

# India: Self Employed Women's Association

*The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India began by running childcare centres for women working in the informal sector, who needed centres that flexibly met their needs. It shifted from simply providing a valuable service to women, to focusing on high quality childcare; and the programme has expanded rapidly in reaction to massive demand while still holding quality. This article discusses techniques and tools that have been and are being developed and employed as SEWA – a strong, well established and effective organisation – has used the Effectiveness Initiative (EI) and its processes to improve its approaches and operations.*

SEWA has used the outcomes of its involvement in the EI to strengthen its own capacity and its operational competence. This is parallel to what has happened in the Philippines (page 22), and in Portugal (page 32). In doing so, SEWA has employed a variety of techniques to identify needs for training and for tools to support the development of expertise among the childcare workers.

## *Teachers' diaries*

Teachers now write daily diaries that are then shared with others at a monthly in-service meeting. While at the present time these are somewhat limited in terms of what is included in the diary, SEWA expects to support a gradual evolution of this tool to centre more on activities and issues. One current restriction is that writing is not a common activity for the childcare

providers; it will take time before they can record in a more meaningful way.

## *Participatory Learning and Action (PLA)*

PLA tools have generated a very positive response from the SEWA EI team. So far they have used pie charts (here they are called roti charts) and matrices. One use of the roti chart technique included parents who, together with staff, looked at the costs of running childcare, breaking these down into the various items that need to be paid for. They then looked at how much (the slices of the roti) was paid for by parent fees and government subsidies, and this revealed the gap that had to be covered from other sources. One of the immediate outcomes was that the parents decided the fees needed to be raised from 15 Rupees they were paying per month to 20 Rupees. The staff felt that these visual techniques were extremely useful with

parents and teachers, and are planning to use more of them.

## *Local committees*

To strengthen work in the individual centres, committees of local people have been formed. Members have been trained in how to operate a centre (for example: how to keep track of funds; manage the centre; operate a quality programme; and so on). These committees have been strengthened considerably, and are gaining skills to become much more self-reliant in operational terms. However, given the economics of the populations that the centres serve, they are unlikely to ever become sustainable economically.

## *Technical Teams*

To support the development of training activities, Technical Teams have been created. These consist of supervisors,

leaders of the unions of women who are associated with childcare, and SEWA staff. The teams develop future activities, and oversee the training and in-service process. They meet monthly and, in addition to handling routine administrative concerns, pertinent topics from field experience are presented and discussed.

## *Spearhead Teams*

To complement the Technical Teams, existing Spearhead Teams have been employed to strengthen the women's unions and help to guide their activities. The composition of the Spearhead Teams is 80 percent union members and 20 percent SEWA staff.

## *Children's profiles*

Histories of children's involvement in the centres are now being supplemented with photographs. This will help SEWA

to follow some of these children over time, since they will have a photographic record of who the child was when he/she began in the programme. Mothers have responded to this very enthusiastically.

### *Tracer activities*

SEWA is undertaking a number of initiatives to follow-up children who have been through its centres. One of these is to look at how children are doing in terms of schooling following their experience in the childcare centres. To get a gross measure of tracing, SEWA staff organised two 'melas' (fairs) in which all the children who had 'graduated' from the centres came together for a day of games and celebration. Many hundreds attended.

Linked to this – and to the children's profiles – is work by an American post-graduate student on placement with SEWA to tell the stories of eight children. This will include a write up of who the child is, the kind of family the child comes from, and so on; and will be accompanied by photos of the child at home and in school.

Although this follow-up of children is only operating at a fairly simple level at the moment, there is the potential for a more systematic tracing of children who

participated in the programme. This would need a full-fledged project. One challenge is that SEWA has no baseline data on the children who have passed through its centres, nor do they have comparison possibilities, since they would have no access to villages where the children did not go to a childcare centre. However SEWA is beginning a programme for adolescent girls in new villages, and it will gather profiles of these girls' histories when they enter the programme. This might provide indications of what would have happened to the SEWA children if they had not participated in the SEWA childcare programme.

### *Nutrition campaign*

As part of its EI participation, SEWA looked at children's nutritional records in the centres. They discovered several things: that some teachers were using the growth scale inaccurately and so had a poor sense of the children's nutritional status; and that some teachers were good at collecting the data, but did not know what to do with the results. In several centres there was, in fact, a negative growth curve for many children. SEWA responded by having staff who were known to families stay with a number of them for 24 hours and record the quality and quantity of food available, how it was cooked, the

families' eating patterns, and how the food was distributed. They discovered:

- that the food was balanced nutritionally, but there was not enough of it;
- that the family never ate together – in fact, men and boys ate first, followed by women and girls; and
- that food was distributed unequally, with men and boys getting most, and women and girls getting the remainder.

As a result, SEWA is beginning a nutrition campaign to make people more aware of how they can prepare their current foods in a more nutritional way, and to encourage families to eat together and share food more equitably.

### *Work with children in times of disaster*

There have been two major disasters during the time the EI has been in place. In fact SEWA talks about the timing of the EI as beginning with a major cyclone and taking root at the time of a major earthquake – two interesting elements in a timeline! EI participation, and the kinds of processes that go with it, were therefore in play as SEWA gained a mass of experience in what providing childcare can mean in a time of disaster. Two key areas of interest here are bringing services and some 'normality'

to children's lives, and the ways in which childcare can become the focus for community activities. In both disasters, SEWA centres became central points for food distribution, feeding, and health services. In addition, they served as 'schools' when the formal schools were destroyed. Older children joining in the activities in the centres created a kind of child-to-child effect.

### *Policy actions*

After a year and a half of working with India's Central Welfare Board, SEWA has convinced them that childcare centres that charge fees should also be eligible to receive state aid, if the population being served is unable to pay the full costs of the service. This has set a precedent.

### *Pay and working conditions*

SEWA is committed to, and working towards, paying its childcare workers India's national minimum wage and bringing working hours into line with the needs of working women.

Overall, participation in the EI has given SEWA new ways to look at its work. It has created tools and processes that have generated an on-going process of reflection, leading to new and more effective actions. ○