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AVAG STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY ORGANISATION

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Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) was established in 1988 by the International Township of Auroville in South India as a small charitable outreach organization working with the villages in the surrounding bioregion. Auroville's experiments in urban planning, education, land restoration, renewable energy and appropriate technology, ecological work, village development and many other areas provide a positive, supportive context for the sustainability of AVAG's work.

With the receipt of a Commonwealth Human Ecology (CHEC) grant in 1993, AVAG programmes developed rapidly and expanded to other villages, employing increasing numbers of local people who were trained as development workers. Currently AVAG works with 75 villages in the two states of Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry, and its reputation as a catalyst of rural development is well established in the area.

AVAG's programme aims to assist village communities and organisations to strive towards sustainability, to find integrated, practicable solutions to the pressing problems of contemporary village life. Central to the programme is the cultivation of two interrelated global ethics that together facilitate sustainability, **the self-realisation ethic and the ecological ethic**. The self-realisation ethic asserts that people's proper goal is the evolutionary development of their fullest human potential and calls for a progression of a sense of self that extends beyond the individual to include more of the phenomenal world. The ecological ethic perceives humans as an integral part of the natural environment.

The programme aims to develop and cultivate an environment supportive of self-realisation and ecological awareness, and therefore the context for sustainable lifestyles. Through education and training, the programme introduces concepts that empower the whole person with the understanding, skills and commitment to build a sustainable future. By promoting debate on aspects of taken-for-granted beliefs and practices that are counter-productive for a transition to a sustainable community, the programme aims to encourage participants to analyse situations and make decisions for themselves. By deconstructing systems of oppression and demythologising assumptions that create divisions, a sense of identity is cultivated of humans as part of an interdependent community. Through discovering possibilities to work together, participants find local solutions to sustainability in their community. They grow to perceive their communities as living systems of integrated humans with shared responsibilities that function as part of a larger whole. By encouraging groups to work together, the programme aims to develop an awareness of the interconnectedness that is required for the sustainability of the positive changes achieved by the programme so far.

By the end of the proposed 5-year plan, the programme aims to have brought the groups to a stage where they can function independently of the NGO, to effectively make collective decisions in the best interests of their community. If they need outside financial help for their initiatives, they will be able to apply for funding to outside bodies under their own Club and Federation names.

At present, 30% of villages involved in the project are in the phase-in period, 30% in the early implementation phase, 30% in the middle implementation phase and 10% in the later implementation phase. By the end of the five years, the programme anticipates that 10% of the villages will be ready for the phase-out stage. There will still be a number of villages in the implementation stage and the programme estimates that it will need to continue its work with them for approximately ten years to

achieve a successful phase-out with them. If more villages join the programme during the next five years, this process could take longer.

PHASE- IN

Work in a village begins when a group approaches AVAG for help, usually women or dalits. The men and the caste groups generally follow after they witness the success of the other groups and the ways in which the entire village benefits from groups working under the programme. The phase-in period usually lasts from one year to five years depending on how quickly the groups grasp the democratic principles and notions of self-organisation to which they are introduced. The rate at which a group proceeds to grasp such ideas and progress through the programme's trajectory of activities usually depends on caste and gender composition, educational background and geographical location of the group¹.

Phase-in Activities

Men's group

The men arrange and hold one meeting per month with the AVAG development workers (DWs) during which trainings and workshops are organized. They maintain their own records, begin to implement micro-projects and contact local Government offices with the DWs assistance.

Women's group

The women arrange and hold one meeting per month with the assistance of development workers (DWs). The DW helps to maintain records when necessary, when there is no literate woman in the group. After initial training, the women start a savings scheme. Trainings and workshops are organized on a wide range of issues and microprojects are implemented with the help of the Development Workers. The women contact local Government offices with help from the DW.

Children

When the teachers from a government school backed by either men's or women's group approach AVAG, PEP (Primary Education Programme) is introduced to the students of the 4th and 5th standard children. The programme is limited to the primary school at present due to lack of D.W. for PEP.

Dalit

Dalit groups visit non-dalit villages.

Village organizations.

The groups attend cluster level meetings.

Indicators that project is moving from phase-in to the implementation phase:

Men's Groups

- When they can implement micro-projects on their own and contact Government offices independently.
- They begin to overcome hesitation to participate in exchange programmes with women and undertake micro-projects jointly with women from their village.
- The semi-literate men start asking questions in seminars.

Women's Groups

- Women start to participate more in the seminars and meetings, show punctuality and
- They initiate meetings independently without the DWs help and take up group responsibilities
- They take an interest in women's issues, even if they don't take emphatic action.

¹ For example, groups in more remote villages or a small dalit settlement next to a larger non-dalit settlement take longer because they are more afraid to break down their accepted belief systems. When there are more educated girls, confident middle-age women or young women with experience outside the village, the groups are consolidate more quickly.

- They have no hesitation in participating in exchange programmes with women of different castes.
- They undertake micro-projects independently and jointly with men.

Dalits

- The dalits and non-dalits are ready to implement joint micro-projects together.

IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

This consists of early, middle and late implementation stages.

Early Implementation Phase

The early implementation phase lasts for two years. This is the phase when people begin to work together. The tension between castes and genders begins to ease through activities and discussions that help to break down prejudices. AVAG assists people in establishing processes to encounter blocks to development, and encourages them to meet within the Panchayats and Village Councils. The activities that the different groups undertake grow in number.

Activities

Men's groups

Men form Men's Clubs (MCs) and start to attend two meetings per month and are also initiating some of the meetings. Men start to visit the district headquarters of Government offices situated away from their village in Cuddalore and Villupuram (40 kms away), to resolve village issues and to access government schemes available for the benefit of the village.

Women's groups

Women form Women's Clubs (WCs) and attend two meetings per month and maintain their own records. Women start to visit the district headquarters of Government offices situated away from their village in Cuddalore and Villupuram (40 kms away), to resolve village issues and to access government schemes available for the benefit of the village. Women take loans and repay them, attend Grama Sabha meetings that are held by the Panchayat four times in a year. The group joins the **Women's Federation**.

Children

Summer camps and extra-curricular activities are organized for the children. Leadership, personality development and guidance training is organised for the younger members of the men's and women's group who are in their teens.

Dalits

The number of men's groups participating in exchange visits is increasing.

Village organizations

The cluster meetings for men and women are organized separately.

Middle Implementation Stage

This phase lasts for two to five years.

Activities

Men's groups

- The men join savings schemes.
- The **Men's Federation** is formed.
- The men and women's group exchange visits.
- The men participate in blood donation camps.

Women's groups

The women participate in a joint income generation programme. Women attend and participate in the discussions in the Grama Sabha meetings that are held by the Panchayat four times in a year. The group is actively involved in the activities of the Women's Federation and implement gender sensitive policies, allot scholarships for higher education to young girls, organise

vocational training for women, provide legal aid and financial assistance for legal advice, and help the needy women in the area through compassion funds.
The non-dalit women are ready to host dalits in their village.
Women contest in the local village Panchayat elections.

Children

Organise children's parliament, newspapers and one-day trips and send the children to attend state and national level conferences.

The parents and teachers implement micro-projects to improve the schools infrastructure.

Dalits

Caste and gender mixed groups are exchanging visits.

Village organization

A combined meeting of men and women is organized at the cluster level. The **Village Councils** (VCs) are formed.

Exchange visits and performances are organized for Aurovilians to foster friendship and cooperation. The establishment of the Joint Development committee with Auroville is undertaken.

Indicators that the project has achieved the objectives of the middle-implementation phase:

When the following indicators are achieved the people are ready for the final phase of implementation.

All Groups

- When the project expands to cover all villages in Vanur block through people's voluntary participation.
- The various groups can start conducting some of the meetings with only one development worker and then progress to conducting meetings on their own, or rely on the DWs support only sometimes.
- The Development Workers themselves become more skilful and develop greater capacity to train villagers.
- The men start to acknowledge gender disparities, start to appreciate changes in women, and can change their attitude towards women.
- Men's and Women's Federations respond well to AVAG's efforts to bring them closer, through joint meetings, so that they can become aware of each other's strengths and weaknesses, and the need to work together.

Women

- In the women's groups, the women have contested in elections (2002) and the legal aid centres are functioning smoothly.

Children

- The parents show an interest in the education of the children, the rights of the child are respected; more possibilities exist for the children to improve themselves.

Dalits

- More possibilities created for Dalit and non-Dalit people to plan and work together and understand each other.

Village organizations

- Village Councils become stronger and start to appreciate efforts of Women's Clubs and Men's Clubs. and work together with existing organisations in villages (other WCs, MCs, Panchayat, PTAs).

Bioregional

- Animosity towards Auroville is resolved.

Later implementation phase

This phase lasts for five years.

Activities

- Groups attend blood camps.
- The women's groups take up issues on their own.
- Women are managing the Income Generation Projects (IGPs) independently.

- Both men and women are going to the Government departments independently and accessing schemes.
- The teens join the men's and women's group and are its active members.
- The non dalit attend cluster meetings held in dalit villages.
- The men are aware of exploitation by caste and party leaders.
- The village councils work together with existing organisations in villages (ie. clubs, Panchayat etc.)
- The Joint Development Council is well established with Auroville.

Indicators of having reached the Phase-out stage

The project's objectives for development in the bio-region will be achieved when the people are empowered for self governance when they satisfy the following indicators:

- When groups can discuss issues on their own, become gender and caste sensitive enough to take up these issues together.
- Tension between castes has been reduced enough to allow planning and working together.
- The groups have established a good relationship with the government and can take up government schemes successfully without the help of AVAG (ie. IGP, housing and toilet schemes, old age pension, widow pension)
- Women take part in local elections based on their achievements.
- Men start to treat women as equal partners.
- Men move from acknowledging gender disparities, and start to appreciate changes in the women and help in bring the changes.
- Village councils become strong and become an effective tool to resolve problems and bring about community development, as they are more truly representative than the government Panchayats.
- The Joint Development council is effective and helps in resolving problems amicably between Auroville and the villages.
- The villagers can participate equitably with Auroville in planning for the development of the bio-region.
- More Aurovilians show interest in village development and this results in more joint projects undertaken by Auroville and villages.

PHASE OUT

During the phase out The Men's and Women's Federations are functioning independently to ensure the harmonious development of men and women of the bio-region.

Indicators/Activities

- Groups are able to effectively conduct their own meetings without the assistance of the Development Workers.
- The men are sensitive enough to take up women's issues and the groups manage to last for many years being mature enough to weather political elections.
- Groups organize service camps for blood donations, veterinary camps etc. independently.
- The women are strong enough to oppose any form of violence against women, and confident to contest in elections to district level posts of the Union and District Councilors
- Children and teens are educated, valued by their parents, and grow into responsible citizens
- Caste discrimination has been overcome
- Village Councils function effectively for village development
- Joint Development Council ensures effective and equitable development of the bioregion

CONCLUSION

By the time AVAG phases out its programme, the villagers will have gained the skills to implement social change and will have established the institutions to carry out projects for the betterment of the community. Therefore, the context will have been set to ensure the sustainability of the programme's effects by its conclusion.

Even as the project's phase-out takes place, AVAG will continue to exist as Auroville's outreach body, maintaining a friendly and mutually beneficial relationship with the villages even when they are no longer dependent on the Development Workers to sustain their community organisation. The village groups will continue to benefit by being in relation with AVAG and Auroville, as the continued presence of AVAG will provide an incentive for continuing their development activities. AVAG will still be available to advise and guide village groups on request, but the programme aims to facilitate those groups towards the sustainability of their own local organisations in pro-village projects, and their ultimate independence of the programme.

Equitable Village Councils will continue to function for the development of their village, addressing the needs of all sectors of their community, including previously marginalised groups such as women and dalits. Community organisations will have developed awareness that in order to sustain themselves, all members of the community must be represented. The councils will continue to implement cooperative programmes on their own initiative, by either accessing existing government schemes or undertaking community projects with participation from all groups.

The Joint Development Council will request ongoing representation from village groups to join with representatives from Auroville to ensure the continued social, economic and political development of the bioregion based on human rights principles.

The development programmes of the Government of India and Tamil Nadu will also continue to offer opportunities to groups of villagers, ensuring the continuation and sustainability of the self-help and self-organisational procedures introduced by the programme. Village groups will be able to access and undertake such government programmes independently, thus ensuring their own sustainability and the continued application of new skills learnt from their exposure to the programme. The national policy of enfranchising and empowering women and dalits will assist in ensuring ongoing change for these groups .