INDISCO- India Experience with Promoting Decent Work among Tribal Peoples in the Framework of ILO Convention 169

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INDISCO is the ILO’s Interregional Programme to Promote Self Reliance of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples through Cooperatives and Self Help Organizations. It can be likened to the second arm of the ILO’s work with ITPs through its technical cooperation function, the first arm being the standard-setting function through its conventions on indigenous and tribal peoples.

INDISCO’s goal is to translate policy into practice by demonstrating improved implementation modalities and action projects on the ground. Based on the two fundamental principles of consultation and participation, as promulgated by ILO Convention no. 169, the community-driven INDISCO activities of technical cooperation establish a process of social dialogue. These, in turn, have a bearing on the policy environment.

In India, the government has large programmes with impressive resource allocations geared towards tribal development. Unfortunately, the approach has been typically bureaucratic and ‘top down’, with the people in question finding themselves excluded from the planning and implementation process. As a result, the tribal scenario in India admittedly continues to be grim. Comprising about 8% of the total population, the 533 tribes and sub-tribes of India – as elsewhere – are faced with distinct development challenges. These challenges are characterized by social, economic and geographic exclusion, land alienation, a steadily depleting livelihood base, illiteracy, unawareness of both their rights and the market potential of their skills and resources. Thus, they continue with a subsistence economy, vulnerable to exploitation, distress migration and the inevitable debt trap. In such a scenario, it is futile to speak of tribal rights at the normative level alone unless the more urgent priorities and felt needs of the people are met. This means that the right to food security and consequently the right to a livelihood – i.e. the right to Decent Work1 – must be observed. Thus, when working to facilitate the ITPs’ empowerment process, it is necessary to address these rights first.

At the heart of the INDISCO strategy is the demonstration of replicable models of tribal empowerment through pilot projects with the objective of promoting a rights-based approach to the Decent Work Agenda among the tribal peoples. This strategy is based on the ILO/DANIDA Policy Framework and is focused on fundamental rights, consultation, participation, development and self-management. The participatory approach was successfully demonstrated by first phase of small pilot projects across the tribal belt of India. These gave way to one expanded project in the tribal-dominant state of Orissa, testing a cluster approach to tribal cooperative enterprise. This method is based on the rationale that working with an ethnic unit of homogenous tribal communities would be more conducive to tribal cooperatives than an administrative unit.

1 In the words of Mr. Juan Somavia, ILO Director General: “the primary goal of the ILO today is to promote opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity.” This comprises the promotion of rights at work, equal employment opportunities, social protection and social dialogue.
Many lessons have been learned in the course of INDISCO work in India. From this, some of the best practices have been singled out. For instance, the following has been learned about employment strategies: In their individual capacities, tribal peoples are not able to withstand the fiercely competitive and exploitative market forces. The ability to counter these forces requires the empowerment that comes with exercising the right to organize, collective voice, representation and bargaining power. In turn, these require the suitable institutional structures needed to work. Building upon traditional village institutions to form self-help groups provides a good starting point. For the purpose of long-term sustainability of their own self managed enterprises, however, it becomes necessary to formalize them under a legally recognized framework. This framework must be member-based, democratic, professional, autonomous and accountable. It must provide better access to the benefits of support services, such as credit, business development, market linking, etc. Cooperatives are found to be the best form of organization as they are conducive to the tribal ethos of community solidarity, and mutual help within ethnically homogenous groups with common needs and uniform membership. These strengths can be capitalized upon to form self-supporting cooperatives which have the flexibility to include even the unskilled or semi-skilled and home-based workers and respond to the need to formalize the informal economy workers. (Tribals, as we know, belong to the poorest and most disadvantaged section of the informal sector).

The need for adequate capacity building in ensuring sustainable and professional self-management cannot be overemphasized. Training and awareness building methodologies based on traditional forms of song, drama and the visual arts, find greater acceptance and impact.

People identify with and are more receptive to frontline staff (extension workers, village animators) who have been chosen from within the community and consequently have the advantages of language, customs and belonging. Being relatively better educated, and suitably capacitated during the project period, they will also provide continuity and leadership in the management of the community cooperatives beyond this time.

From the start of any initiative, the people must be vested with ownership that includes informed participation and a consultative process. This ensures cultural compatibility in the choice of employment activities. (For instance, there is a tacit agreement about the economic utilization of certain natural resources by certain sections of the community, which an outsider cannot be expected to know.)

Economic enterprises based on traditional occupations and natural resources, with simple technological and skills upgradation and value addition at the primary level for better returns, are generally more popular. However, due to the pressures on land, the younger generations of tribals are open to try new skills and avenues for non-land based enterprises.

Tribals generally live from one day to the next and therefore look for quick monetary returns from their work. Any form of vocational skills training needs to bear this in mind, and secure some earnings while the training is in progress. Hence, linking up vocational training with production and marketing has better chance of success than just training as a standalone activity.
Having a personal stake in the enterprise, such as pooling of one's own savings for the capital investment, promotes its sense of ownership, accountability and success.

Women are generally found to be more receptive to ideas and concepts that are new to them (such as saving up for the future, adult literacy, cooperatives, etc). They tend to show greater foresight than their male counterparts, especially when they see benefits for their children and family. They therefore make active partners in the development process and in managing their cooperative enterprises. However, gender mainstreaming efforts need to include the men folk, especially village elders and opinion leaders, for there to be any change in perceptions.

The empowerment process of the tribal enterprises needs to include awareness of and access to the existing national programmes for their economic development, which are they are rightfully due.

With regard to Policy interventions, the lessons are summarized as follows:

- Policy interventions cannot be a standalone activity. Rather, they need to be channeled through the demonstration of concrete development activities on the ground, the translating of policy to practice, which in turn, can seek to influence the policy environment.

- Stakeholder consultations and responding to the stakeholder priorities make for meaningful participation and cooperation.

- It is important to institutionalize a process of social dialogue at all levels in order to bring grassroot perspectives to the notice of policy makers.

- The effective participation of ITPs in policy dialogue requires their all around empowerment. Addressing their vulnerabilities (such as extreme poverty, illiteracy, lack of organization and voice etc.) through an integrated rights-based approach is therefore an essential prerequisite.

- The promotion of ILO Convention no. 169 in India is faced with a number of challenges:
  - The size and diversity of the country accounts for differences in perspectives and disunity among ITP organizations. There is a need to consolidate the ITP organizations under one united umbrella federation.
  - ITP organizations engaged in advocacy of ILO Convention no. 169 are not recognized by the Government of India as being truly representative of the scheduled tribal population of the country. There is need to promote dialogue for better understanding between the two stakeholders.
  - The Government of India has objections to the terminology used in ILO Convention no. 169, such as ‘indigenous’, ‘right to self determination’ and the ‘right to land’, which are viewed as a threat to national solidarity.
  - Therefore, emphasis on the less controversial provisions of ILO Convention no. 169, such as the right to consultation, informed participation, preservation of
indigenous knowledge, occupations, cultures and institutions, is likely to find better acceptance and provide a starting point for a policy dialogue.

In conclusion, exercising the right to access to Decent Work, which is remunerative and productive as well as culturally compatible, includes recognition of the ITPs’ right to their land and natural habitat/ancestral domain, natural resources and intellectual property rights in practicing indigenous systems of sustainable resource management. All of these rights are advocated in the ILO’s policy on ITPs through its Convention 169. Traditional tribal skills, along with the empowerment that comes with the cooperative advantage, can be capitalized upon to develop niche markets for products that can be sold at a premium in the open market and thereby meet the challenges of globalization. The skills can thus be turned into economic opportunities to help the ITPs towards their inclusion in the mainstream economy.