

Skills development & enhancement for the unorganised sector

1 Introduction

Till a few years ago, most studies on skills training, work and employment have confined themselves basically to describing policies and programmes which were implemented by the government. Most studies mentioned the relatively low coverage, quality and efficiency of the Indian vocational training and education as well as the apprentice system (GOI 2001/2002; Mamgain/Awasthi, 2001). However, recent reports have shown a certain shift at the policy level mentioning that the Government has indicated the need for reforms for employment related skills formation and vocational training. As per the recommendation of the National Commission of Labour (NCL) and task forces of the Planning Commission (GOI, 2001/2002), India requires a much more efficient and responsive training system, which interacts more vividly with the markets, so that training and skills standards are adequate for the requirements of the workforce to be able to stand the chance of being absorbed and re-employed in the increasingly competitive labour markets in India and internationally. A flexible vocational training and education system needs to be developed which reflects the market changes and provides the space for workers to switch between work and training as per their requirements be it in the organised or the unorganised sector. Continuous learning is the main requirement for the modern worker who at the same time should be multi-skilled and team oriented, as well as capable to flexibly anticipate and adjust to changes (GOI, 2003).

The Government is aware of the low skills levels of the average Indian worker and has given priority on skills and education of the workforce in the years to come. According to NSSO data, a mere 10% of the male and even less (6.3%) of the female workers have marketable skills (GOI, 2001). Even more disturbing were the basic literacy statistics of the Indian labour force for the year 1999-2000: 44% of the Indian labour force is illiterate and the same is the case for 69% of all women in the labour force. More than 66% percent of the Indian workforce has not attained secondary or higher education: for women, the percentage is even higher at 75%. Less than 33% of the workforce has attained secondary level and above, which would be the level of education required for further vocational training or education. However, even out of these 33% only a minor share passes secondary school, which reveals the high levels of drop out during secondary education.

Social exclusion of the unorganised work force from education and vocational training is systemic

Mainly two aspects are most crucial when we discuss the low educational levels of the Indian workforce: not only that access to quality education, one of the basic premises for the development of a professional workforce, has been exclusive but also vocational training, given the small number of seats available and the selection process and criteria defined by the training institutions which would entitle a student to utilise the these training facilities. In fact, the vocational training institutions provided by the government have had difficulties to meet the training demand of the emerging work force being accessible to only a selected number of students who even passed at least level 10 and 10+ (in a few trades less than 10th standard is required). With a mere 5 percent of the Indian labour force in the age category between 20-24, who have obtained vocational training, India lies far behind the international average, where for instance Korea excels with 96 percent or Mexico with 28 percent or Botswana with 22 percent respectively (GOI, 2003: 11).¹

Consequently, it can be said that with the exception of some vocational training in poverty alleviation programmes, the government and other training agencies "play an insignificant role in the development of the informal sector skills" (Mamgain/Awasthi, 2001)...” and are in many instances not very effective for poverty alleviation and employment generation. Training for workers in the unorganised sector so far has mainly been imparted by NGOs and member based organisations (e.g. trade unions or cooperatives) or through traditional forms of skills transfer through master craft men, on-the-job training and training within the family or community outside the formal training system. One often quoted reason, why training was confined only to the organised sector and thus was exclusively accessible to secondary level students, has been the implicit assumption of the development model dominant during the last decades that the unorganised sector workforce would be absorbed by the organised sector during the process of industrialisation.

The recently released reports on labour and training reforms mentioned above reflect an overall shift in conceptual thinking when it comes to policy making, focusing on the importance of meeting the training needs of the overall workforce and the unorganised sector workforce in particular through a competency based training approach (CBT). Section II of this paper

¹These estimates of skills and competencies need not be taken as absolute truth as they don't necessarily reflect the competency levels of the Indian labour force since skills in this particular context are confined to certification and qualifications by schools and training institutions, and not necessarily to the competency on-the-job.

discusses the CBT approach more in detail within the context of the existing discussion in India and explores the potential of CBT to meet the skill requirements of the entire Indian workforce (this includes the unorganised sector workers). It is discussed that CBT has many advantages as well as limitations when it comes to the unorganised sector and the overall main intention of training and education: more self-directedness of workers at work which would also encourage conscious and self-directed decision making at the workplace and consequently in their lives.

Section III proposes an alternative approach of learning, which is rooted in humanistic and more integrated continuous learning for adult workers. The learning approach is sensitive to their particular needs and requirements and focuses particularly on the working poor, the weakest group of the unorganised sector. Given the generic perspective and flexibility of the approach, it is argued here, it can easily be adopted for the entire unorganised sector and even be a powerful model for the organised sector workforce, since it does not limit itself to a micro-perspective of learning, but has an institutional structure and an inbuilt process for monitoring and audit that ensures an organic way of continuous learning for everyone open to learn at an individual and group level. Learning as it will be shown, gets a different meaning, as it happens everywhere and anyone who has a particular skill, can become a resource person. Within this institutional framework, learning becomes systemic and recognised.

Finally, section IV describes first experiences made and challenges encountered by MAYAORGANIC, a market oriented development model for poverty alleviation which has been implemented by MAYA.² MAYAORGANIC proposes an institutional framework, which incorporates both the market perspective and the learning model, while challenging and re-defining existing relationships be it at the educational and vocational training system level or at the production and labour system level. Both forms of social exclusion - no access to education and vocational training on one side and no decent work in the labour market on the other - have contributed to the perpetuation of different forms of poverty of which low skills and productivity and exploitation in the unorganised labour market are only a few to be named. MAYAORGANIC being sensitive to both these aspects is a proposition for effective poverty alleviation and social change.

II Competency Based Training

1. What is CBT?

CBT is not a new approach but has gained popularity in the last two decades. Highly valued for its focus on industry requirements, it has become the dominant approach to effectively promote multi-skilling in national vocational training and education systems in many newly industrialising and industrialised countries.³ This particularly, as today, where markets have become saturated and where the competitive advantage of industries does not lie only in quantities of production (economies of scales) and low cost aspects but on flexible supply and high quality (economies of scope): *“At a given moment, quality became central to the creation of competitive advantage in the market and started to become the basis for competitiveness -productivity strategies on a wide scale.”* (Mertens, 1999:11) In consequence, competition is no longer based on production related advantages but on organisational advantages and innovations, where production and services change flexibly according to customer’s requirements. Therefore, the capacity of the organisation and the workforce to adjust to changes has become the most important factor in a company. Knowing how to identify, solve and treat new upcoming problems, therefore the ability to learn and adjust is the company’s advantage and therefore competency. The following section concentrates on particular aspects of CBT, which the authors consider as useful for the further argument of this article. The short description of CBT and some critical points are therefore not exhaustive.

Shift from qualification to competency

Qualifications usually have been associated with the capabilities an individual has acquired during school and further education for the purpose of fulfilling a certain job and function in an effective way. It can be defined *“...as the potential capacity to carry out or realise tasks corresponding to certain jobs or activities”* (Mertens, 1999: 63). In many instances qualifications and school certificates were the requirements for basic and further education and training in a particular activity. The training system and labour market, being highly exclusive and oriented towards certification and school based qualifications has regarded competency as equal to qualification. Increasingly, the perception of qualification has changed towards an understanding that a focus on competencies would rather encourage continuous learning, which, it is assumed, is more holistic and self-directed and supportive to learn at the work place.

²MAYA’s main focus of the last 14 years was on the eradication of child labour. How the perspective on child labour has changed towards a systemic understanding of child labour where livelihood issues in households and community are essential for the eradication of child labour can be read on www.mayaindia.org.

³ Countries which have developed national vocational training policies with the CBT approach are USA, UK, Australia, France, Malaysia, South Africa and many more. CBT has been applied in many different ways, emphasising either the behaviourist approach (e.g. USA), or the functional approach (e.g. UK) and finally the constructivist approach (e.g. France). For further discussion see Mertens, 1999).

Competency refers to a set of knowledge and abilities which ensure that an individual arrives at pre-defined results, therefore allowing a person to find different solutions and ways of reaching this particular result. On-the-job learning becomes crucial and functions and results are more relevant than qualifications or mere fulfilment of tasks by the workforce. Competency goes beyond the mere specialisation of a person in a particular activity but enhances capabilities which enable a person to switch between industries and firms more effectively (transferability). *“It is the real capacity to achieve an objective or result in a given context.refers to the real capacity of the individual to dominate the set of tasks that make up the concrete function.concentrate more on the possibilities of the individual and on his capacity to mobilise and develop these possibilities in concrete and evolving work situations, which takes us away from the classic job description.... The concept, already rich in ambiguities, is charged with new meaning, arouses curiosity, performs multiple functions and is generalised in diverse settings.”* (Mertens, 1999:63)

Shift from supply-driven, curriculum based training towards demand-driven, modular training

The traditional vocational training and education systems stand for not being very sensitive to the market requirements and have been criticised for their lack of flexibility and facing difficulties in coping with the continuous changes in the labour markets. In today's context, the development of curricula is an almost futile exercise, since whatever material is developed for training, is already outdated when it enters the market. The result is that in many instances students have not acquired the skills required to could ensure access to regular employment in the organised sector. The main advantages of CBT lie in the continuous involvement of the industry in developing and re-defining modules and standard setting for training which is both classroom-based and on-the-job (GOI, 2003).

Shift from certification to assessment as benchmark for improvement of personal competency

Another advantage of CBT lies in the process of how individual competency is assessed. Given that competencies are a set of attributes to be assessed and valued, assessment is not absolute but indicates a benchmark of knowledge a worker has acquired so far. Instead of absolute marks and standards which have been defined by external institutions and qualify or disqualify a person, the assessment invites the individual to reflect on his/her performance and develop the capabilities to move towards the identified objectives. The assessment is transparent and encourages the workforce to learn and improve their competency. Learning therefore gains a new meaning, being a part of a continuous process, contributing to institutional learning and the achievement of an enterprise's objectives.

2 Limitations of CBT

CBT has also been criticised in many areas for not fulfilling the desired objectives of training: to make a worker more responsible and self-directed, while making use of his/her knowledge to adapt to changes and new challenges at the work place itself.

Reductionist approach, missing out on life skills

Educators criticised that humanistic aspects of education, which can be subsumed in life related, attitudinal and other generic aspects which are important for work related competency - such as conceptual thinking and experimental knowledge, communication - have been overlooked, since the focus was too much on industry-specific learning at the work place⁴. There is the tendency that learning has become fragmented, narrow and rigid; limiting its intention to be instrumental for the workplace requirement of the enterprise. *“The checklist approach, in which a competency is achieved/not achieved or a person can/cannot perform a particular task is considered simplistic and demotivating, suggesting a ‘minimum’ level of acceptable performance rather than a standard of excellence.”* (Kerka, 1998:2).

Flexible enough to meet the requirements for trainees to ensure continuous learning?

No one would deny the positive move of the Indian government towards a more demand-oriented and flexible vocational training and education system approach. However, the draw back lies in the approach itself which it is claimed here will miss out on the main intention of training and education: to equip the workforce with the capability to identify changes, reflect on the work quality and be more self-directed when it comes to decisions which would encourage a person to take conscious steps which are in favour of change. Instead, though students' skills might be more applicable and useful for them to find employment in the labour market, there is the danger that training methods will again result in courses, passing exams and certifications which are often based on outdated training modules and assessment tools, where students will not be interested in the learning process and therefore competency to identify, solve and analyse problems but in acquiring the qualification that would increase their chances in the labour market. This process does not turn students into the expected professionals the market is waiting for: a well informed, competent and self-driven work force, which is intrinsically interested to improve and refine existing skills towards a better understanding of the subject and therefore better performance in an enterprise.

⁴ See for instance some evaluation reports on CBT in Australia on <http://www.ncver.edu.au>.

Applicable for the unorganised sector?

CBT has been discussed to be a powerful approach which can reach out to the so far excluded unorganised sector. Till now however, there is no empirical evidence which would put a light on the practicality of this approach for this particular group. It is indeed a challenge to see how CBT will be applied to the unorganised sector, given that CBT is strongly focused on industries, where learning happens within given timings and at a workplace in an enterprise and where it is assumed that the work force is regularly employed and works in decent work premises. In India, where more than 92 percent of the workforce is active in the unorganised sector, such a work culture does not exist for the majority of the workforce.

Though the competency based training approach is more flexible and dynamic than traditional training and does not rely on qualifications but on results being achieved as measurable outcomes, the question is how learning, standards and certification would be imparted in a way so that access to training and learning for workers on a continuous basis on one hand and market relevant knowledge acquisition on the other is ensured. Another question is how skills and knowledge transfer can become effective for unorganised sector workers so that they can make use of their newly acquired capabilities, when life related issues (e.g. literacy and numeracy) are not incorporated in the process of learning. As mentioned earlier, a significant part of the unorganised sector does not have the numeracy and literacy skills which are required for many professional activities, nor is the working environment conducive for any organised way of living or learning. Given the irregularity of work and therefore income insecurity, planning of life careers and further continuous training will become an almost futile and non-affordable exercise for the workforce unless the methodologies and delivery of training and education are not related to their reality. In professions where higher education is required, life is more structured; work and life are easier separable than in poorer and low skilled sections of the unorganised sector. What can be seen is that work skills and life perspectives are closely linked to each other and shaped by the environment people live in. It is therefore not surprising that personal aspirations of workers rarely go beyond the fathers' occupation or other occupations which are reference points within this particular environment. Similarly, workers are hardly aware of the changing quality requirements nor have they an understanding for changing skills requirements in the markets.

Training being only confined to work place related skills will not be very sustainable, unless systemic shortcomings are addressed which perpetuate the prevalence of poverty and limit people's aspirations, therefore social and economic mobility (resulting in social exclusion due to educational and training related inequality). Persistent inequalities with regard to access to education, training or decent work determine and pattern people's capabilities to overcome their own limitations. The complexity lies in the fact that the people themselves interpret and perceive their situation very individually though it is structural and therefore systemic. This often results in a feeling of powerlessness, manifesting itself in various forms of disempowerment like frustration, passivity or aggression.

This would imply that training needs to go beyond getting access to entitlements, as capabilities need to emerge which ensure self-directedness. It is argued here that training and education are political since they put into question existing power relations and encourage social transformation. Training also requires collective learning so that existing structures can be challenged and alternative, more equal institutions can emerge and be owned by the people themselves. Education and training should encourage people to understand and reflect on their status of powerlessness and passivity within a collective structure, which provides them with the feedback required and takes them to a level where they start to consciously take responsibility towards change and therefore for their own lives.

III Learning for Self-directedness

1. Systemic nature of existing situation

The earlier discussion emphasises the systemic drawbacks of the current situation of skills enhancement of the unorganised sector, where mere access to skills training would be insufficient to resolve the problem of learning in a sustainable way. It necessitates taking into account systemic dimensions affecting the unorganised sector workforce, such as the dual social exclusion of the educational and vocational training system from any form of learning and continuous learning in particular as well as the exclusion from any form of decent work through the market. Even though multi-skilling and competency based training are being promoted in recent times, there is still a tendency that the market dictates the content of learning and expected competency instead of encouraging the workers' interests for learning or their self-directedness. As quickly as the markets express their needs for particular skills and utilise them accordingly, it also discards the same as soon as they are redundant. In effect, such a situation makes it impossible for the trainees to be self-directed as their learning strategies are focused only on how to effectively react to the changing market situation and not on personal development which could encourage the learner.

Another systemic drawback of the current training system is that in most instances, learning is limited to individual intake of information, where there is no mechanism for reflection on learning. In the case of the unorganised sector, this is further enforced by the lack of any form of structure/organisation that would encourage reflection on market changes and the identification of learning needs. Consequently, people are prevented from responding to the rapidly changing market demands in a planned manner, resulting in their limited opportunities for improving their skill-levels and working conditions.

Taking these aspects into consideration, what is proposed here is a new learning approach⁵ which emphasises systemic changes for skills enhancement at the macro level and self-directedness at the group and individual level. The approach intends to create a new learning environment, where learning and not mere qualifications/certificates is promoted and where learning is institutionalised through a resource network, a learning audit system and continuous reflection within a group and between individuals. Yet, learning is sensitive to the learning needs of the individuals and groups. The environment built by such an approach differs significantly from a traditional training institution (which is static and physically immobile) as it is rather a virtual space that utilises any resource available, be it markets, trainers, information, books, etc., to facilitate learning.

Learning within this approach includes not just workplace related outcomes but also life skills; as it is believed that the latter is imperative for effective utilisation of learning in all life spheres (Pieck, 2002). The focus of this approach is to build the capabilities of the workforce such that they are able to assimilate, synthesise, and internalise new information and opportunities, given any circumstance in which they find themselves and develop capabilities to determine the circumstances. Therefore, implying that while markets and products may still determine training needs, the workforce is not limited by the patterns set by the market but is enabled to make choices more proactively rather than involuntarily react to the market. It is believed that such a macro-level approach which takes into account markets, the formal industry, the unorganised sector and inherent interrelationships would contribute not only to skills enhancement of the unorganised sector but also to the overall development of the sector and would lend to community development.

2. A new approach: lifelong and continuous learning that is self-directed

With its roots in humanistic philosophy, self-direction as a concept is by no means new; having been widely discussed and applied in adult education circles and by a variety of educationists and psychologists during the last century (see for instance Brockett/Hiemstra 1991; Rogers 1961 etc.). The learning approach discussed here draws its arguments from various sources which might have been published within a different context, time and environment. However, the authors believe that though certain arguments were made in a different context and are based on a particular theoretical perspective, they are still very much valid for this particular approach here, since it addresses different levels of learning. It focuses on individual goals and interests of learners and accords these a central place in the educational process while emphasising the need for a collective self that includes social and political dimensions to it. This approach to learning is also rooted in Freire's political discussion on empowerment through adult education, which he refers to as 'conscientisation' and the need for social mobilisation so that structural inequalities can be overcome and social transformation takes place.⁶

The following aspects may be outlined as the primary focus in working towards developing an approach to lifelong and continuous learning, keeping in mind the macro-perspective of learning which is required so that learning becomes systemic.

The need for self-direction

As Carl Rogers had observed, "anything that can be taught to another is relatively inconsequential, and has little or no significant influence on behaviour....the only learning which significantly influences behaviour is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning" (Rogers: 1961).

In a self-directed learning process, the learner him/herself becomes the engine for learning; it is not externally imposed but intrinsically motivated. The purpose is a learning process, where the individual discovers his/her own powers to learn, and only requires certain moments for reflection with a facilitator and/or group in order to see other perspectives and techniques based on which he/she can then consciously make a choice for the more suitable option. The main objective of self-directed learning is that a person realises that learning and development only happens through him/her; that trainers and educators can only initiate and be a catalyst for further development/learning. This process of realisation is seen to be crucial for personal empowerment.

Moving beyond competence towards capability

It is perceived that mere upgradation of technical skills and work related competencies of the unorganised sector workforce

⁵ For further reading on the learning model, please contact mayaindia@vsnl.net.

⁶ For further reading on Freire's discussion on conscientisation, see Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972).

will not result in changing the situation neither in relation to work (better wages, multi-skilled, flexible adjustment to market changes, etc) nor to improve the quality of life; unless capabilities are developed so that a person makes effective use of such skills and relates the learning other life spheres. The focus of the approach in discussion, therefore, is to build such capabilities of the unorganised sector workforce so that they start making conscious decisions which are based on critical reflection in any area of operation: at work and other life spheres. In this regard, the influence of the environment people live in, on their life-perspectives & actions is also paid significant attention. Capabilities are built based on the present work situation and life-experience of the workforce, such that they are able to relate the skills acquired to changing market needs and utilise ongoing interactions with markets and the formal industry to further enhance their skills and capabilities.

The content of learning in this context thus includes technical skills addressing aspects of efficiency, quality consciousness, finish of the product/service, basic skills of literacy and computation, etc on one hand; on the other hand, life skills related to a vision, innovation, identity, communication, problem solving, decision-making, critical thinking, teamwork, democratic functioning, participation, political articulation (within a group) etc, are also paid significant emphasis.

Facilitation

An approach to self-directed learning involves a radical shift in the role of hitherto 'trainers'; moving from a premise of instructional knowledge-transfer towards facilitation. A facilitator is seen as one who supports learners to identify needs, set outcomes, strategise, access resources, assess own capabilities and consistently be on the path of learning. This in turn implies a close understanding of each member and group as well as engaging them in discussions and dialogue and relating learning content to life experiences of the learners so as to arrive at a diligent balance of blending political needs with the immediate reality of the individuals and communities.

Facilitating implies taking the people from where they are and, "...to go with them beyond these levels of knowledge without just transferring the knowledge... the question is not how to take advantage of the reading of reality, which the people are doing, but to make it possible for students to make a different and much deeper reading of reality.... such learning enables the students to connect their experiences with information and therefore, being able to generate knowledge and learn"(Horton/Freire: 1990).

Thus, the primary role of the facilitator is seen as supporting the individuals to understand new horizons and apply this understanding in different situations; thereby increasing possibilities and new options for social and economic mobility of the workforce. Learning together with the individuals and groups, the facilitator would need to support them to develop their own view and analysis of an existing problem through self-reflection and mirroring on skills enhancement, cross-learning, execution of orders, performance, etc; without imposing an agenda or abdicating responsibility. In this regard, the facilitators would need to gain a sensitive understanding of 'invisible' factors that influence learning, *for instance, issues of power inherent in gender, class, caste, religion, leadership, or even long years of experience of working in a particular sector.* Enabling the individuals and groups to challenge internalised beliefs and develop critical abilities through actively seeking and interpreting feedback.

Need for collective reflection

As Dewey (1938) observes, *"not all experience educates. For learning to happen, an experience must include two key dimensions. The first is continuity: the learner needs to be able to connect aspects of the new experience to what he or she already knows, in ways that modify this knowledge. The second is interaction: the learner needs to be actively interacting with his or her environment, testing out lessons developed in that environment."*

It is believed that interaction with many individuals and groups enhances reflection and supports the learner to gain a 'real' and understanding of a particular issue. Through interaction the individuals are encouraged to analyse and reflect on different view points which would lead them to take more conscious decisions, which are based on a more objective and systematic understanding that there are various choices available.

Particularly when it comes to training of the unorganised sector, such a process of reflection needs to be institutionalised so that learning is not incidental but a part of a continuous process of questioning the existing status where people live in. Learning therefore does not limit itself to time bound micro-interventions, but becomes an inherent part for individuals and groups to de-fine and redefine their perspectives. The collective/group on one side and the support of networks and resource persons, on the other side, offers the possibility of dialogue, mirroring and reflection and for a deeper understanding of reality; therefore, learning becomes systemic.

Resources

Traditionally, resources have been understood as specifically identified books/and teaching materials. Within this approach however, a structure is in place at the macro level which makes different kinds of learning resources available – be it experts from the private sector, trainers, or people from the communities in addition to training materials of various kinds. What

further distinguishes this approach is the definition of resources as being available everywhere and at anytime; depending rather on how the learner is able to avail of them. As it was mentioned earlier, learning and skills development might be facilitated but finally remains the learners' responsibility to make effective use of the acquired knowledge in his/her daily life. It is argued here that a learner with a certain level of self-directedness will not run short of resources or need to depend on any expensive school material, since any tool locally available, can be utilised for learning. Even if resources are not locally available, but if the individual is able to clearly define a learning outcome, s/he knows how to access the vast resources, if there is access to a network. In fact, the person him/herself will become a resource for learning and a part of the resource network within the community which makes cross learning in many instances a viable option for self-directed learning. Thus, rather than a static group of a few experts identified as trainers, resources within this approach are created and re-created through a dynamic partnership-oriented relationship between the formal industry, markets and the unorganised sector.

Learning outcomes, certification & learning audit system

One major drawback for the unorganised work force is the lack of any standards and certification system, which makes wage-setting in the labour market extremely non-transparent and exploitative, as wage levels are only based on an arbitrary market value. In this model, contrary to absolute standards and qualifications as in the traditional sense, the learning outcomes signify a direction, towards which each individual and institution can choose to take a particular path/methodology and time for learning, depending on their present levels and priorities. It is seen to help determine future learning agendas, based on outcomes set in the interests of the group and the individuals. Such standards also become significant in the context of gaining legitimacy and recognition within the formal industry as a quality workforce, setting wages for individuals, ensuring transparency and in encouraging learning itself.

A learning audit system (as proposed within such an approach) is distinct from a test-based assessment as it involves an ongoing process of feedback on learning outcomes through self-reflection, client feedback, market information, specific order/product related feedback, discussions within the group & across groups and during the execution of orders, etc. Assessment therefore does not limit itself to externally imposed criteria but encourages the learners to continuously reflect on his/her performance, which is an equally important aspect of the assessment process. Thus, the assessment practice here moves beyond an 'expert' paradigm towards one where learners are facilitated to set, manage and assess their own learning agendas for better work and for more decent living.

3. A synthesis of the approach

The approach intends to create an environment for empowerment, where learning is central and has clearly defined mile stones which ensure social and individual transformation. Learning, for that purpose needs to be continuous and reflection inherent in the perspective of individuals and groups; therefore learning is not limited to micro-initiatives but addresses macro-level questions which require a certain level of institutionalised learning, which is partially ensured through the learning audit system, a process for collective reflection as well as a learning path that is defined with the individual. Institutionalisation of learning which encourages self-directed learning, as the social and political dimensions of the self take precedence is hence seen as a powerful approach to change systemic shortcomings of education and vocational training in a very effective way. In addition to being the basis for the process of learning, self direction is also seen as the intended outcome of such a process; that individuals and groups of the unorganised sector workforce are self-directed and have developed the capabilities to identify learning needs and outcomes, as well as they know how to access resources, devise learning strategies, assume responsibility for learning and apply their learning to various life spheres. Institutionalisation of learning and reflection, coupled with a continuous audit and assessment process are therefore systemic, thus contributing to the overall development of the unorganised sector, also influencing community development.

IV. MAYA ORGANIC⁷: a market approach and the view on learning for empowerment

MAYAORGANIC's vision of markets and learning: A systemic understanding

MAYAORGANIC is an integrated macro approach that attempts to change systemic shortcomings in the educational system as well as in the production-labour market which are believed perpetuate poverty. It facilitates a process that enables the working poor to overcome three main forms of deprivation faced by them: 1) lack of any forum of articulation due to lack of a formal structure and organization, 2) income insecurity and low quality of work and 3) missing opportunities in the areas of education, learning and skills development; all of which result in low bargaining power in the labour market.

⁷ For a more detailed reading on MAYAORGANIC see <http://www.mayaindia.org/morganic.htm>

MAYAORGANIC, being a non-profit company, follows a market approach while promoting a model for development, which addresses the need of the working poor to have access to skills up-gradation and learning on one side and to provide a way out of the market-inherent and highly destructive process of self-exploitation prevalent particularly in the unorganised sector on the other side.⁸ Perhaps most significantly, MAYAORGANIC recognises that the unorganised sector, the organised industry and the markets- each has specific needs as well as opportunities to offer and share with each other for growth and development. MAYAORGANIC has created an environment that is conducive for partnership between the unorganised and the organised sector aiming at improving the overall standards of the sector as well as the quality of work, scope of income, learning and produce of the unorganised sector, particularly of the working poor.

The model takes advantage of the large number of individuals operating in the informal economy by them coming together - as collective enterprises of 30-50 members/owners each - to access the work opportunities available and by making continuous learning, social security and decent work conditions an inherent part of the organisational structure. It distinguishes itself from existing member based organisations in that all these collectives are profit centres of a particular sub-sector specific enterprise, which in turn ensures a certain visibility and organizational structure, thus far missing in the unorganized sector. So far, MAYAORGANIC has been working in 4 sub-sectors and has registered 4 enterprises: lacquerware, construction (painting, masonry, and carpentry), hospitality and services (domestic work, food industry and public place maintenance as well as gardening and waste management) and garments (home based garment workers and embroidery workers).

The backbone of MAYAORGANIC is the learning approach discussed above. Drawing from a fundamental premise of self-directed learning and its political interpretation, MAYAORGANIC has adopted an institutional approach which ensures access to continuous skills upgradation and reflection while at the same time ensuring that learning is not incidental but systemic for the worker's collectives as well as for individual members in the collectives. MAYAORGANIC firmly holds that central to any learning process is its assessment practice, as it determines the involvement of the learners and the effective utilisation of the learning and provides an important reference for skills standards which have so far been absent in the unorganised sector. In this context, MAYAORGANIC has developed a learning audit system for the sub-sectors mentioned above wherein learners and collectives are facilitated to set, manage and assess their own learning agendas for work and for life related training needs. The audit system thus seeks to lend to empowerment of the individuals and collectives, while at the same time providing a transparent system for wage setting according to the competency, performance of a particular collective or an individual. Here, MAYAORGANIC distinguishes itself from the traditional learning approaches, which confine themselves to micro-interventions within a limited time and at a given place, most often a training institution, while at the same time, also neglecting the crucial linkages between training standards and competencies-work and income.

MAYA ORGANIC encourages different kinds of vital networking between the collectives and markets. One central activity is the interaction with clients in the areas of information about changing market demands and quality feedback related to the products and services offered by the collectives. Equally important is the continuous interaction with resource pool (persons/institutions/material) which support the collectives in the areas of training, marketing, product and brand building and social protection; this ensures continuous product and service upgradation for better marketability. This form of networking and making the resource pool accessible to the collectives not only facilitates the process of continuous reflection on market trends and changes but again, enhances empowerment.

As an active marketing agency, MAYAORGANIC represents the various collectives under a brand in the market, ORGANIC, that does not only represent products/ services but rather a development brand. It implies that every product/service bearing the ORGANIC label has a developmental objective and connotes for good work practices, high quality and continuous improvement of collectives to be run professionally. It is responsible for developing and promoting the brand identity across different markets and clientele through building networks with clients and promoting the brand through this network. MAYA ORGANIC also has a process of monitoring the collectives to ensure all dimensions of the compliance and what the brand stands for.

IV Synthesis between learning model and MAYAORGANIC: How learning towards self-directedness happens

⁸ The relationship between the markets and producers has been defined by low price criteria, resulting in labour saving strategies and often exploitation. Low labour cost payments in turn resulted in low quality of products and services provided by the unorganised sector workers/enterprises. The vicious circle is set: the markets determine low prices and wages for unorganised sector units on one side; this influences the behaviour of the unorganised sector units and workforce on the other side not to invest into skills and technologies to meet minimum requirements. Again, low productivity and quality of work determine the bargaining powers between the clients and the units, which push down prices and shift the responsibility of rejection to the weakest part of the entire production chain, the unorganised units, and in turn decrease the payment of the unorganised workers.

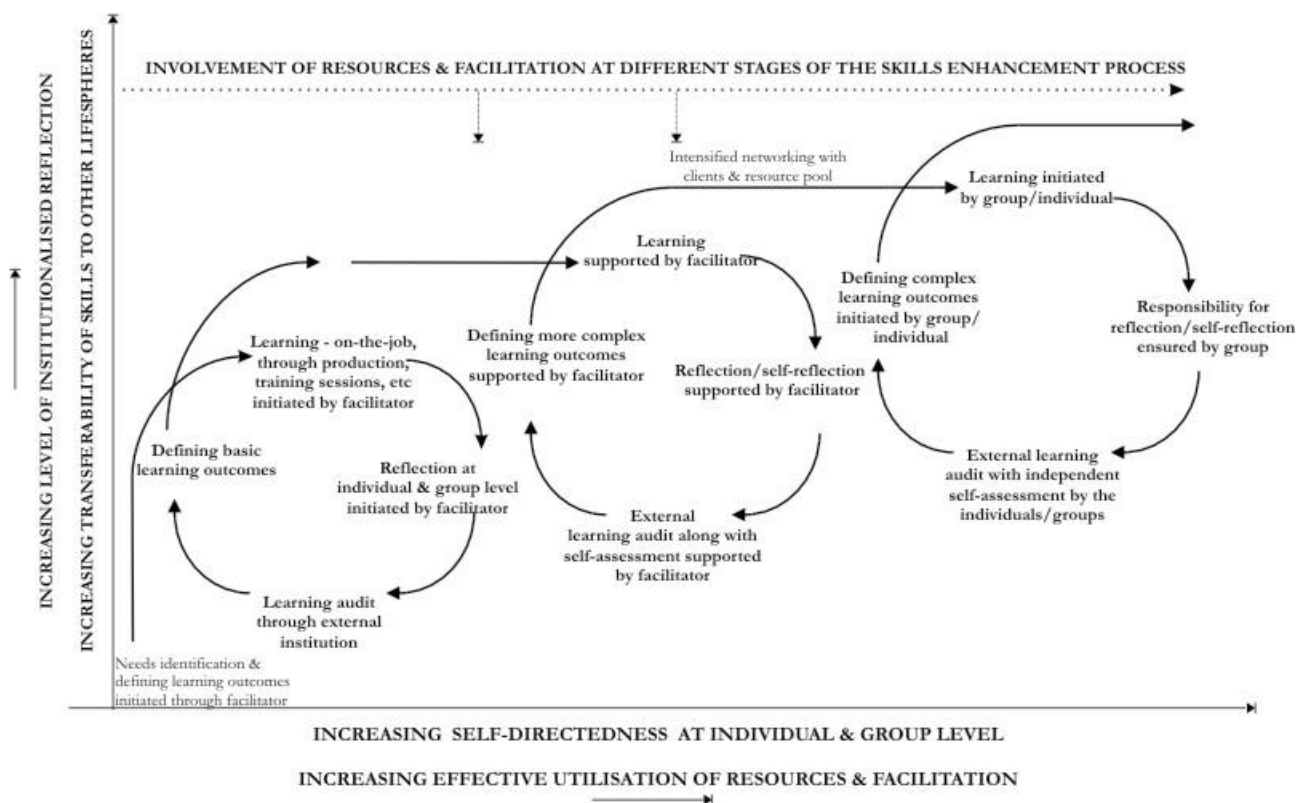
Training and skills formation for the unorganised sector workforce has for long been not a priority area for policy makers and many civil society organisations. However, this has changed in the last decade, where increasingly, member based organisations and NGOs, and recently also the government have become involved in training-cum employment generating activities, recognising that unless skills related questions are addressed, poverty cannot be eliminated.

In many instances, however, these interventions have not been very sustainable, limiting themselves to some short-term training, which would not necessarily equip the trainees with the capabilities to succeed in the highly competitive labour market, prevalent particularly in the unorganised sector. It was discussed that unless systemic aspects for learning and work are addressed simultaneously, poverty reduction and empowerment of people will be incidental and not large scale.

On one hand training and education need to be continuous and take into account and actively address the status where people live in, the various forms of deprivation they face, their high level of disorganisation and the lack of an organisational structure for collective voice, which would enable them to realise that there are opportunities for change. Training and skills upgradation also need to be institutionalised and recognised, therefore have an audit and monitoring system which has clearly defined skills standards and yet are only seen as a feedback and encouragement for further learning. On the other side, training and skills upgradation need to be linked to the market, be partially on-the-job and rooted in a continuous process of reflection on work, orders and training. MAYAORGANIC ensures not only access to continuous learning for entire groups but also to markets and information as well as to other formal institutions (e.g. credit or government institutions); therefore providing a formal institutional structure to the sub-sector enterprises and the collectives which was non-existent for the unorganised sector workforce.

The graph below illustrates the process of learning towards self reflection and self-directedness, as envisaged within such an approach. The initial phase would involve a greater initiative of the facilitator, while over time, through an increased institutionalisation of the process of reflection and learning, the individuals and groups are enabled to move towards identifying more complex learning outcomes by themselves. Simultaneously, the role of the facilitator and the resources will increasingly be determined by the learners, based on their learning outcomes and their enhanced capability to access and make use of these resources. Through such a process, it is also claimed that the transferability of the learning to other life spheres also becomes a greater possibility.

Graph: Process of learning towards self reflection and self-directedness in MAYAORGANIC



So far, many parts of MAYAORGANIC are still at the conceptual level, and empirical evidence will show whether this

approach has the required complexity to effectively deal with poverty alleviation strategies for the unorganised sector workforce. It is believed that the strength of MAYA ORGANIC lies in simultaneously addressing social exclusion, as it not only ensures access to continuous learning and work related training, but re-defines the structural relationship between unorganised workers and organised sector units in a systemic way, namely through a new partnership of professionalised collaboration and learning, which is directed towards a fairer distribution of profits and benefits for the unorganised sector workers and enterprises.

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