facilitating affordable access to clean, green energy solutions and generating green livelihood opportunities. Our Water campaign promotes water conservation.

SDG 15: Promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystem - the organic farming practises promoted through the agricultural campaign leads to a reduction in use of chemicals and pesticides thus reducing land, water and air pollution. Through its forestry campaign, SEWA carried out plantation and monitoring of over 1.6 Million saplings.

The above examples of SEWA’s initiatives brings the old saying – “Where there is a will... there is a way too” to life... it shows how simple initiatives designed and implemented by poor informal workers themselves can bring about significant contribution to SDG’s. The need of the hour is for such initiatives to scale-up.

And to enable scaling of these kind of initiatives there is a need for a policy lens that looks at the trades of informal workers at par with industries. They need enabling policies to promote formation and then scaling of workers own microenterprises so that these poor workers do not have to undergo distress sales and also increase their bargaining power.

Additionally, there is also a need for an innovative financing mechanism – a mix of equity, grant, patient capital and a loan, which provides easy access to capital and enables these initiatives – workers owned and managed tiny enterprises to scale-up and enter the mainstream.