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Discussion Paper BRIEFS

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Discussion Paper 180

Scaling Up Kudumbashree—Collective Action for Poverty Alleviation and Women's Empowerment

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Inspired by the innovations in participatory development in the early and mid-1990s, the Government of Kerala initiated Kudumbashree in 1998 to alleviate poverty in the state by 2008 by empowering women through collective action. To facilitate collective action, Kudumbashree focuses on formation and capacity building of three-tiered community-based organizations (CBOs) of poor women known as community development societies (CDS).

Purpose of This Report

This paper analyzes factors that enabled or constrained the scaling-up of Kudumbashree. It also discusses potential threats to and trade-offs of scaling-up. The data are drawn primarily from the available literature and from qualitative data collected during a visit to Kudumbashree and its urban and rural CBOs in three southern districts of Kerala.

The Scaling-Up of Kudumbashree

The Pilot. In 1991, the Government of Kerala, along with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), initiated the Community-Based Nutrition Program (CBNP) in urban Alleppey town to improve the health and nutritional status of children and women. CBNP facilitated collective action by forming and developing the capacity of three-tiered CDS, the members of which were exclusively women. Women from families identified as poor, using a nine-point non-income-based index, were organized into neighborhood groups (NHG) of 20–45 families. Each group elected a five-member committee to develop, coordinate, and facilitate community development and action plans. NHG were federated at the ward level as area development societies (ADS), and these, in turn, were federated at the municipal level as CDS. By 1994, the CDS approach was extended to the rural areas of Malappuram, one of the 90 most underdeveloped districts in India.

Kudumbashree. Based on the positive experiences in urban Alleppey, and subsequently in rural

Malappuram, in 1998 the government of Kerala scaled up the program to cover the entire state under the name Kudumbashree. Kudumbashree is an interdepartmental initiative with staff deputed from 19 line departments. Kudumbashree employs four key strategies to promote community development: convergence of various government programs and resources at the CDS level, participatory antipoverty planning and implementation, formation of thrift and credit societies, and the development and nurture of microenterprises.

Kudumbashree's scaling-up has been more than geographic. From primarily a pilot to improve nutritional status of mothers and children, it evolved into a multisectoral poverty alleviation program, scaling up functionally. And by facilitating empowerment of women's CBOs and concurrently devolving resources and power to localities, the program scaled up politically. Its organizational scaling-up includes forming partnerships with diverse institutions including banks, universities, and an increasing number of government departments.

Factors Enabling and Constraining Scaling-Up

Enabling Factors. An enabling environment—especially decentralization and the concurrent devolution of finances to the local government bodies (LGBs)—was

critical in scaling up Kudumbashree. The CDS structures are now considered as a further step to decentralization. As the CDS structures are affiliated with the LGBs, their financial sustainability is ensured through various modalities, e.g., convergence and earmarked assistance to women's self-help groups. The unique sociopolitical context of Kerala, coupled

with leadership of a few motivated and innovative officials, was key in both the decentralization and scaling-up processes.

Kudumbashree is an interdepartmental initiative, which makes it conducive for a multisectoral response to poverty alleviation. Other institutional arrangements,

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such as partnerships with the central government and the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), continue to play a role in an expanded response to poverty alleviation through CDS structures. Training and capacity building of the LGBs and the CBOs have been identified as critical in building ownership.

Constraining Factors. Two factors initially constrained the scaling-up process. The government initially wanted to include all women, not just those below the poverty line in the CDS structures. Negotiations between various stakeholders delayed scaling up by over a year. Many LGBs resisted strengthening of the CBOs, which were perceived as a threat to authority. This still continues to be a problem in some locations.

The potential threats and trade-offs include a shrinking focus on maternal and child health and nutrition issues and an increasing preoccupation with microenterprise initiatives. Mandatory group formation coupled with rapid expansion compromised the quality of training, posing a threat to sustainability of collective action. The current community development and action plans lack a wider, long-term development perspective. As CDS structures are affiliated to LGBs, they may be as weak or as strong as the LGB itself and the CDS structures are vulnerable to political interference. The NHG volunteers perceive themselves as working for the government, expecting remuneration. The CDS structures themselves may become bureaucratic, signs of which are already evident.

Other Key Findings. There are no explicit exit strategies. There is an implicit assumption that once Kudumbashree facilitates the capacity building of CDS structures, the CDSs will be ready to take over.

Kudumbashree has not yet analyzed the feasibility of such a handover and started making explicit plans for such transformation.

Conclusion and Discussion

Empowerment of women and poor women driving their development is a powerful strategy to alleviate poverty. The Kudumbashree CBOs act as social safety nets, increasing access to entitlements and providing avenues for political participation. However, there has not yet been a serious attempt at evaluating the impact of Kudumbashree. An impact evaluation has not been built into the program design. A monitoring system that tracks not only the outputs (the current focus of the Kudumbashree monitoring system) but also the quality of participation and outcomes are key to improved programming. Impact evaluation at three levels, consistent with the objectives, is essential: poverty alleviation in terms of income, assets, and human development; participation (and its quality); and empowerment. These systems should be coupled with processes to act on the findings.

The key challenge for the scaled-up Kudumbashree is to move beyond its preoccupation with credit and microenterprise and stay true to its mission of alleviating multiple causes and consequences of poverty through women's empowerment.

Keywords: scaling-up, women, empowerment, poverty, collective action, Kerala, India

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