

A visitor of Toronto Canada -Kathrin's Reflections on Project with Young Peoples in Karauli

Spending a week in Karauli was a wonderful opportunity. With the guidance of NIRA, I was able to learn and experience a great deal about life in rural Rajasthan. I was introduced to people from every walk of life, while also gaining exposure to a variety of development projects. That experience allowed me to add to the growing list in my head, where I keep an imaginary catalogue of ideas regarding successful methods and approaches to development. I noted many positive elements during my week long tour of NIRA's field operations. Some of those experiences were new to me, while others reinforced speculations I had already made regarding past experiences of development practice.

Personally, I had never before had the privilege of visiting a health camp and so was interested to examine this method of organizing and distributing development assistance. I was pleased to learn that such a variety of services was offered at the camp, and also pleasantly surprised to learn that it was a government initiative. I can easily see how such a camp could serve as an effective, economically-sound method for distributing a much needed service to a large number of people. I also noted how important it would be to ensure that the event was well-advertised and that any relevant transportation challenges were thoughtfully considered. This would facilitate taking full advantage of the camp and the resources made available through its organization, consequently maximizing the benefit to the population at large. In terms of sustainability, it would also be important to devise a strategy for long-term care, including supplementary medication distribution whenever necessary.

This project also opened my eyes to some ways in which governments and NGOs can learn from and help each other. Without this experience, I would have most likely only considered such camps in the context of their use for NGOs. Instead, I now see that such "camps" could also be a way for governments to help realize their unfulfilled responsibility to adequately provide certain social services. In Canada we have a free health care system, which the majority of the population considers to be one of the most important features of our social welfare structure. Though it is a highly prized service, our health care system is far from perfect and suffers from a number of set backs, for example long waiting lists for critical operations and lack of medical care in remote areas of the country (of which there are many). It would be interesting to consider the idea of health camps in a Canadian context, and also the potential to organize similar camps for other development purposes.

During my time in Karauli, I also attended a number of community meetings related to various issues, i.e. **female feticide, youth education, migrants & sex workers, sexually transmitted infections, and health rights advocacy**. Though my limited knowledge of Hindi prevented me from understanding these meetings completely, I was happy to simply observe what I could. Listening to some quick translations gave me a general idea of what was going on, and the interaction among participants and facilitators hinted at the rest. One of the things that I noticed at these meetings was the level of respect and

comfort which seems to exist among everyone involved. The NIRA staff and its volunteers appear to have established good working-relationships with their beneficiaries, thus creating a friendly and open environment conducive to constructive discussion.

Just as the atmosphere of these meetings was comfortable and casual, the way in which they came together was also informal. As a Canadian, I couldn't help but wonder in amazement at how these meetings would magically organize themselves within half an hour of our arrival. The fact that a 'gori' had just arrived in the village probably helped significantly in quickly spreading the news, but I can nevertheless state with absolute certainty that an NGO in Canada would never have been able to accomplish pulling together impromptu meetings like that. I admire this ability, yet I wonder if it would ever work in Canada. Without regularity, advance planning, and a certain amount of punctuality, attendance at any meeting in Canada would likely be very poor.

The intimate environment which allows these meetings to come together and be conducted with such ease has other implications as well. It means that, though these initiatives are conducted as several relatively small-scale projects, or rather because of that fact, each person who is exposed to the project can be more directly involved and personally affected by it. From what I could tell, the programs run by NIRA made a difference in the lives of those who attended those meetings. At the very least, they were exposed to important information regarding health and empowerment, often for the first time. In certain cases, the affect has been much more significant, such as for the women who have formed self-help groups with NIRA's assistance and thus begun to establish a certain level of economic stability. These micro-finance initiatives help to address the economic insecurity which acts as one of the fundamental traps in the cycle of poverty. Though NIRA's main objectives focus on health, self-help groups are a good example of one way in which the organization promotes holistic development, which is another aspect of the organization's work that I admire. Their hope for expanding the Youth Information Centres to include employment resources is another such example.

Though I applaud the concept of holistic development, one thing I have learned is that, while always keeping that principle in mind, it is also important to choose certain focus areas and to develop some goals regarding those initiatives. To this end, yearly and even 5-year plans can be helpful. This type of planning is a good way to maintain focus, ensure that the organization and its staff are constantly moving forward, and also that everyone is envisioning the same objectives. With certain targets in mind (i.e. a certain number of groups formed, workshops organized, meetings held, reports written, etc...), it is easy to evaluate the productivity and success of the team and helps keep everyone on track. This also makes yearly reporting easier, as targets have already been established and it only remains to assess whether these aims have been met. In terms of reporting, it is important to review documents to ensure that all charts are completed and that figures have been referenced. The level of English used in NIRA's reports is generally quite acceptable, however it is always good to keep moving forward and thus reviewing for mistakes and asking others to do the same is essential in trying to improve language skills.

Overall, I feel that my experiences with NIRA have highlighted the importance of genuine human interaction. Seeing the way in which NIRA staff and volunteers interact with the beneficiaries confirms my opinion that constructive relationships are one of the cornerstones of successful development initiatives. I only wish that NIRA could employ more field staff so that such meetings and community interaction could occur on a more regular basis. I have thoroughly enjoyed my time in Rajasthan and I have no doubt that NIRA and its entire wonderful staff is to thank. In addition to learning a great deal, I very much appreciate the warm and friendly welcome which made me feel at home. My heartfelt thanks to each and every person who has made my visit so wonderful; I look forward to keeping in touch with everyone.

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