

Struggle and Development

SEWA has chosen to adopt the joint strategies of struggle and development efforts to organize self-employed women workers, and move towards our vision of a new society. Generally, efforts at organising are focussed either on struggle efforts alone or only on development. Although each effort alone has its strengths, it also has its drawbacks which are compensated for when combined with the other.

On the positive side, struggle efforts draw positive attention to exploitative situations, bring visibility for issues facing workers, create pressure on the existing system to respond and reduce exploitation, build unity and courage among the workers and inculcate a spirit of sacrifice among them. Struggle efforts are able to involve large numbers of workers and help to build a movement of workers. The specific issues of struggle, by confronting the existing system, are able to show the way for change.

But struggle alone also has negative implications, especially for the self-employed workers. Being unorganized, weak, and poor, they have very limited bargaining strength. Their ability to sustain a struggle is severely limited by economic pressures. Hence it is easy to victimize them and break their determination to struggle efforts are mainly a process of making demands and pressures on a system for more and more benefits for a particular group of people. When successful, they tend to become inward-looking and may not necessarily contribute to regenerating resources. Struggle efforts rise and fall with the emergence of issue and are not continuous and on-going in nature.

Similarly development efforts alone have their own pros and cons. Development efforts are able to create a constructive alternative to an unacceptable system, they are able to impart skills in the workers and develop a capacity of self-sufficiency. They are able to create asset ownership, control, and autonomy for the workers. Development issues help to build an organizational base as they are continuous and on-going in nature.

On the other hand, development efforts tend to become only commercial-minded and limited in outlook. They are not able to reach very large numbers of people and may work towards the good of a few people only. They forget about the good of all workers. They also tend to fit with the existing status quo rather than question it.

Independently, therefore, both struggle and development efforts have limitations to bring about change and create a new society. However, combining both these approaches creates a unique potential force SEWA continues to evolve this joint strategy of struggle and development by working at the grass-roots with self-employed women workers.

The efforts of struggle and development have to be constantly balanced and combined for building on their respective positive aspects, and minimizing the negative implications. Together, struggle and development are able to establish increased solidarity for workers and increased concrete benefits by the participatory involvement of the workers. They are also able to question the status quo. and build an alternative. Development efforts to be successful always involve struggle at some point, and this capacity has to be inculcated in the workers. Struggle efforts have to build concrete development orientation for sustained involvement of the members. All the members of society, in our vision, must have the capacity for struggle

when the needs arise, and must be involved in on-going development work of sustenance. From the struggle efforts we understand the nature of exploitation and from development efforts we build our own alternatives.

Struggle and development, in turn entail organization building and a growing movement which go hand-in-hand and are complementary to each other. Both are incomplete and have limited effectiveness in themselves. A continuous balance has to be maintained between an organization and a movement. Organizations give the movement stability and continually and the movement carries the organizations on to social change.

Struggle and development activities have both to be carried out under the auspices of some organizational form. Of the various organizational forms available in the legal framework of our country, the ones which embody the values of struggle and development had to be identified. The considerations for the choice of organizational form for SEWA have been the following :

- One in which the self-employed workers are the members.
- One, which allows the direct control of the members of the organization, the workers, to form the decision-making body.
- One which is based on democratic principles of membership and elected representatives of the workers.
- One which encourages and strengthens the direct participation of the members who are the self-employed workers.
- One which has an equal basis of financial contribution by all workers to establish a right in the organization. It also has voting rights based on the numerical strength of members and not on the financial strength. Each member has one vote only.
- One which establishes accountability to the workers themselves as the ultimate forum.
- One which is a representative organization of the workers.

These considerations clearly pointed to the trade union form of organization for the struggles efforts, and the co-operative form of organization for the development efforts. SEWA is registered as a trade union and has sponsored autonomous co-operatives of the respective trade groups. The joint action of struggle and development is translated into reality through the joint action of trade union and co-operative. A constant balance is maintained between the two by focussing on the on-going organization and building a movement of the self-employed workers simultaneously. Both the forms-union and co-operative – are ideologically participatory and focus on the worker-identity of the members. They are people's organizations. SEWA is a people's organization.