



Workshop Narrative Report

Launch of

Towards a Feminist Solidarity Economy

Organised by

ActionAid Association (India)



Supported by

Global Partnerships Network





1. **Title:** Launch of Towards a Feminist Solidarity Economy: A Study of Women Cooperatives in Four States of India
2. **Date and Time:** Tuesday, 27th December 2022, 1:00 pm to 5:00 pm
3. **Location:** India International Centre, Delhi
4. **Background:**

At an ILO Conference in 2009, the social and solidarity economy was defined as a “concept designating enterprises and organizations, in particular cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, associations, foundations and social enterprises, which have the specific feature of producing goods, services and knowledge while pursuing both economic and social aims and fostering solidarity.” While there is no one definition of social solidarity economy and the term is relatively new, the idea of promoting collective economic activities rooted in the spirit of cooperation and good for all has been around for long in India’s development efforts. The path to cooperatives was laid out in the Constitution of India, which through the Directive Principles for State Policy, placed upon the state the responsibility to advance cottage industries on a cooperative basis, particularly in rural areas. However, quite like the promise of land reforms, cooperatives have remained confined to a few successes and a few states, despite the National Policy on Cooperatives and the passage of Multi-State Cooperative Societies Act in 2002. The creation of a new Ministry of Cooperation in 2021 has not yet led to any major push to encourage cooperatives or collective enterprise.

At least in part, community-rooted cooperatives have the potential to provide a viable solution to address challenges of inequality, while simultaneously creating economic growth. Social solidarity economy and the engine of cooperatives also provide an answer to one of the most fundamental problems of human history, which has become even more pronounced the past decades – the division between capital and labour. When workers become owners of their enterprises and initiatives, it multiplies several fold the economic and social benefits, especially dignity, they can derive from these collective efforts, and with inspirations and imageries they create for others to emulate.

“Towards a Feminist Solidarity Economy: A Study of Women Cooperatives in Four States of India” emerges out of a study that sought to assess the role of cooperatives in empowerment of women socially, economically, through control over own income, and

politically, through voting, participation in local governance and political representation. It, further, aims to investigate if co-operatives lead towards empowerment and change in the position of women in the community. Empowerment, as we understand, is a multi-dimensional process and inextricably related to gender inequality. This study sought to delve upon the factors contributing to women's empowerment through co-operative movement. It also looks at the issue through the subject hood of the most dispossessed women.

5. Program Schedule:

Time	Session	Resource Persons
1:00 pm onwards	Registration	
1:15 pm to 2:00 pm	Lunch	
2:00 pm to 2:15 pm	Welcome Remarks	Prem Ranjan, Head of Policy and Research Unit, ActionAid Association
2:15 pm to 3:00 pm	Presentation of Findings from "Towards a Feminist Solidarity Economy: A Study of Women Cooperatives from four States of India	Dr Varsha Ganguly, Professor, Institute of Law, NIRMA University (Principal Investigator of the study)
3:00 pm to 4:00 pm	Reflections on the Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Savitri Singh, Deputy Chief Executive, National Cooperative Union of India Dipali Sharma, Director HR-OE Programmes and Partnership, ActionAid Association Malini Nambiar, Senior Manager-Partnerships, ActionAid Association
4:00 pm to 4:30 pm	Open Discussions	
4:30 pm onwards	Tea	

6. Workshop Proceedings and Key Takeaways:



Figure 1: Mr Prem Ranjan welcoming all and setting the context

The workshop began with Mr Prem Ranjan, Head of Policy and Research, ActionAid Association welcoming all participants. He set the context for the workshop by presenting the scenario of the cooperative sector in India. There are a total 5.03 lakh cooperative societies in India with a combined membership of 210 million. With a network stretching through the entire breadth of rural India, 21.7% of India's population are members of cooperatives. Cooperatives account for 46.31% of the total agricultural credit and 23.5% of the total fertiliser production across the country. This has been achieved through the institution of 21 national-level, 361 State-level, and 2,572 district-level cooperative federations in the country.



Figure 2: Launch of the Report

Dr Varsha Ganguly then presented the objectives, methodology and findings of the study. There were two broad objectives of the research:

- To assess the role of cooperative societies in empowerment of women belonging to marginalised communities socially, economically (control over own income), and politically, through participation in the cooperative movement in India.
- To investigate whether empowerment of women takes place through better access to information, skills, training, and their leadership in management of the cooperatives of which they are a part.

A total of five cooperatives from four states were covered under the study. These include Mahasakthi Mutually Aided Cooperative Federation from Andhra Pradesh; New Bihar Multi-purpose Women Development Cooperative Society from Bihar; Waghodia Women Credit Cooperative Ltd. and Shree Sangam Mahila Bachat Ane Dhiran Sahakari Mandali Ltd. from Gujarat; and Swarbhatri Women's Mutually Aided Cooperative Thrift Society from Telangana.

The data collection was done between December 2020 and January 2021. This included focus Group Discussions covering around 80 individuals and in-depth interviews of key informants from across the different areas under study.



Figure 3: Dr Varsha Ganguli introducing and discussing the study

Major findings emerging out of this research include:

- Cooperatives as a way of economic empowerment – The study states that women who were part of the various cooperatives reported increased income, expansion of livelihood opportunities, reduction in debt and increase in savings and assets.
- Cooperatives as a way of capacity development – Respondents reported increased financial literacy and money management skills as well as expansion of livelihood in newer non-farm activities. They also reported increased awareness on health and nutrition, government schemes and their civil and political rights.
- Cooperatives as a mode of women's agency - These women also reported enhanced self-esteem, recognition of their self-identity and increased participation in household decision making. The enhanced agency also impacted their role in

community development and increased political participation at the panchayat level.

- Cooperatives as a mode of social solidarity – The cooperatives have had effects beyond the economic empowerment of the women members by creating a collective space where women can come forward and discuss issues of social and gender injustice. The collective power of these women have led them to address issues of domestic violence, caste based discrimination, as well as education and prevention of early marriage for their daughters.



Figure 4: Ms Savitri Singh giving her reflections on the study

Ms Savitri Singh, Deputy Chief Executive, National Cooperative Union of India applauded this in-depth multi-state study and its encouraging findings, calling it a “*valuable research*.” She requested ActionAid Association to ensure the reach of this important learning document among communities at the grassroots, through copies translated in local languages. On this occasion, Ms Singh also assured cooperatives from across the country of her support to help conduct trainings. She stated that the NCUI celebrates ‘The



Cooperative Week' every year from November 14th to 20th with an objective of highlighting the achievements of the Cooperative Sector in various sectoral areas and chalking out future strategies of growth based on dynamics of Cooperative development in each sector. During this week they organise a fair cum flea-market at the NCUI headquarters in Delhi where women cooperatives from across the country participate to exhibit and sell their products.

Ms Dipali Sharma, Director, OE Programmes and Partnerships, ActionAid Association, thanked all guests for their participation and inputs. Addressing the gathering, she talked about the injustices and precarity faced by dispossessed communities, which has just worsened amid the ongoing climate crisis. She also shared how the process of workers becoming owners of their enterprises multiplies the economic and social benefits. Subsequently, she elaborated on ActionAid Association's efforts from across states focused towards promoting not just social but also ecological justice – through social solidarity economy and the engine of cooperatives.