

Proceedings of the 9th Annual National Conference of the STARS (Skills Training for Advancement in Rural Societies) Forum

Conference Theme: “Make in Rural India” - Role of rural enterprises and entrepreneurship in job creation and accelerating rural economy.

Introduction

The 9th Annual Conference of STARS Forum took place at the Centre of Science for Villages (Kumarappapuram Campus, Dattapur, Wardha) on 14th and 15th December, 2018. 84 participants from 40 organisations, attended the Conference. These



participants came from 8 states viz. Maharashtra, Telangana, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, and Kerala. Participants included heads and senior executives of NGOs, academicians, startup evangelists and investors, social entrepreneurs, innovators and appropriate technology developers, entrepreneurship trainers and – most importantly – rural entrepreneurs themselves.

The Conference was held in Wardha to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Mahatma and Kasturba Gandhi, and also to celebrate the work and lives of Acharya Vinoba Bhave, Sant Tukodji Maharaj, Dr. JC Kumarappa and Dr. Devendra Kumar.

The Hans Foundation (Delhi) and some individual donors provided financial support for the Conference. The Centre of Science for Villages (Wardha) was the Conference Host partner organisation.

Conference report

The Conference theme was chosen to reflect one of the major concerns in India today viz. the jobs crisis. We need to create 2 crore jobs every year to address our growing working age population. Given that 65% of Indians live in small towns and villages of India, it is imperative that a substantial number of jobs have to be created in these areas. The role and potential of small-scale rural enterprises was explored in the Conference. In keeping with this theme, the STARS Forum curated the sessions, topics and speakers to enhance our understanding of the challenges and opportunities, experiments and scalable models in rural enterprises.

Rural entrepreneurship being a key component, the Conference included one workshop to enhance financial knowhow of entrepreneurs and a group discussion on a issue of public policy, viz. developing an “Ease of Doing Business” measure that is appropriate for small-scale rural enterprise promotion. Institutions showcased micro-enterprise opportunities that they have developed with opportunities for replication and

adaptation. Rural entrepreneurs – including women entrepreneurs – were invited to share their experiences.

The opening session was chaired by Dr. Yogesh Kulkarni, Chairperson of STARS Forum . The session featured Dr Soham Pandya (Executive Director, Centre of Science for Villages, Wardha), Prof. Sarthak Gaurav (School of Management, IIT- Bombay), Shri Nagaraj Prakasham (angel investor, mentor for Social Entrepreneurs, NSRCEL - IIM-Bangalore) and Shri Ashish Wele (agronomist and independent consultant at development agencies).

Dr. Pandya gave an overview of rural technologies developed at [CSV](#) since its inception. Prof. Sarthak Gaurav spoke about the agriculture trends in the Vidarbha region, observations on the agriculture economy and some of the options for the future. Shri. Nagaraja spoke about the need for developing a sustainable economy for the future. He suggested a 3P (People, Planet, Profit) approach for new enterprises. Shri Ashish Wele gave an example of the business model developed by [Mrida](#), which works with farmers as important stakeholders in order to give them better than market returns for their produce. He also covered the role of public policy and the need to understand how policies – both at national and international levels – impact farmers and their incomes. Unless we understand how policies are made, who makes them, etc. we may not be able to appreciate the challenges and opportunities in a better way.

The post lunch session on Day 1 was focussed on various rural enterprise opportunities being showcased by their originators/innovators. This session had the following showcase presentations:

- a. Shri Manvendra Singh from [Udyogini](#), spoke about the women led entrepreneurship development models the organisation had developed, especially for the Central India belt.
- b. Shri Roopesh Rai, founder of [The Green People](#) and [The Goat Villages](#) (Uttarakhand) gave an energetic session on how urban-rural connect has been addressed through innovative models, e.g. “Bakri Swayamvar” (which not only has an entertainment value, but importantly addresses prevention of in-breeding), village stays that have improved foot falls from a few thousand to over 48,000 per year etc.
- c. Shantanu Sahu ([Transform Rural India Foundation, Ranchi](#)) spoke about their models to develop entrepreneurship amongst agriculturists in Jharkhand called “Grameen Sarathi”
- d. Shri Baleswar Mahato, a agri-entrepreneur from Jharkhand, spoke about his entrepreneurial journey supported by CINI ([Collective for Integrated Livelihood Initiatives](#)), Ranchi. Baleswar runs a nursery that supplies saplings to farmers.
- e. Shri Sirshendu Paul, also from CINI (Ranchi), gave a presentation on their Lakhpati Kisan initiative, to irreversibly get farmers out of poverty.
- f. Manish Nair and Nikesh Ingle, co-founders of Rural Caravan, gave an insight into their entrepreneurship development initiative in Amale, Mokhada Block, Jawhar Taluka, Dist. Palghar. The entrepreneurs have been successfully running a smoke-less chulha enterprise, along with providing rural tourism opportunities for people from Mumbai and Nashik. The most interesting takeaway was that the entrepreneurs share their profits with Rural Caravan, since they understand the win-win relationship this creates with their mentor organisation.

- g. Vicky Chaudhary from [Vigyan Ashram](#) spoke about the “Skills-on-Wheels” project, which involves the use of hybrid learning models (in-person and using videos) to support skill development amongst rural youth.
- h. Devkanya Jagdale, from [Swayam Shikshan Prayog](#) (Osmanabad) gave a talk on how her organisation develops entrepreneurship capacity in rural women.
- i. Jayashree Kukade from Tejaswini Women’s Technology Centre, Rotha, Wardha, and her colleagues gave a talk on the venture they have recently setup to assemble, sell, and service treadle pumps for small farmers. The specific challenges they faced as a women’s group working with heavy metal, the societal mind-sets they had to fight and overcome were most illuminating.
- j. Shri Anil Nair, from [Wildlife Trust of India](#), Project Lead from the Vidarbha Tiger Project, spoke about the livelihood opportunities that were created for those who depend on forest resources, helping reduce human-animal conflicts, protect forest ecology and support balanced development.
- k. Shri Subhash Lode from [Mission Samridhhi](#), gave an update on their work with farmers and other enterprising youth. He spoke about the Farmer’s Balance Sheet – a tool they have developed to help farmers manage their accounts.
- l. Ms. Ruma Agwekar presented some of the potential small business opportunities that her organisation (Petals Training and Development) has been promoting amongst urban poor.



The last session of Day-1 was a 2 hour intensive workshop on understanding the financials of a small enterprise. One of the most prominent reasons why small enterprises do not sustain and grow, is poor understanding of important financial concepts and how they relate to the business. To address this, STARS Forum invited Shri BR Venkatesh (MBTLA Udyojakta Kaushal Vikas Sanstha, Mumbai) to conduct an intensive 2 hour session. This was designed not as a lecture but a collaborative discussion where the participants went through the process of setting up a hypothetical enterprise. At each stage - from startup to running, to daily operations - financial needs, what they represent were discussed. This session was highly appreciated by all attendees.

The second day continued with sessions from invited guests. Dr. Sudhir Prabhu – Secretary and Founding member of STARS Forum, spoke about the challenges in front of NGOs and institutions given the various developmental needs of India. He gave a comparative example of India and South Korea, both of which had a similar socio-economic status in the 50s and 60s, and the changes that happened in both. Shri Srikanth Prabhu from [Social Alpha](#) gave a presentation on their Rural Alpha initiative, to create a framework to standardize various rural entrepreneurship ideas and opportunities, developing capacity building tools and systems, etc. Dr. Gopal Paliwal – founder of Centre for Bee Development, Wardha – showcased the social enterprise setup for honey bee protection and promotion of honey as a sustainable enterprise.

The population of persons-with-disabilities is too large to ignore. Most of them live in rural India where facilities are nowhere upto the mark nor are they adequately available. Livelihood opportunities for such persons therefore should also be a national concern. Shri Narendra Paul, COO of [CORD \(Sidhbari\)](#) gave a presentation on his organisation's journey in addressing this issue.

Issues faced by Cotton farmers are well documented. Vidarbha being the largest producer of cotton, is deeply affected by these. Shri Atul Sharma of Gram Seva Mandal (Gopuri, Wardha) spoke about the "Cotton-to-Cloth" initiatives in that region that will enable the cotton farmer to take up value adding activities, thereby supplementing income. He also talked about the need to downsize textile machinery to enable this process.

Dr. Yogesh Kulkarni introduced the concept of Fab Villages – an extension of the [Fab Lab](#) movement – to address local needs through high tech but small footprint equipment such as 3D printers, laser cutting machines, design software. Dr. Reghu Rama Das from [Mitraniketan](#) gave an insight into livelihood opportunities and appropriate technology development in Kerala. Kudumbashree model was also described for broader appreciation of the role of women led enterprises. Shri Subhash Deshpande from Jnana Prabodhini, introduced BEAM – Battery of Entrepreneurship Aptitude Measurement – a tool that can help a entrepreneur understand his/her strengths and areas of focus.

Financial inclusion and access to affordable credit is a major challenge for any rural entrepreneur. Hence a session was curated to address this issue. Shri Pravin Muley – NABARD, DDM for Wardha – gave an overview of NABARD, its role and focus in the context of agriculture and rural development – especially financing of such activities. He particularly emphasised that rural entrepreneurs need to get a good understanding of the business fundamentals. This is important for them to avail various subsidies and schemes of banks and NABARD. Shri Vishwanath Ramani from [RangDe.org](#) gave the attendees an introduction to internet based peer-to-peer lending pioneered by his organisation. He also introduced their initiative called Swabhiman that is focussed on providing financial literacy as a pre-requisite to credit access. Shri Mohan Mehtre from Samagra Gram Vikas (Pusad) spoke about the process they have created to identify and support entrepreneurs who are then provided mentoring and financial support in the form of affordable loans. In the final session, Shri Rakesh Kadam from Bajaj Auto-Bhartiya Yuva Shakti Trust (Wardha Cluster) spoke about their entrepreneurship identification, development and mentoring program.

The final session of the Conference was a group discussion on the topic of Ease of Doing Business. EODB has been attracting a lot of attention, with both central and state governments working on improving their EODB scores. However the EODB parameters are not representative of items of interest to small-scale rural enterprises. Hence a new set of parameters would be required. The group debated the merits-demerits, pros-and cons of having a new EODB. However the consensus was that this is a subject that has not received attention at the public policy level. Hence more work needs to be done on this front.

The Conference concluded on 16-December with a visit to Gram Seva Mandal, Centre for Bee Development and Centre of Science for Villages. During these visits, conference

attendees got a very good insight into the various activities, innovative work and entrepreneurship development activities of these three organisations.

Finally, the STARS Forum wishes to thank all participants, speakers, host organisations, volunteers and sponsors for making this a memorable Conference.