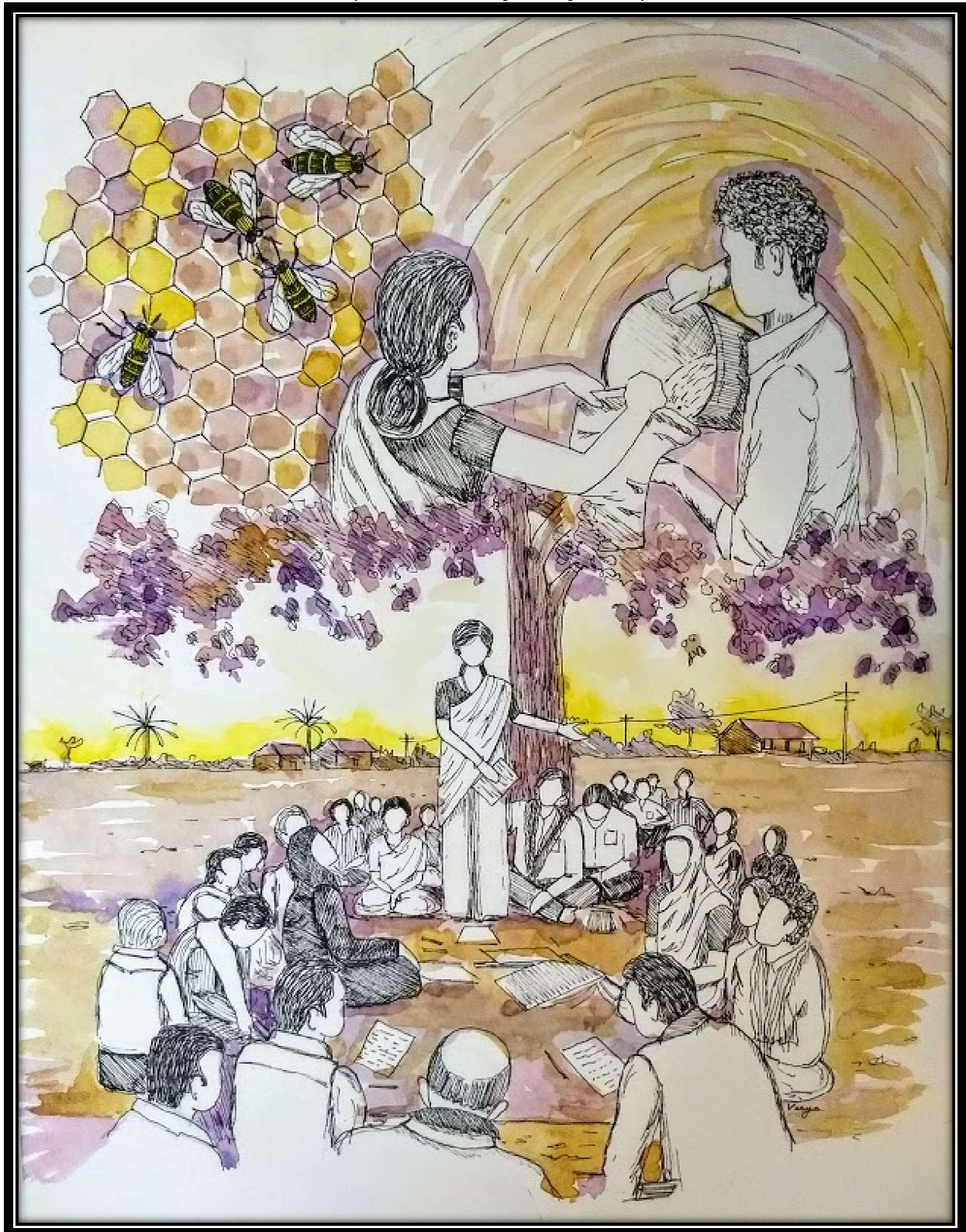# Reviving Community Participation and Leadership Towards Strengthening Grassroots Democracy*

Experiences from the Community Learning Movement

A TfDS publication by Vanya Joseph

"Through my efforts as a CLM resource person, people have developed the awareness that they must come together and resolve their own issues"

Mariya
Mariya is a CLM resource person from Raichur District;
A BA graduate, she is currently a worker in the GRAKOOS Network.
Mariya participated in the CLM resource building program in 2015

"There is a need to educate people on the true meaning of decentralisation. At first people accepted schemes and services without any opposition thinking that only those in Delhi could decide about them. However, after we enlightened them about how decentralised governance works, they are now convinced that the decisions made in the gramsabhas are the final ones. They are also convinced now, that they must actively participate in all village and ward level meetings.

Ningamma
Ningamma is a CLM Resource person from Bagalkote, Raichur District.
She is currently a worker in the GRAKOOS Network. She has studied up to 7th standard

The status of community participation and leadership in rural India

Among the tenets of democracy, people's participation (in governance) is invariably the first to be listed. And not surprisingly, for it has proven to be a powerful tool to develop a robust nation. People's or community participation leads to relevant intervention and sustainable development as it communicates ground realities and needs to policy makers and those formulating development interventions. It provides leverage to change the status quo of disproportionate distribution of power as well as access to entitlements and opportunities for wellbeing.

India holds the status of a democracy. And while it generally conforms to most of the components that cumulatively define a democracy, there are gaps, particularly with regards to community participation. Therefore India is not a *true democracy* yet, for its maximum potential of community participation has not yet been tapped. In India community participation is not omnipresent as it ought to be. In urban and metropolitan settings, people may choose to participate in democracy or not. But in more rural environments and at the grassroots level, particularly among the marginalised, underprivileged and working class, the gap in people's participation is as much a result of unawareness as it is of oppression.

And this brings us to the aspect of community leadership. Going hand in hand with participation, it is another key element in the equation of democracy. Traditionally In rural settings, leadership has been monopolised by individuals belonging to dominant groups formed on the basis of religion, caste and class. Women have been largely, if not outright excluded. Such power structures are maintained through a hierarchy that perpetuates the inbuilt agenda of these dominant groups. Fortified with political back up, the dominant groups sustain their stronghold by keeping sub groups within the community separate through divisive practices while making the community dependent on them for survival and sustainability. People's participation in decision-making is thwarted. In the process, the community and its people have been receivers of services and schemes that have been inconsistent with their actual needs. The outcomes of this power system are thus disempowering: they prevent the community from coming together for a common cause of development by the withholding of information and resources. Consequently there is social and economic exploitation that stems out of mismanagement of community resources.

On certain occasions there is an emergence of issue-based leadership in the community wherein once the issue is set right, the leadership dissolves. Individual leaders emerging out of these specific contexts may continue to evolve and find new avenues to work for the betterment in the community. Or in the absence of guidance or lack of vision may get co-opted into the political agendas of the larger society.

Historical experience in community leadership and participation

Naturally, the apt recourses for such state of matters are creating avenues for community participation in governance to bridge the gaps, and building community leadership. However, these are not entirely unchartered territories in the history of Indian citizenship. It is dotted with such attempts, these having taken various forms as movements, voluntary organisations and community based organisations. Among them, some have evolved and flourished while others have waned or died.

Post independence, between 1945 and 1965, Indians experienced the phenomenon of 'euphoria of independence'. They believed and expected that with the British having left and the Indian government having been set up, all their existing problems would be solved. But by the mid 1960s disillusionment set in among many sections of society. Post independence, the benefits of the implementations of the Five Year Plans, land reforms and other such pro-citizen initiatives weren't reaching the poor, marginalised, small farmers, and other vulnerable or potentially vulnerable communities including the working class. Hence between 1966 and 1975 the sections of society[1] who were unaffected by government policies started revolting led by the working class. In response, the government's strategy

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[1] women, Tribal communities, students and Dalits

was to encourage the birth and functioning of 'voluntary organisations'[2]. 1976 to 1990 was the time when voluntary organisations flourished and when groups and movements working on the environment as well as non-party political movements emerged. However, members of the working class who had been pioneers in forming movements in India started losing militancy from the mid-'eighties – especially after the defeat of the Mumbai Textile Workers' historic battle for their democratic rights.

The Changing world order, the emergence of the Panchayat Raj and their influence

In the 1990s, the WTO's regime was firmly established in India and the impact of globalisation, privatisation and liberalisation that it had initiated had spread in almost all areas of commerce. All voluntary organisations who had been involved in social transformation for decades changed their identities to 'Non Government Organisations' without much conscious choice. The transformation was beyond mere nomenclature; perspectives, philosophy and methods of working changed as well. Their voluntarism and vigour decreased when the government started giving them 'partnership roles' in implementing its own 'development' and welfare programs. Organisations and activists focusing on rights, awareness and people's institution building had taken a back seat. The phenomenon of globalisation, privatisation and liberalisation also opened up the doors for bilateral and multilateral funding that invariably defined the development focus in the receiving country.

When the Panchayat Raj Act was implemented in 1992 it brought about a sea of change in the archaic structure of rural leadership and local governance. Power and leadership could no longer be the monopoly of only certain dominant sections of the community but became accessible to one and all, bringing in women and representatives from backward castes. It resulted in people's participation in local development. With its mandate for economic development and social justice, the Panchayat Raj system provided the much needed institutional support to local leaders to define the course of local development.

However, the Panchayat Raj system has had its own teething problems and continues to face certain glitches in functioning smoothly and effectively. These include limited functional autonomy, continued influence of the traditional power structure and dynamics, lack of local representation in its administration, lack of accountability and incidence of corruption by elected representatives. In effect, government policies and programmes still don't always address the actual issues of people because they don't get effectively communicated from the bottom up; schemes themselves don't get implemented or monitored properly.

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[2] They worked on various aspects like Panchayat Raj, women's issues, self help groups, environment, education and health

And so, despite its presence, rural India is not bereft of issues today. Among the long list, poverty persists, there is lack of quality education, school dropout rates are high, agriculture is difficult and farmers commit suicide, infrastructure is poor, unemployment and the ensuing leaching of able human capital are rampant, quality health care is insufficient, caste and class based oppression exist, communal disharmony and patriarchy exist and so on.

But because the Panchayat Raj model promotes community leadership and grassroots democracy, it should not be given up on and has to be nurtured and sustained. The precondition for the Panchayat Raj system to be utilitarian to the community is community mobilisation that would ensure participation and increase accountability of people's elected representatives. And thus, support from several community led initiatives such as self-help groups and federations have helped actualise its mandate by bringing in participation of people in planning, monitoring and evaluation.

CLM - a promising player in bridging the gaps

One such effort which has been part of this process has been the Community Learning Movement (CLM). A capacity-building-cum-intervention programme, the goal of CLM is to enable local activists to competently take up rights-based, people-centered advocacy on issues of marginalization at the village and panchayat levels. It intends to equip grassroots activists with knowledge, skills, information and perspectives to function as resource persons and catalysts to mobilse and organize people to advocate for their rights as a means towards strengthening grassroots democracy.

> *"Community Learning Movement* has twin goals at its helm:
> *Firstly, building a model of community led leadership to strengthen grassroots democracy and Secondly, training a cadre of local resource persons to mobilise the community."*
>
> ***Dileep Kamat, CLM Program Facilitator***

Origin and evolution of CLM

CLM is a derivative of ruminations that marginalised people, whose voices go unheard or are misrepresented in the process of others advocating for their causes, can and need to be at the centre of any process concerning their betterment and that capacity building is integral to such a process.

Around 1996, The National Centre for Advocacy Studies (NCAS)[3] had been considering the idea of grassroots advocacy or people-led advocacy by marginalised communities as an alternative response to developments in the changed world order (as described above). On

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[3] Based in Pune and set up in 1992, a premier advocacy resource centre in South Asia.

the parallel, Dileep Kamat[4] had also been thinking of a more effective means to achieve social change among the marginalised in the present context. It was as a result of their collaboration that the concept of the Community Learning Movement emerged. The very first event of the CLM process involved bringing together grassroots activists associated with the Tungabhadra River fishing rights, joint forest management and common land movement etc, for a 3-day programme with the participation of Dileep Kamat and NCAS. From their deliberations, it emerged that the CLM would aim at creating a grassroots cadre that would have political consciousness and build a culture of questioning in the community about governance, bringing back the volunteering spirit of pre-independence times. It was decided that CLM would be initiated in Karnataka.

Human and Institutional Development Forum (HIDF) which has also been interested in innovative processes towards social change and their institutionalisation, came to learn of CLM through its association with Dileep Kamat. Participating in 2 of its initial 4 batches, HIDF was impressed by the empowerment that the programme brought to its participants. It foresaw the potential of CLM and was keen to collaborate and take it ahead both in terms of its geographical outreach as well as design, towards institutionalisation. It was felt important to develop the programme so that it would generate more resource persons for CLM since till then, the programmes had been facilitated solely by Dileep Kamat in 6 districts of Karnataka.

It was then that CLM evolved into the CLM – Resource Persons Building programme. The redesigned version of CLM aimed at developing resource persons in each community to become anchors who could lead the community on issues that mattered to them. The skills of mobilisation and knowledge on services and schemes were the resources that these CLM participants would take back to the community. CLM was offered as 6 training programs between 2009 and 2016 and had participation from 159 grassroots activists, most working in NGOs and federations in 20 districts of Karnataka and 1 from Andhra Pradesh.

As a process, CLM has 3 dimensions to it:

1. Capacity building – individuals with potential, go through a multi-modular training program that equips them with knowledge, skills, perspectives and attitudes to take on the roles of resources of information, community mobilisers, and agents and anchors of change.

2. Mobilisation – trained CLM resource persons equip the community with awareness and motivate and mobilise them to advocate for their rights and deal with their issues.

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[4] Hailing from Belgaum, a Gandhian and activist for over four decades working with organized and unorganized workers, Dalits, women, tribals and marginal farmers on the issues of class, caste and gender as well as common property resources.
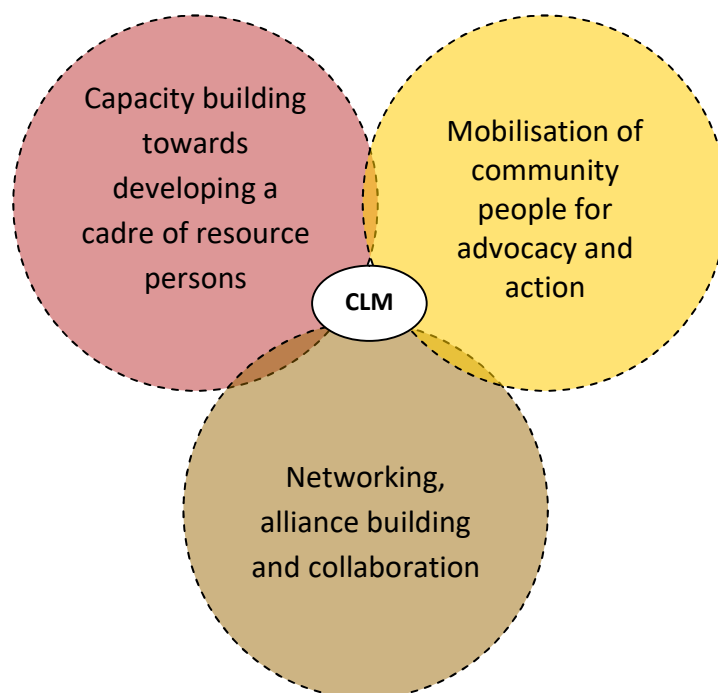
3. Networking and collaboration – CLM resource persons create and nurture alliances amongst the community members and with other organisations who have similar mandates of working for the wellbeing of the community such as self-help groups, unions, federations, and gram panchayats. This is for bringing about collective action and collaboration towards handling community issues with increased efficacy and efficiency.

How CLM contributes to strengthening grassroots democracy

An evaluation of the programme[5] has shown that CLM has set off several processes that are slowly but surely contributing to people becoming more involved in local governance and are taking more responsibility in doing what it takes to ensure their wellbeing. In the communities that CLM resource persons have worked in, several notable developments in terms of people-led-advocacy, mobilsation, leadership and collaboration towards dealing with community issues have taken place. Some of the impacts of CLM are as follows:

CLM with its approach of building human capital in the community through learning as a core principle has laid a foundation for community-based volunteer networks. These networks have ensured the working of village- based services like Public Distribution System, anganwadis, mid-day meals scheme in the schools, correction of irregularities in the working of schemes like NREGA and so on. The CLM resource persons have also mobilised these volunteers to resolve issues like alcoholism and domestic violence prevalent in the

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[5] Conducted by Ms. Srilakshmi Divakar in 2017, commissioned by Trust for Development (TfDS).

community. Earlier these issues would be considered as private matters and would not be condemned publicly. Now there is recognition that these are problems that need to be dealt with in the openness of the community and not in the silence of privacy. They have been able to arrive at the resolution of these issues through protest, discussion and peaceful coercion.

"If people are with us, many things are possible"
CLM resource person, Belgaum

The success of community mobilisation and advocacy taken up as a part of the CLM process is manifest in the participation of community members in gram sabhas. The gram sabhas have rightly been utilised as the space for raising questions about non-functioning of programmes, corruption and for putting forth demands on behalf of the community. The community waits for the announcement of gram sabhas and demands that they take place regularly as laid out in the law.

CLM resources persons have forged working alliances with village level panchayats resulting in the timely delivery of schemes and services like anganwadis and PHCs. Some panchayat leaders have leveraged on the presence of CLM participants to reach out to the community. In one of the districts strong women panchayat leaders have collaborated with CLM resource persons to take up issues in the community. The women especially, have taken

advantage of reservations as part of the panchayat system to hold positions of power. This has provided them an edge in decision-making and in building community support for relevant issues. They have paved the way for relaxing of social barriers that earlier would come in the way of inter-caste or inter-religious mingling and social exchanges. This has urged the community to explore common spaces for interaction, in some cases considering the panchayat office as a common meeting point as it is available to all.

The CLM programme has leveraged on such relaxed social barriers brought about by the efforts of certain women panchayat leaders and have facilitated the engagement of different caste and religious groups in the community through an inclusive approach of mobilisation.

> *"I work in a Muslim community. Initially I found it uncomfortable mobilising women for the community meetings. Both because I was not used to conversing with them and also because women in the Muslim community do not step out much. It was difficult to go to their houses to invite them for the meeting. Now I am much more comfortable conducting these community meetings and talking about issues that concern them. Women now participate in meetings actively and also I am at ease to visit them give information whenever necessary".*
>
> **CLM resource person, Ranebennur**

CLM has been able to forge linkages to other pre-existing networks like the self-help groups and federations to strengthen community-based action. For example, GRAKOOSA, a membership-based state level union of unorganized workers in rural areas, is one such network that has provided immense support to CLM resource persons by providing resources and a platform for them to be continuously engaged with the issues of livelihood and minimum wages for work. CLM itself has been instrumental in setting up federations like Beedi Workers Union or Safai Karmachari Kavalu Samiti that have mobilised the affected community for advocacy

CLM resource persons have also encashed on other opportunities like contesting in the local panchayat elections to become part of the local governance structure and have grown to flourish as local leaders. A growing leadership has also emerged among CLM resource persons who are staff of NGOs where it is manifest in their taking more responsibility and accountability for their work.

CLM has facilitated the engagement of different caste and religious groups in the community through an inclusive approach of mobilisation. CLM resource persons at Belgaum and Raichur shared that organising family gatherings once a month that invite everyone in the village to participate, have relaxed some of the existing caste norms. Families from different religious and caste backgrounds cook and bring meals to a common meeting area. They then sit in different circles to share and eat the food together. Although

it is only a small percentage of families that actually eat each other's food now, it is still a beginning towards change.

Challenges

Although largely successful in actualising its goals, CLM faces certain snags in the reality of its implementation. Capturing them makes way for thoughts on means of improvement.

Mobilising the community is not always easy, especially in the initial stages of the CLM resource person's work. A big challenge is in the form of elements present in the community who work towards maintaining the community as several factions or breaking its harmony so that their power equations remain intact.

While CLM resource persons who are NGO staff take greater leadership for their work, they are often not yet in a position to identify other issues that have consequences for development and solidarity in the community. For instance, with regard to increasing communal tensions in the community, CLM resource persons in NGOs or networks respond when they break out in the form of fights or disagreements. But there are no efforts to understand the root of the problem or to engage the community around it.

Similarly, CLM resource persons from the networks lack the skill for being observant of village issues beyond those that are in their mandate. Not much different, CLM resource persons who are NGO staff recognise issues existing in the community but do not engage with them since they are not issues that their organisations are working with. At the most, brief interest is shown in the form of informal inquiries.

Building alliances and collaborating with local panchayats can be challenging as in certain areas, panchayat representatives can be exploitative or non-cooperative.

The path ahead

The programme has definitely opened up the space for women to engage in the community as local leaders but this process needs to be strengthened. This is because in rural settings, traditional patriarchal norms that control gender-based allowances and restrictions still operate. In the absence of such a process the women could get co-opted by patriarchy and become dependent on male authority.

Though the mandate of the programme was to build self-activated local leaders the initiative has largely confined itself to NGO staff. Even in instances where the participants started out as individual change makers, they have eventually been absorbed into organisations. In the current landscape of increased investment in building the capacities of communities, CLM is an active player which aims at developing necessary skills of self-advocacy and leadership in communities. Even though CLM has drawn most participation from representatives of NGOs, it is expected that they in turn will transfer these competencies to the community.

Currently CLM resource persons have a fair grasp of the specific issues that affect the community. There is a necessity to initiate a methodical process of engaging the community in discussions around democratic governance, questioning the existing structures of power and relooking at the ways of interaction in the community that reinforces caste, class and gender structures. It has been suggested by some stakeholders to create a platform for regular dialogues at various district centers. It was felt that these platforms could enhance peer learning among CLM resource persons and keep the networks of engagement strong.

It would be interesting to extend the programme to individuals who already have an agency and constituency in the community like teachers, panchayat representatives, ASHA worker, SHG members etc. These members would continue to be part of systems that provide various services to the community. Building capacities of these individuals may result in better engagement with the community.

The CLM programme can be a great move to organise the youth in the community. The programme can provide direction and perspective to the youth as they have a future stake in the community and its progress.

At present, CLM resource persons are mostly immersed in their immediate micro realities. There is a potential for them to leverage on their alliances with existing networks to address power dynamics in the macro context since various networks have an opportunity to link together to influence policy making.

The Human and Institutional Development underpinnings of CLM

"CLM has my honed capacity as a human being. I have grown to be a leader. I have understood the importance of building networks and working with different groups. The programme has strengthened me to face many challenges. I have been fortunate to have been mentored by a committed group of facilitators"
Pushpa K.L,CLM resource person, Davanagere

One of the significant dimensions of the CLM process is capacity building. The objective of this capacity building is to develop grassroots activists into anchors who would be able to mobilse the community towards resolving issues as well as to be resources of information on services, schemes, whom to approach for what sort of issue etc. These objectives contribute towards fulfilling the larger goals of CLM.

There are many aspects to the capacity building process in CLM. It is done in a planned and systematic manner. Structurally, it is a multi-modular training program comprising several learning events interspersed with periods where trainees implement their learning in the field. The learning events provide a blend of conceptual and experiential learning. In terms of content, along with building knowledge on themes such as the caste system, human rights, social structure and so on, the curriculum of CLM introduces dimensions such as learning methodologies, process sensitivity, communication, healthy group dynamics, the role of change and so on. Need-based support in the form of mentoring is provided for back-home implementation of learning. This design is in congruence with the CLM's motto of '*Do while you learn; learn while you do'.* The inbuilt component of peer learning enriches the learning process through exchange of ideas.

"When I started community work I hardly had an idea as to how to interact with people. I used to be scared and not have enough information to engage with them. CLM has built my courage through proper knowledge and skills. I have grown to be a better community worker. I am now confident that I can resolve problems in the community, I know where to get information from and I bring courage to their lives"

Akbar Dharwad, CLM resource person, Ranebennur

Capacity building or human and institutional development is a process by which individuals, groups, organisations, institutions and society develop capacities to individually or collectively set and achieve expected goals, perform functions, and solve problems. In development contexts, capacity building is an absolute requirement for interventions to be not only effective, but sensitive, inclusive and sustainable.

CLM is a case in point. The progress that it has made and its successes can be attributed to the amount of investment that goes into it, in building human capacity and strengthening of people's institutions.

In conclusion, a process like CLM with its objectives of strengthening grassroots leadership and building capacities of community-based resource persons is crucial. It is a

programme that addresses the immediate need for community mobilisation around issues by resource persons. The skill to mobilise the community is backed by appropriate knowledge, systematic planning and building of community support networks. At its highest potential CLM can contribute not just to training community-based resource persons, but to actually develop strong communities that are vibrant, led by a vision of sustainable development and thrive on values of social justice. The people in such communities then are not just seeking services as users but are ensuring good governance and can mobilise themselves around values of accountability, inclusive development and equitable resource distribution.

*This document is an adaptation of the Evaluation report of CLM conducted by Ms. Srilakshmi Divaker.

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