

SUMMARY NOTE

The Future of Governance Forum 7 Oct - 8 Oct

**PANEL ON HOW CAN GRASSROOTS FIELD
WORKERS ENGAGE WITH LOCAL
ADMINISTRATION EFFECTIVELY?**



Speakers

Ashif Shaikh, Jan Sahas
Biraj Patnaik, National Foundation of India
Mirai Chatterjee, SEWA

Moderator

Rukmini Banerji, Pratham

About the Panel



This panel delved into how community-level development professionals can be provided with the right tools and information to effectively engage with government authorities, and serve vulnerable communities. The panel also acknowledged the urgent need to empower these last-mile functionaries.

The Future of Governance forum was curated by the Accountability Initiative at the Centre for Policy Research, and co-hosted with Arthan from 7 October-8 October 2020.

Ms. Banerji started the conversation by saying that grassroots field workers' engagement is not discussed enough, even as the role played by people at the ground-level enables change. **The discussion started by exploring the challenges faced by field teams in dealing with local administrations, particularly during the pandemic.**

Ms. Chatterjee talked about the challenges faced by SEWA, and local women. She segmented the challenges as follows:

- Firstly, the most difficult issue has been **getting information** on schemes and programmes. When individual women go to the block or district levels, they have to engage in a lot of back and forth. Sometimes, local authorities themselves are confused, she said, and they do not have the latest information on schemes (as many times schemes change).
- Secondly, it is very hard for individual women and vulnerable communities or workers to know **where to go or whom to ask for information**. And this is where organisations like SEWA come into play because the beneficiaries need support on information, access and entitlements, and then the follow-up and grievance redressals.
- A third challenge is **collaboration**. Often individual women and poor people at the grassroots are given a difficult time. So, individually, it's very hard to build links and collaborations to get the work done, but collectively it's easier.
- Fourth, is the challenge of **documentation**. This is a huge issue in our country where poor people have to spend much time and money, and try to find out and collaborate with the local authorities. But again, documents that are required keep changing.
- Another issue is that of **digitalisation**. Now,

a lot of schemes are online, and mostly, this is a welcome move. But it is not easy for local people to access information online, especially women as they may not own smartphones. There are internet connectivity issues too.

- Lastly, is the problem of **corruption**.

She further said that caste, community, and gender discrimination, is still widespread in our country. A way forward is through organising, collectivising, building membership-based organisations, unions, etc, as alone one can't manage to bargain the way a group can.

Lastly, she talked about building partnerships and said that in the pandemic, working relationships that were established pre-pandemic have helped, for instance on relief measures.

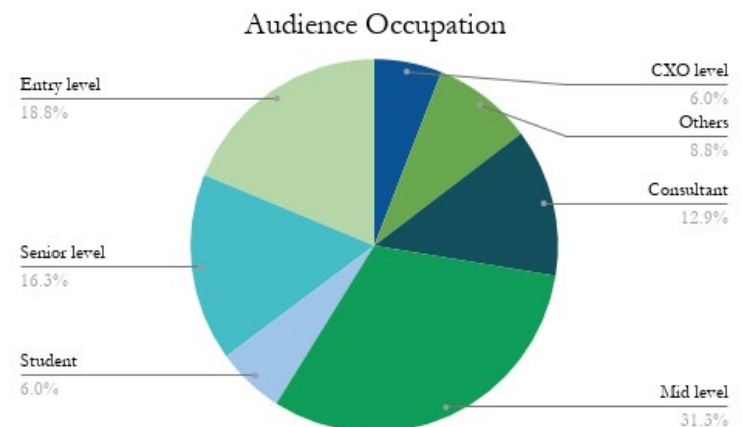
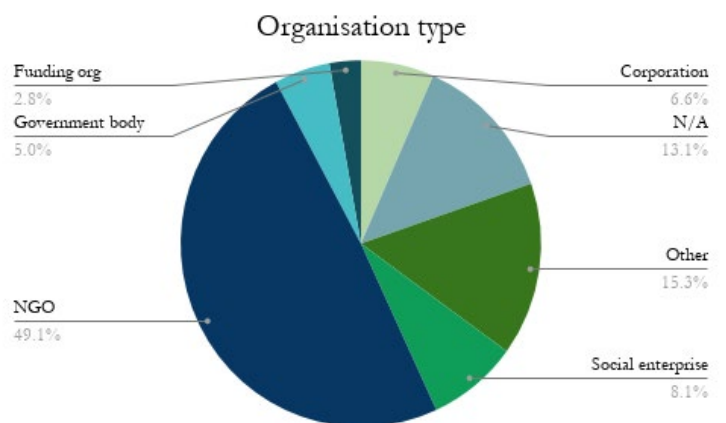
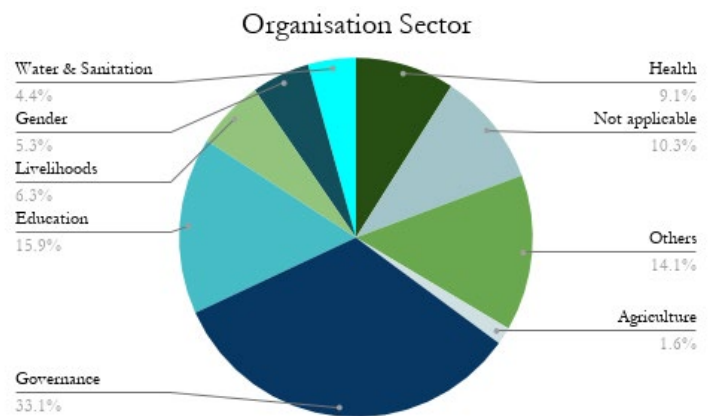
Next, Mr. Shaikh shared the experience of social groups that his organisation - Jan Sahas - has worked for. These are vulnerable communities, including manual scavengers, survivors of rape, sexual violence, victims of bonded labour, and sex trafficking.

The government tries to identify groups based on castes such as Schedule Caste, Schedule Tribe, etc. Whereas, in Jan Sahas, they try to identify the groups not only on the basis of how excluded these are from the society, but also based on discrimination and social stigma they face because of the situation they are in. Giving an example, he said rape survivors are struggling for access to justice and at the same they are faced with discrimination by their families, their communities due to social stigma.

Creating community-based structures in case the organisation is not able to continue the project or programme is important, he added. This is how change can be a community-led process, and can be continued by community workers or activists.

On the pandemic response, Mr. Shaikh said that his organisation has created a database for 1.5 million workers across 19 states. They began

Who the audience were:



building their capacity as leaders before the pandemic to serve the community, which bore fruits during the pandemic.

In his remarks, Mr. Patnaik said that when constraints, challenges, and opportunities of field workers are spoken of, it is useful to remember the differences in organisations. There are NGOs, coalitions, and campaign-based organisations, among others. Their engagement with the state will differ from, for instance, a human-rights based organisation or one fighting for civil liberties.

Next, Mr. Patnaik talked about campaigns and coalitions, and said that these enable a macro-environment for engagement, as a lot of work is gone in the background while the coalition is being built up to ensure that the core idea - one of representation - has enough legitimacy across the government's levels and is visible.

According to Mr. Patnaik, the biggest challenge from the government side is field workers gaining access. The government needs to create an enabling environment for NGOs and the civil society; create a narrative of the civil society as enablers. **If the narrative shifts, and portrays the civil society in a certain way at the macro-level or in the media, then this will constructively impact the field workers' ability to engage with local authorities.**

Next, he reflected on lessons learned from the field, and emphasised on knowing the details (such as entitlements), particularly with local administrations, more details can enable quality and constructive engagement. Second is the ability to engage with state even at the field worker level, where one is not just going as a supplicant or as petitioner, but rather as the right holder, and can hold the states accountable for its inefficiency. Thirdly, training and capacity building, or how much investment the organisation has made in training its field workers to engage with the state is key.

Another important aspect is the need for systematic engagement on issues and communicating across levels, not just the people at the top or in the local administration, so that

there is continuity in them being able to recognise the organisation's mission, vision and ability to see a positive change.

Mr. Patnaik concluded by commenting on capacity gaps and said that **building confidence of field workers to engage or mobilise the community, and the ability to communicate effectively, are two capacity gaps which need to be addressed.**

From Pratham's experience, Ms. Banerji took ASER as an example, and she said that it doesn't fall neatly into the buckets of a coalition or campaigning. They see it as a huge capacity building exercise for themselves and the organisations, which participate at the district-level, along with the government. If ASER would have been called a capacity building programme, it would have not got the kind of traction it did. Because it was creating a real product which would be debated and discussed, it created additional value.

On leveraging the power of collectives and coalitions, Ms. Chatterjee said a critical piece for SEWA has been people strength (women strength) and without *agyaawaans* (who are democratically elected women leaders at the grassroots from different caste, minority groups and who bring other women together) reaching the last mile, helping people avail entitlements and services would have been almost impossible.

Mr. Patnaik also emphasised on putting the community/people at the forefront of the programme for its success.

Responding to a question on the successful growth of organisations, Mr. Shaikh segmented the factors as follows:

- The role of technology is very important for community level work, in engaging and mobilising the community.
- Diversifying funding, not only in terms of foreign or institutional funding but funding from the community itself.
- Co-creating interventions can also help. If one co-creates the programme, the community-level activist participates very well.

- Lastly, the involvement of the community should not only be in activity implementation but also at the level of decision-making within organisations.

Ms. Banerji then asked about the constraints of local frontline workers associated with the government. To this, Ms. Chatterjee said that often the frontline workers like Anganwadi Workers are the wheels of the bureaucracy, and are unable to speak up as they are part of the bureaucracy. But we are not part of the system, we can ask things, she said.

In response to a query by Ms. Banerji on the overburdening of existing groups by choosing to work on many issues and whether they can indeed say no, Ms. Chatterjee said, it is women who are the guiding force behind deciding which issues are dealt with. Ms. Banerji also asked if such collective power is difficult to gather in urban areas.

Responding to the question, Mr. Shaikh said that workers are migrating from rural areas to urban areas for jobs, livelihood, and economic opportunity. To mobilise the community and support the community is very painful and very complicated for a field worker of a civil society organisation. In rural areas, there are some systems and structures in place to reach out to the community. But in urban areas, it is very complicated, not only for the government, but also for civil society organisations.

Ms. Chatterjee said a stiff challenge is that one-third of the SEWA membership is in urban areas. She further elaborated by saying that sometimes things are easier in urban areas as one is closer to the centre of power. In urban areas, mobility is easy. But they have also faced problems with migrant workers because of their pattern as workers are highly mobile, and sometimes activities meant for them get delayed or postponed.

On another note, Mr. Patnaik said that it was getting harder to engage with the government of India at a structural level. Mechanisms available with the civil society have, over the years, shrunk. This needs to be acknowledged and work needs to be done to change it. He believes **there is a**

need to constantly work to ensure the space available to civil society is not restricted.

Ms. Banerji added to Mr. Patnaik's point, and said that in the last couple of months, so far, there has been greater openness to look at possible types of solution strategies.

This is a summary of the panel discussion, and has been paraphrased.

 To view the recording of the Summary Note, click [here](#).



@Accountabilityindia



@Acclnitiative



@Accountabilityindia



www.accountabilityindia.com

Accountability Initiative



@ArthanCareers



@ArthanCareers



@Arthan



www.arthan.in

Arthan