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Social and Solidarity Economy for localizing the SDGs and Scaling up Impact

The Case of Women's Self Help Groups in India

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Abstract

Within the rich mosaic of gender-based initiatives in Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) in India, the women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) distinctly stand out as the dominant strand; and this paper argues that with a comparative advantage of a social design for developing collaborative and inclusive institutional foundations in the community, they are a compelling tool for transforming lives and driving sustainable bottom-up practices towards the SDGs through *localization* and *co-production*. Today the SHGs are an important vehicle through which the Government of India articulates its strategy for the agenda 2030. It is an important element of the local architecture of the SDGs, and a "credible means of implementation" in India, with huge potential to deliver impacts across multiple SDGs *cost-efficiently*. Entrenched in Solidarity, Social Mobilization, and Organization of women for Community Development, the SHGs make up the nucleus of a robust community-driven means of implementation. However, there are serious challenges (often overlooked in the policy discourse) in terms of the fragility, vulnerability and capacities of the SHGs which need to be addressed to further strengthen them as strategic players for the realization of the SDGs with cost- efficiency and greater strategic impact.

Keywords

Social Mobilization, SHG, State-Society Relationship, Localization, Cost-Efficiency, Co-production of SDGs

Bio

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The SHG in India as *Addis plus much more*

The Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) is a very provocative concept. It compels us to *rethink* the “anthropos”, rejecting the notion of the *homo economicus* with its distorted ontological assumptions of atomism, competitive rationality, and narrow economism, and create opportunities for the diverse solidarity-based community-driven financial systems to blossom and multiply so as to open up new cognitive as well as policy spaces for a sustainable future (Dash 2019). Its moral grammar is defined by an “ontological turn” in development thinking (Dash 2013, 2016) that changes our lens to, what Amartya Sen says, fundamentally “view a person as an *agent* and not just as a “patient” (Sen 1995, 103, emphasis added). An *agent* is “someone who acts and brings about change” (Sen 1999, 19), in contrast to the poor social imagery of the “suffering subject” as a “victim” of the age of capital. It is the *agency* of the “suffering subjects” which produces, what Ulrich Beck says, the “hidden emancipatory side effects” of global capitalism (Beck 2015, 78) through a relentless process to *reclaim* and *remake their lives*. The SSE thus moves us away from the “dark theories” of the anthropocene and the “suffering subjects” of the capitalocene towards what Joel Robbins (2013) calls as the “Anthropologies of ‘the good’”, creating the global ethos for a “good anthropocene” (Dash 2019). Its moral grammar is the normative driving force for an ethically defensible SDG agenda. That is why the SDGs should care about the SSE.

However, the third international conference (2015) in Addis Ababa on Financing for Development (FfD) underemphasized the role of a very significant element of the SSE – the power of “the small money” in unlocking the *transformative potential* through *community self-help*. The SDG agenda has been crafted on the model of “co-production” to make sure that “no-one is left behind”. *Collective forms of co-production* have “emerged from bottom up as a response to the multiple forms of exclusion and deprivation” by the vulnerable groups in the margins of the society (Broto and Alves 2018, 371), which play a pivotal role in achieving the SDGs. By overlooking these “invisible players” (Mathei 2015) in the “fringe economy” (Utting 2015), the Addis Ababa Action Agenda made an error. But, as the World Economic Forum’s Global Agenda Council on Sustainable Development (2015) says, the Addis Ababa agreement is just one piece of the global FfD story. There are many different public and private sector initiatives taking shape around the world in parallel to the official UN process to mobilize and “bend the curve” for the achievement of the SDGs, which need to be understood as “Addis plus much more”. Together with these different initiatives, the multiple local innovations in the SSE around the world should also be regarded as part of “Addis plus much more”. In India, the women’s Self-Help Group (SHG) movement, the dominant strand within the rich mosaic of gender-based initiatives in SSE, is a prominent part of *Addis plus much more*.

A Brief Background

The SHG story in India is extremely important in the context of the poverty and neo-liberal globalization debates. India embarked on its economic reforms in 1991 to liberalize and open up the economy. However, concomitant with the neoliberal economic reforms, the SHG strategy, became an important component of the Indian Government’s overall policy thrust to mitigate the adverse impacts of neo-liberal growth. The SHG model was introduced as a core

strategy in the Ninth Plan (1997–2002) with the objective to “organise women into SHGs to mark the beginning of a major process of empowering women” (Planning Commission 1997). Consistent with its democratic political culture, social mobilization to build and empower organizations of the poor through the SHGs became a critical component of the “pro-poor” development strategy in India.

While economic reforms were intended to “spread wings” through globalization, the SHG revolution intensified to “deepen roots” as a parallel process in India, with a resultant decline in its poverty. There was a significant decline in the headcount poverty measure in India during the two decade period beginning from the early 1990s (from 45.3 percent in 1993-94 to 37.2 percent in 2004-05 (Government of India 2018, Planning Commission Poverty Estimates data). By 2011-12, it had further declined to 21.0 percent. Thus, the MDG target to reduce poverty by half was met before the target year. However, with 175 millions of poor (in absolute numbers) in India today, poverty continues to be a complex problem, more so in terms of its multidimensionality, and its eradication requires a greater thrust in the context of the SDGs.

A Home-Grown Model of SSE . . .

The SHG is a robust home-grown model of *financial engineering for a social goal* – designed as a people-centred, community-based, financial structure for the poor and excluded women with the goal of poverty alleviation and women empowerment. An SHG is a small group of (10 to 20) women from homogeneous backgrounds, voluntarily organized around savings and credit, with an internal mechanism to manage its own funds (as a precondition to access institutional finance). But the groups are designed to be autonomous, member-owned, self-governed and democratic institutions of the poor women for more complex social and developmental roles.

The SHG model is defined by a “double innovation”, mutually reinforcing each other: i. the *social innovation* is in the *design of the group* (SHG) as a nucleus to steer collective action at the grassroots and drive the process of development from below, and ii. the *financial innovation* is the *architecture of collective finance*. It is a *financial system as if people mattered* – a financial system of the poor women, (managed) by them, for them to change *their* lives. The members themselves manage their fund. It may not be a big fund, but it is their *own* fund, it gives them a sense of ownership; helps them understand “finance” and the capacity to manage a collective financial asset in ways that work best for their realities, which, in turn, strengthens their capacities and confidence, social recognition, and dignity. But if the social foundation is weak, groups collapse. However, community-based finance is not an end in itself, it is a means to strengthen community-processes, so that people can act together and achieve their multiple and diverse developmental needs through their collective action. Thus, while SHGs have a focus on resolving market failures (such as credit market failures), they also often have an equally strong emphasis on rights and entitlements to overcome structures of subordination (Thorp *et al.* 2005). Finance is an initial mechanism and a tool for linking people together.

The theory and practice of SHG are rooted on a *social understanding of poverty* that looks at the problem of (feminization of) poverty as a *social construction* (not just a social condition), and argues that poverty is *multi-dimensional*, which “takes account of the other ‘deficits’ that matter to the people, sometimes more than money” (Kabeer 2003, 107). Entitlements and access to services, other than the financial, are of critical importance for the

poor women. Thus there is an equal (or sometimes even more) emphasis on the non-credit instruments for poverty alleviation. Many SHG-promoters suggest that the social empowerment goals of their SHG programs are achieved through mobilization even if the groups cease financial operations after a few credit cycles (CGAP 2007, 17). The SHG is an organization through which individuals undertake collective action with a primary goal of improving their own lives. Collective action implies that individuals share their time, labour, money, or other assets with the group to produce both collective and individual benefits, through creation of positive social externalities and public goods (Gugerty *et.al.* 2019). It is a forum to talk to their friends and peers, share information, resolve differences and conflicts, discuss each other's problems, and offer each other moral support besides small loans, and add more value to each other's lives. These everyday forms of participation are extremely important for them to forge a sense of solidarity to promote their collective interests, as well as to overcome their individual vulnerabilities within rigid hierarchical contexts. The institutional processes of the management of SHGs are based on deliberative processes, and as Heller and Rao (2015) argue, effective deliberative processes are extremely important to break persistent inequalities of voice and agency. Thus the SHG is a valuable platform to *equalize agency*.

Thus the SHG is a huge *social mobilization* tool and a *locus* for: i. *rebuilding new solidarities* around common developmental goals, and *expanding circles of support ties* – as groups mature, they begin to expand their reach, by building bridges and linkages, both horizontally with different other community-based groups in their own locality and vertically through their federations to acquire the ability to *engage* with the “official” systems with confidence and a greater bargaining power, ii. *an important site* for new social learning as well as personal transformation (empowerment) of women, and iii. *a social infrastructure* for the delivery of a wide range of government services at low cost to deepen their outreach for greater developmental impact. It is crafted through a *repairing* relationship (based on self-reinvention of the poor women), emancipating rather than subjugating them to the double pillars of the “andocentric world” – global capitalism and patriarchy – and putting a moral brake to their brutalism. Members view the group not in the same way as an employee views the firm, or a client looks upon a bank, but as an entity that is very much central to their lives, offering a social environment combining not only cohesion, support, security, but even identity, confidence and hope (Dash 2005, 305-6).

. . . originated in the civil society, and now propelled by the State . . .

International experience with grassroots-level financial institutions has shown that their “ultimate success . . . depends on the strength of centrally provided support” (CGAP *op.cit.*, 28). Unless core external support functions are provided in a sustainable manner, community-level units degrade over time and eventually collapse. In India, a strong support infrastructure has been built over the decades for the SHGs to function effectively. A consistently proactive and increasingly enabling policy regime has helped the growth of the SHG movement. What started as a small pilot programme by MYRADA (in the context of the breakdown of the cooperative societies organized by it) and PRADAN (both developmental NGOs), has now become a massive movement for poverty alleviation and women empowerment in India with the active policy support of the government. The Reserve Bank of India (the central bank) in 1990 accepted the SHG as a model for spreading and deepening community finance; and the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) came up with its innovative pilot

project of SHG-Bank Linkage in 1992 (starting with 500 SHGs), which has evolved to be a major programme through which NABARD promotes the SHG revolution with funds, capacity building and innovation, and helps change macro policy to create an enabling eco-system for them (Fernandez 2006). More than 25 years of policy support in India, beginning with NABARD's SHG-Bank linkage programme, has led to a significant expansion and development in the SHG landscape. Over the years, it has grown in size, spread, scope, maturity and importance in India's development process. Today, there are 8.7 million SHGs in India reaching out to over 112 million families, and the number keeps growing. They currently manage a portfolio of about one trillion Indian rupees – 755 billion in loan outstanding and 195 billion in savings – more than many MNCs (NABARD 2018).

. . . . as the local institutional architecture for the SDGs . . .

Today the SHGs are an important vehicle through which the Government of India articulates its strategy for the agenda 2030. It is an important element of the local architecture of the SDGs, and a “credible means of implementation” in India, with huge potential to deliver impacts across multiple SDGs *cost-efficiently*. One significant element in the strategy for the implementation of the SDGs is its *localization*: embedding it in the grassroots and empowering communities to stimulate a bottom-up tailwind to drive the SDGs through local co-production. Sustainable Development Goals need to connect with peoples' vernacular epistemologies and their local sociologies. Only if the local people take responsibility for its implementation in their communities, can we hope for its success. Thus the SSE makes a compelling claim on the macro policy actors to recognize the *need to engage* with the “bottom of the pyramid” for driving the SDG agenda. This is what the Indian approach to the SHG model resonates with.

The policy of the Indian government for the promotion of the SHGs, as an important local institutional architecture for poverty alleviation and women's empowerment, has evolved over the decades. The initial thrust on SHG promotion was given as early as 1982 in the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) programme to ensure that the benefits of the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) reached the poor women. There was a stronger focus on SHGs in the subsequent programme of the government known as the Swarnajayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojana (SGSY, launched in 1999), and SHG building became a national movement in the country. The SGSY, a major vehicle for the government to fulfil its commitments for the MDGs, was anchored in SHGs as a key strategy of implementation. Its achievements were significant, and 4.15 million SHGs were formed under this programme. However, there were still some impediments in its functioning, such as inadequate credit mobilization and repeat financing to SHGs, their non-federated nature, insufficient capacity building etc. Several evaluation studies showed that SGSY was relatively successful wherever systematic mobilization of the poor into SHGs and their capacity building was taken up in a process-intensive manner.

As a result, the government restructured it to launch a new programme in 2011, known as the *Aajivika*-National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM – later renamed as Deendayal Antayodaya Yojana, DAY-NRLM), keeping in view the enormous unfinished work under SGSY as well as the weaknesses it suffered from, to harness the women power through social mobilization, institution building, and livelihoods promotion. All the state governments have also been encouraged to constitute their own State livelihood Societies. Its goal is to lift every family out of extreme poverty. The basic feature of this programme is *Universal Social*

Mobilization to deepen further the SHG density in the country. It has been designed to provide a combination of financial and technical assistance for a comprehensive livelihoods approach that encompasses four inter-linked components *viz.*, (a) mobilization of all rural poor households into functionally effective SHGs, and their federations (b) enhancing their access to financial, technical and marketing services; (c) building capacities and skills of the poor and promotion of sustainable livelihoods; and (d) institutionalizing *convergence* of the various other support programmes of the government (such as food and nutrition, health, drinking water, sanitation etc., given their integrated nature in terms of development outcomes). Today, there are 5.2 million SHGs with 57.9 million members under the NRLM (Government of India 2019).

Some of the SDGs require massive behavioural change in order to be successful and sustainable (e.g., in areas like Health and Sanitation, Nutrition etc.). Therefore, more recently, the government launched some massive behaviour-change programmes, such as the *Poshan Abhiyan* and the *Swachha Bharat Abhiyan*, through a subtle policy shift towards change management practices based on the economic theory of “nudging” (Thaler and Sunstein 2008), which is being increasingly incorporated by governments around the world in their policies to improve people’s wellbeing and overcome society’s most difficult problems caused by behavioural failures (Thaler 2015). The *Poshan Abhiyaan* (National Nutrition Mission, launched in March 2018), seeks to holistically address the problem of malnutrition by improving nutritional outcomes for children, pregnant women, and lactating mothers, and strives to reduce the level of stunting, under-nutrition, anaemia and low birth weight in children, as also focus on adolescent girls through convergence (cross-cutting SDGs). Similarly, the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*, with the goal of eliminating open defecation in India is a huge public health and sanitation drive in India, and perhaps the biggest behaviour change campaign for national hygiene, sanitation and waste management, based on holistic sanitation approaches. These programmes have an in-built mechanism to leverage the SHGs (developed under the NRLM), as multi-sector platforms, for effective community engagement. There has been an amazing participation and leadership drive by SHGs as agents of change, especially in the *Swachh Bharat* Mission, which is driven by the women’s sense of self-respect and honour. SHGs are increasingly becoming a pillar of support across the country in various ways: taking loans to build toilets, regular use of toilets, and monitoring usage and behavioural change.

. . . to achieve economies of Scale and Scope through *Mass Localism* . . .

The NRLM has an objective to cover 70 million rural poor households (350 million poor people), across the 600,000 villages in the country in a period of 10 years and create sustainable livelihood opportunities through SHG mobilization. More than that, the efficiency of the various government programmes relating to the SDGs (e.g., PDS for food security and nutrition [SDG # 2], Health [SDG # 3], education [SDG # 4], clean drinking water and sanitation [SDG # 6] etc.) are designed to be improved through convergence at the SHG level as a multi-sector platform. With reference to the SDGs, the NRLM looks at women’s empowerment [SDG # 5] not only as an intrinsic goal, but also as an instrumental goal for realizing these different other goals. The scale and magnitude of implementing them, in a country like India, requires an approach different from the “moving from billions to trillions” to achieve the SDGs.

The SHG model presents a different approach to scale that provides for *economies of scale* as well as *economies of scope*. It is an approach based on *Mass Localism*. Mass Localism is about “seeking distributed solutions to problems and supporting communities to implement them” (Bunt and Harris 2010, 32). Scale is achieved by multiplying numbers of local solutions that collectively have a big impact. It is a grounded and inductive approach to SDGs, combining local action and national scale. Further, when we “join up” diverse public services, based on opportunities to unify and reconfigure them around a common purpose at the level of the SHG, we achieve an *economy of scope* and make them more cost-efficient, compared to rolling them out in silos through the top-down bureaucratic system.

Research studies also provide evidence to establish that providing development interventions through SHGs could lower the per person costs of services through *economies of scale*. Evidence suggests that women who participate in any group are more likely to be well connected and participate in multiple other community networks which may lead to spill over effects in the community (Anderson *et.al.* 2009; Davis and Negash 2007). With respect to health strategies, for example, Manandhar *et al.* (2004) found that women’s group members reached an average of six other women with information. Several studies of interventions that mobilized women’s groups to promote maternal and newborn health find that group-based interventions are highly cost efficient (Colbourn *et al.* 2013; Ensor *et al.* 2014; Manandhar *et. al. op.cit.*; Prost *et al.* 2013; Roy *et al.* 2013; Tripathy *et al.* 2010). Efficiency is achieved as a result of horizontal connectivity. SHGs being multi-sector platforms also provide *economies of scope*, including complementarities across investments and interventions, allowing the government (and NGOs) to provide several services through one intervention. Groups organized primarily to achieve finance outcomes are also leveraged to achieve different other outcomes (Colbourn *et al. op.cit.*; Dongre *et.al.* 2009; Houweling *et al.* 2013; Roy *et al. op.cit.*). The literature also suggests that groups may generate additional benefits by providing peer pressure, commitment mechanisms, or sanctions that encourage the adoption of new norms, practices, or behaviours.

. . . . and impact along multiple SDGs. . .

The vast body of empirically-based research literature on SHGs, for the most part, suggest that SHGs do generate “empowering actions” to achieve positive results (albeit, in varying degrees depending on their level of maturity and strength as also the program design and context). Impact studies of the Self Help Group-Bank Linkage Programme of NABARD demonstrate a positive impact in rural India in terms of its outreach, generating income, reducing poverty levels and empowering women (APMAS 2017; NCAER 2008; Sinha *et. al.* 2012; Hannover 2005; Puhazhendi and Badatya 2002; Puhazhendhi and Satyasai 2000, among others). The results showed a positive impact on income contributing to poverty alleviation, while also raising the capacities of the members to increase their household expenditure for basic needs such as better nutrition, education and health. Also, the results reported a substantial degree of women empowerment (in terms of their self-confidence, competencies, family decision-making, and communication and problem-solving abilities). The NCAER study found that members’ household income grew on an average at 6.1 per cent per year, and consumption expenditure on food and non-food items grew at 5.1 per cent and 5.4 per cent respectively, while household annual expenditure on education and health grew at 5.6 per cent and 5.5 per cent respectively. Empowerment outcomes were very high (92 per cent). Hannover (2005) concluded his review of the impact studies of the NABARD programme,

saying : “[t]he improved access of SHG members to sustainable microfinance services as well as the group approach and related human capacity building processes contribute with cross cutting outcomes in several direct and indirect ways to most impact aspects of MDGs” (p. ix). A study by Deininger and Liu show significant economic benefits in the long term as the groups matured, and points to positive economic gains through better nutrition, higher levels of consumption, and asset accumulation by the SHG participants. The benefit on energy and protein intake was higher with longer group participation and greater initial poverty, because of their ability to draw on a federated network to provide access to food grains in kind, and they conclude, “[i]f benefits are maintained at current levels, they significantly exceed program costs.” (2012, 294). On the basis of their review of 36 studies (from South Asia, including 18 from India, using 24 nutritional indicators), Kumar and others conclude that women's group-based programs are most successful in improving nutrition outcomes, with strongest evidence for infant and young child feeding (IYCF) practices (Kumar *et.al.* 2018).

Based on their analysis of the entire dataset from the third national District Level Household Survey from 601 districts in India to assess the impact on maternal health service uptake, Saha *et.al* (2013) conclude that the presence of SHGs in a village is associated with higher knowledge of family planning and maternal health service uptake in rural India. Maternal mortality was lower as groups generate more demand for safe delivery kits, and visit women during their pregnancy to ensure that they had received these kits and used them. Newborn babies significantly improved the likelihood of surviving within the first six weeks of their lives (Tripathy *et.al.* 2010). Women from the SHGs with health intervention were more likely to: use contraceptive methods, have institutional delivery, initiate timely breastfeeding, and provide age-appropriate immunization, and can reach a substantial proportion of women to assist them in learning and practicing healthy behaviours, thus building a social cohesion on health (Saggurti *et.al.* 2018). SHGs offer protection against exclusion to health care and enable a coping strategy, acquire loans to cover health costs, help women to overcome financial barriers to access health care (Mohindra *et. al.* 2008). Combining SHGs with water and sanitation programmes (WATSAN) is a model that is working well in villages in India. SHGs have strengthened the movement for toilets and sanitary napkins, and motivate as well as provide funds to make the sanitation dream a reality (Rai 2015). They ensured water and sanitation services, constructed toilets to eliminate the practice of open defecation with corresponding reduction in school dropout rates, the incidence of cholera, diarrhoea, and common stomach ailments and death due to communicable disease in the villages (Prakash 2015; Shreshtha *et.al.* 2015).

The positive impacts of SHGs on gender equality and women's empowerment have been rather well established (Dash and Kabeer 2005; Saran 2004; Swain and Wallentin 2009; Deininger and Liu 2009; Swain and Wallentin 2012, and the above cited studies, among others). Empowerment outcome is visible through the *material pathway* – an increase in the income of women leading to her bargaining power in the allocation of resources within the household – as well as through the *cognitive pathway* in terms of greater autonomy and awareness of Rights, leading to changes in the *behavioural* and *relational* pathways of empowerment (Saran *op.cit.*). Brody *et. al.* (2016), in their systematic review (of 23 quantitative and 11 qualitative studies), suggest that SHGs have positive effects on various dimensions of women's empowerment, including economic, social, and political empowerment. In addition, their qualitative synthesis suggests that women participating in SHGs perceive themselves to be psychologically empowered. SHG participation is positively associated with greater control over household decision making (Bhoj *et.al.* 2013; Caro *et.al.* 2013; Desai and Joshi 2013;

Holvoet 2005), wider participation in civil institutions and political processes (Deininger and Liu 2009; Holvoet *op.cit.*), and greater overall presence in society (Caro *et.al. op.cit.*; Deininger and Liu *op.cit.*; Desai and Joshi *op.cit.*; Holvoet *op.cit.*; Sinha *et al.* 2006; Tesoriero 2006).

. . . . but needs to meet great challenges

While the SHGs have a high potential to deliver impacts across multiple SDGs, there are enormous challenges, both internal and external to SHGs. The first challenge is with regard to their reach, which is today highly uneven across India. This means the issue of *equity* in the SHG movement, at various levels. For example, the SHG density is very high in southern India, while it is very low in the north-eastern region. This inter-state inequity has great implications of regional inequalities and gaps in terms of SDG outcomes among states, which is otherwise already a major problem in India. Further, the poorer states in India are not the ones which are also being most effectively reached by the SHG movement. The same problem also exists among the districts and the panchayats within a state. Therefore, expanding into areas where SHG coverage is still minimal continues to be a major problem. Similarly, the poorest in a locality are often excluded from the SHGs, and wherever, they are members of the SHGs, they don't often benefit equally from their participation. For example, studies have found a mixed picture in terms of equitable loan distribution within the group (Harper 2002).

The other danger is the speed with which the SHGs are growing (pushed by a target-driven approach of the government). It is much faster than peoples' speed of change, and often ahead of the capacity of the self help promoting institutions to ensure equity and quality. Several studies note that groups formed by government agencies tend to be the weakest relative to those promoted by NGOs (eg, Sinha *et.al.* 2006). SHGs are sometimes fragile and vulnerable, riddled with problems of poor management, local power struggles, and mismanagement of capital. Moreover, there is a prevalence of the informal sector with multiple factors that create a situation of disadvantage for them. The support provided by the promoting agencies is often inadequate. Often SHGs are weak in financial management (eg, book keeping, loan management etc.) and their financial sustainability is a matter of great concern. The recent APMAS study (2017) made a ranking of the SHGs in their sample, based on a Critical Rating Index tool (CRI), and found that 68 per cent were grade-A, while 24 per cent were grade-B and the others were extremely low with grade-C, which suggests that about one-third of the SHGs are rather poor quality groups.

Conclusion

Development is not simply about *what* needs to be done, but, more importantly, about *how* it is done (Menocal 2017). The SHG model casts development as a matter of democracy, empowerment, and redistribution of power, opportunities, and assets to break the cycle of poverty and inequality. The twin forces driving this transformation are active citizens and the developmental state, mutually reinforcing each other in *a unique blend* of the "*created space*" and the "*invited space*" of the poor women and their SHGs, as well as a marriage of *the top-down* and *bottom-up strategies*, through a process by which the efforts of the government are united with those of the SHGs as a way to achieve the SDGs. The state creates wider and more enabling space for the SHGs to enhance the accountability, depth and reach of its programmes. The government initiative and the community initiative – active citizens and a proactive

government – complement each other and create a synergy, and when SHG members expand their reach through federations, they move from being ‘women-in-themselves’ to ‘women-for-themselves’, and even further to ‘women for the larger public good’ (Agarwal 2014, 14) to drive the SDGs as a shared responsibility. Green (2012), while focusing on the importance of active citizens interacting with effective states for transforming the power relations to break the cycle of poverty and inequality and to secure a fair and sustainable world, stresses that the combination of citizens and state is not a blueprint; different countries may follow diverse paths to development. In India, this combination is best reflected in the SHG model, which puts poor women on the driving seat. Menocal (*op.cit.*) calls for a shift from “best practice” (based on idealized models of change) to a “good fit” that is grounded in contextual realities. The ‘fit’ between state and civil society – how successfully state and civil society interact “to keep the gears of development in motion” and “to work together to deliver development” (Hossain *et.al.* 2018, 25) – is very well configured in India at the local level in the SHGs for the *co-production* of development outcomes towards the Agenda 2030.

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