

## **THE FUNDING NETWORK REPORT**

### **SUMMARY**

The Grant of £6,459 from the Network received last October for funding Women's Self Help Group Training has been invaluable for the development of the now 1,500 plus groups that Social Change and Development (SCAD) have promoted in the rural poor villages in southern Tamil Nadu. This money has allowed a dramatic increase in the amount of training given to individual group members and leaders. To date the grant has funded 5,050 women training days, paid for off the job training for 5 new Trainers as well as for continuation training for a further 8 other trainers. Amazingly there is still another £1,100 left which will fund the training of another 5 Trainers and a further 640 training days for individual women group members.

### **REPORT**

#### **Background.**

Before the Funding Network grant SCAD, our partner organisation in Tamil Nadu, were struggling to provide the bare training minimum for the members of the Women's Self Help Groups (WSHG) that had been formed in the 400 plus villages that they worked in. The initial WSHGs had proved very popular and this created a big demand for more groups to be set up. On top of this SCAD were acutely aware that the partial State Government funding for such training was about to cease.

It was for these reasons that SCAD agreed to the setting up of over 500 new groups in 2003 making a total of 1,500 groups by the end of the year. This however presented the SCAD training team with a huge logistical problem. Just to cover initial basic training for the new groups plus extra training for group leaders was beyond their then resources. The Funding Network Grant came at a critical time to help the team over this intense period of demand.

#### **Importance of WSHG's.**

It is an established fact that change and development in the developing world is largely brought about by women. The problem with this is that traditionally women in developing countries are less educated and valued than men. So women tend to feel unworthy and powerless to make changes. Women's Self Help Groups are designed to overcome these disadvantages by empowering women to take more charge of their lives and to take more responsibility for the community that they live in.

#### **Importance of training of WSHG.**

Given the poor self image and education levels of most of the target population it is vital that basic training is given to all members in the responsibilities of group membership and the scope of groups. Other initial training is provided so that the women can understand and mobilise the resources available to them and to establish the need to save money and identify changes they wish to make in their village. Extra initial training is required for the group leader, deputy and treasurer so that the affairs of the group are properly carried out and recorded and that simple savings accounts are established. Other training is given at later dates on subjects such as women's development, women's health and nutrition, community organisation, problem solving, leadership, natural medicines etc. Selected women get a further weeklong entrepreneurial training. In ideal conditions the training for each group will be completed within a two and a half year period.

#### **The Quality of Training and Support.**

SCAD have always prided themselves on the quality of the services they supply to their client villages and this has been amply shown in the success of the WSHGs that they have trained. Research carried out by SCAD into the effectiveness of SCAD trained groups in comparison with thousands of other groups in Tamil Nadu has confirmed the high achievement of SCAD groups. In non-SCAD areas there is nowhere near the demand to set up WSHG's and where groups are established they tend to concentrate on saving and borrowing money to help group members and do not get much involved in improving the life of the village.

SCAD trained WSHGs on the other hand understand the importance of improving the life of everyone in their villages and are motivated to do something about it. In addition the failure level of Groups is markedly lower than elsewhere and their payback record on loans is exemplary. So much so that local Banks now consider that lending to SCAD WSHGs is the best sort of lending they can do. This is a far cry to four years ago when banks had to be coerced by Government to make funds available to the groups.

### **The Results**

Perhaps the most impressive success of the groups is that they engender a quite magical quality of mutual support and regard amongst their members as well as engendering great pride and joy in being a member of such a group. This shows itself in so many ways. Literate women voluntarily take on the task of teaching their less educated sisters to read and write. All sorts of emotional and practical support is provided to members who are in difficulties. Weekly attendance levels are high and the women are more than willing to lose money by giving up a day's work to attend training sessions to better themselves and the group. Most WSHGs have their own sari "uniform" which they proudly wear to group meetings and other ceremonies. Many WSHG groups go en masse to important meetings and celebrations such as on Women's International Day.

Within the village the groups identify the improvements and changes that need to be brought about and get cracking on it. In many of the SCAD villages group members form the backbone of support given to disadvantaged older men and women on the Elders programme. They see to it that the everyday needs of the those on the programme in their village are met. They get very involved in the education of all the children in their village. This may mean practically helping the hard-pressed teacher in the local school or convincing other parents of the importance of sending their children to school. It also means pressurising local government to upkeep and modernise schools and, when this often fails through lack of state money, they take matters into their own hands. Several State village Primary Schools have been renovated as a result of this. Other WSHG groups have campaigned for and obtained the first proper concrete toilet and washing blocks in their villages and have taken responsibility to maintain them to a very high order

The savings scheme and associated lending facilities are transforming the lives of group members. Having access for the first time to credit at reasonable rates of interest is making an enormous difference to them and their family members. They have been able to pay off local moneylenders, send their children to school and start up small businesses such as vending cup manufacture and natural health care preparations as well as more traditional undertakings such as tailoring and chicken, goat or cow rearing. At the end of 2003 there was one and a half million pounds sterling in circulation within the 1,500 SCAD groups and this amount is forecast to increase by at least 25% every year as loans revolve and savings increase.

Through SCAD's emphasis on empowerment women group members are now becoming involved at every level of village and local area life. They take full part in special interest village committees on subjects such as education, the environment, house building. They now involve themselves more fully in village administrative council meetings and women are now regularly elected to top leadership roles. Group members are getting involved in local politics too and at the last local elections 72 women were elected to serve as Councillors on local Panchayat's, the first rung of local government. This was unheard of previously.

### **Conclusion**

The growth and maturity of WSHGs is the primary vehicle for rapid and sustained change in the 400 villages SCAD, our partner organisation in Tamil Nadu, works in. The support given by the Funding Network has significantly contributed to this policy in the short and long term. This was achieved by funding the reduction of a rapidly growing backlog of essential training and thus accelerating the engine of positive change in the villages.

Murray Frankland  
Hon. Secretary, Salt of the Earth  
May 4<sup>th</sup> 2004

Enclosures. Photo of International Women's Day Celebrations  
Photo of WSHG vending cup manufacture  
List of WSHG of weekly oaths