

MSSRF International Women's Day Programme
Accelerating Gender Equality with Innovation: The MSSRF Experience
2.30 – 4.40 pm, 7 March 2023

Address by B. Shadrach, Director, Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia, New Delhi, India

Dr Soumya Swaminathan, Chairperson, MSSRF; Professor Nitya Rao, Trustee, MSSRF; Dr G Hariharan, Executive Director, MSSRF; Dr Rengalakshmi, Director, Ecotechnology, MSSRF; Ms Sangeetha Rajeesh, Director, Communications, MSSRF, grassroots champions from Odisha, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry, and Friends!

I am no stranger to MSSRF! I have a long association with the organization that started in 1998 with the Indev project.

A **pro-poor, pro-women, and pro-nature** approach has been MSSRF's ethos since its inception in 1988. By accelerating the use of modern science and technology for improving the lives and livelihoods of communities, the organisation has been addressing practical problems faced by rural citizens related to agriculture and livestock in a partnership mode. For 35 years, it has demonstrated the symbiotic relationship between science, policy and public action. In the MSSRF model of multi-stakeholder partnerships, communities are seen as important stakeholders, not as beneficiaries.

Land-to-Land, Land-to-Lab, Lab-to-Land, Lab-to-Lab model of communication and knowledge sharing is unique to MSSRF, which allows bottom-up and top-down; horizontal and vertical transfer of knowledge.

With these ethos, we launched the Open Knowledge Network in which we experimented with horizontal knowledge sharing between the farmers in India and other parts of the world and the vertical knowledge sharing between the people and their service providers. We demonstrated technology and its role very effectively.

The Village Knowledge Centre (VKC) movement conceived and implemented by MSSRF led to the following:

- A people led movement called, Mission 2007: Every village a knowledge centre programme
- Formulation of 5C formula for achieving results
- Birth of the Common Services Centres (CSC) scheme
 - o 250K entrepreneurs running the telecentres rather than community members.
 - o Could have benefitted 250M people through community ownership.

MSSRF's Jamshedji Tata National Virtual Academy and the initiation of Grameen Gyan Abhiyan envisioned:

- One woman and one man in each of the 6,00,000 villages, an army of more than one million rural knowledge workers
- The concept of academician that led to convocations attended by former President of India, Professor Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam
- The academician who would lead the grassroots knowledge movement, addressing the practical needs of the community, respecting pro-poor, pro-women and pro-nature principles.

Later, in 2015, the world discovered that these principles leading to lives and livelihoods are the founding pillars of the SDGs.

International Women's Day 2023

On the International Women's Day each year, we discuss topics of relevance that would lead us to take action ensuring gender equality and equity. This year, we focus on the theme, DigitALL: Innovation and Technology for Gender Equality.

- Exposes **the inequality** that persists with a view to addressing the same through local innovation and local solutions.
- Calls for addressing the various dimensions of inequality such as poverty, food security, education, life on earth, life in water, climate change, health, access to technology, livelihoods, decent work, skill development, etc.

Through its interventions, MSSRF has made a difference in the lives of more than 600K farming families, impacting their lives every day in over 18 nations, reaching the unreached!

We have heard from the key stakeholders themselves as to how their lives have changed and the livelihoods have improved.

It is now time to take a new leap from where we are at MSSRF. It is time to revisit the original models of creating a grassroots level knowledge movement. It is time for MSSRF to embrace a range of technologies – from the good old-tested radio as a knowledge sharing tool to the advanced tools, such as Artificial Intelligence tools and other technological innovations, what is referred to as the effects of the fourth industrial revolution.

What is happening in the world?

- Gender equality is recognised important towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. **Gender is a cross-cutting theme** although there is a specific goal – number 5 – is dedicated to measuring the progress being made.
- Gender concerns in all other 16 goals are extremely important; therefore, there is a need for disaggregating data on the progress being made through a gender lens, which is key to achieving holistic development and the overarching goal of the SDGs
- UN Women have come out with a report – Progress on Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2022 that highlights the current status.
- There is still a gender divide in technology – in access, capacity, skills, opportunities and ownership.
 - o Gender inequality in the above results in higher costs in achieving the SDGs and national priorities. Women's exclusion in the digital world has already resulted in one trillion loss in GDP in low and middle-income countries. By 2025, we will have lost another 1.5 trillion if we do not remedy the situation.
 - o A World Bank study says, bringing women from the marginalised societies rather than the elite systems to design solutions will yield quicker and faster results.
 - o Women's uptake of STEM carrier is an opportunity. There are only 22% of women in AI, which means that at least 28% have to be redeemed and conquered. By 2050, 75% of the jobs in the market will be STEM-based.
 - o Only 28% engineering graduates are women, which means another 22% are to be conquered.
 - o We need to tackle online violence against women, which are becoming rampant. Even the journalists are not spared, let alone adolescent girls and young women.

As recognised by CSW67 and the Summit of the Future in 2024, harnessing technology and innovation effectively will be a game-changer for women. They can **help reduce poverty, decrease hunger, enhance food security, boost health, improve energy access, mitigate climate change, address humanitarian crisis, make cities safer, make communities safer and make cities and communities sustainable.**

- Benefitting women would result in benefits to communities and the entire humanity. Making them lead from the front in all these would be the best solution to global problems; and this can begin at very local levels.
- NDTV has asked a few experts and drivers of change for their opinion. This included Ms Zarina Screwala and Ms Sangita Reddy and others. What Ms Sangita Reddy mentioned sounded interesting to me:
 - It is important to invest in education and future of jobs by popularising STEM in India;
 - We need to invest in enabling women's leadership, in terms of becoming an economic power.
 - From being heads of panchayats, we need to see them at the helm of all affairs, including that of leading workforce and the industry;
 - we need to provide business skills to promote women entrepreneurship and for becoming transformative change agents.

Professor Swaminathan always envisaged local leaderships in grassroots level knowledge workers - who would, on one hand, understand the needs of the people, the local conditions, local issues and problems and, on the other hand, intercede with knowledge systems for making knowledge-based decision-taking a possibility. His concept of knowledge workers has always been about the local people – women and men – using the power of scientific knowledge for addressing local needs.

In India, at Mini- and Micro-enterprise level:

- 6 Crore Units are operational
- 11 Crore people are involved
- 28% share of the GDP and 40% of exports
- Has been on the rise since 2006

And, in general:

- India requires 70M additional individuals of working age by 2023!
- 262M people above 30 yrs of age, forming India's labour force.
- While many are employed, they are to be made future-ready.
- Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) statistics are stunning – 75% say that they are more prepared while 79% feel confident.
- Women in gig economy offers potential. Out of 301.5M women who are not in the labour force, 229.2M are said to be attending to unpaid domestic work.
- India is among the top of countries facing greatest skill shortages – 64% shortage after Japan's 81%.

We need to convert each of our VKCs as skill development centres:

- For pursuing education through open schooling and open universities;
- For gaining skills for livelihoods.
- VKC managers can help to map the individuals in their villages and develop a skills inventory and see how the skills gap can be filled;

- See how each individual can be employed or supported with self-employment through their collectives – SHGs, FPOs, or small cooperatives.
- They can enroll community members in the academic bank of credits and get them certificates as collaterals for their livelihoods.