



Photo: FIOH

The social mobilisation approach facilitates community change in Sri Lanka

The Sri Lankan NGO Future In Our Hands (FIOH) has over 20 years of community development experience in Uva province, working with smallholder farmers engaged in dry-land and irrigated rice farming. During this time it has developed a highly participatory methodology, the social mobilisation approach, for facilitating change in the communities.

Social mobilisation is a development intervention philosophy. At the heart of it lies the concept that individuals in a society cannot make a change in their lives unless they have an intrinsic understanding of their own situation. In this approach, the work in the community starts with the training of a social mobiliser, and from there on the local level organisations are strengthened to function independently.

Under the COMPAS programme, FIOH started to consciously include a more holistic approach, whereby the community development process is conceived of as a combination of the material, social and spiritual aspects that encompass the genuine aspirations of the community members.

Social mobiliser training

Once FIOH has decided to work in a particular community, the first step is to

Link between farming and worldview

The group and village level forums provide a solid platform for strengthening traditional agriculture. Traditional farming practices are based on collective systems and the worldview of the communities. In turn they also support this worldview. Traditional farming used to be based on the fundamental Buddhist concepts of *ahimsa* (doing no harm) and *mettha* (loving kindness). Under this system there are no 'pests'. All creatures have a function in nature. They use nature-friendly and spiritual techniques to chase away 'unwanted' creatures. Working with nature made the system sustainable.

can elicit a complete picture of the lives of people in the community. Another important element is training in participatory monitoring and evaluation.

During the training programme, the mobiliser starts interaction with the community to jointly gather information about the community's economy, and its social, cultural and religious/spiritual background. He or she engages in deep

analytical discussions with community members. Maps are made together with community members. During this process, the areas where intervention is required are identified, as are the indicators for wellbeing that will be used for monitoring and evaluation later on.

The information collected is further elaborated and analysed each time the mobiliser returns for classroom training. This process of alternating community immersion with classroom session for

reflection is repeated six times, ideally during a period of six months.

Local level organisation and planning

With the situation analysis as the basis, each participating household develops an action plan, and sets priorities for the coming 1-2 years. These might include aspirations such as completing the house, digging a well, a child's schooling, or cultivating the land. The household plans are then discussed in groups. The role of the social mobiliser here is to steer likeminded community members into small groups of 5-10 people. The members of the local-level groups are self selected, based on their close proximity to each other, similar interests, and economic and social status.

The social mobiliser also facilitates discussions about trends in the village and the community institutions that existed in the past. Often the groups decide that collective effort can be an important way to escape from the poverty trap. Actions include revitalising useful traditional forms of collective action that have been lost over time. An example is *attam*, a labour-sharing system in which farmers work on each other's paddy lands. This practice was lost with the introduction of chemicals and machines during the green revolution. Another example is the use of traditional saving methods, such as saving in kind. This generally takes the form of a group savings scheme, which further strengthens the collective feeling within the group. While spirituality is not usually explicitly mentioned in the plans, participants confirm that revitalising these practices strengthens spiritual aspects of their lives.

Collective effort can be an important way to escape from the poverty trap

select and train a suitable local person to act as a social mobiliser. The mobilisers are trained in small groups of 10-15 participants. The objective of the training is to develop an appropriate attitude in the mobilisers so that they can strengthen the community organisation process in a holistic way.

The social mobilisers learn to use various participatory tools, such as mapping, for deeper analysis and understanding of the community's situation. In this way they

At present FIOH works with 630 groups and a total membership of 4556 people, with an average of 7-8 members in one group.

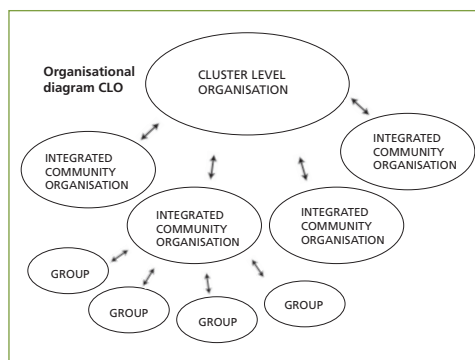
Village level forums

Once local groups are mature enough, the mobilisers facilitate the process whereby they join together to form a village level Integrated Community Organisation (ICO). An ICO consists of 5-7 local groups. A membership fee is charged for joining an ICO. The ICO also collects excess funds from member groups as deposits, and uses these as a revolving fund. In addition, the ICO mobilises funds from formal credit institutions and NGOs, and provides these to the local groups for income generation activities.

The village level plan developed by the ICO includes the activities identified by the local groups, such as training on traditional paddy farming practices or implementing traditional rituals and ceremonies at different stages of cultivation. At present there are 57 village-level ICOs, with an average of 11-12 groups per ICO.

Mobilising external resources

All the ICOs in one administrative division (100-150 villages) are organised into a Cluster Level Organisation, a CLO. There are 6 CLOs in FIOH's working area. A CLO is also a member-based organisation: the ICOs become members by paying a membership fee, and the main officers (chair, secretary and treasurer) are elected. When working out the CLO plan, the ICO members need to have a clear picture of what they can achieve using their own resources. This plan is then used to identify



where members need more outside support for facilitating their planned activities. This may include credit, higher-level training on traditional farming or organising exchanges with villages in another region.

FIOH draws up an annual plan in which it integrates the requested interventions that are financially and otherwise feasible. CLOs and ICOs regard FIOH as one of the many external organisations through which they can mobilise support.

Monitoring and evaluation

The planning process that starts at the household level and continues up to the group, community and district levels is highly participatory and reflects wellbeing aspects as they are perceived by the community members. The aspirations embodied in the plans are well connected with the participants' worldviews, as a result of the mobilisers' facilitation and the activities implemented (see box page 5).

The accompanying monitoring and evaluation system is based on the indicators for wellbeing developed with the community members during the planning

Interacting worldviews in the social mobilisation approach

Spiritual

Social mobilisers are trained to adopt a holistic approach to community organisation, which means including spiritual aspects of life.

Social

The social mobilisers play an important role in revitalising traditional forms of collective action that have been lost.

Material

The group and village level forums provide a platform for strengthening traditional agriculture.

process. For instance, one understanding of wellbeing is: 'having ample food at any given time at home'. Ample food means not only having enough for family consumption; it also means having enough for giving alms to monks and to the needy, as this is a way of accumulating merit according to Buddhist teaching. Local groups and higher-level organisations monitor their own progress continuously in monthly meetings, making use of simple charts.

FIOH's experience shows that community mobilisation has enabled farmers to revitalise traditional practices. FIOH has facilitated this process by providing training and exchanges with similar farming communities and the methodology has now also been adopted by different organisations.



K.A.J. Kahandawa
Future in Our Hands
Badulla, Sri Lanka
kahandawa@gmail.com