



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission for Social Development

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#### Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:

**priority theme: promoting empowerment of people in  
achieving poverty eradication, social integration and  
full employment and decent work for all**

### **Statement submitted by S. M. Sehgal Foundation, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council**

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



## Statement

Large sections of rural areas in India are marked by enduring poverty, diminishing natural resources and slow sociocultural progress. The Institute of Rural Research and Development, an initiative of the S. M. Sehgal Foundation, envisages every person across rural India empowered to lead a more secure and prosperous life.

The Institute works primarily in the Mewat district in the State of Haryana, which has extremely poor development indicators. In Mewat, 48.5 per cent of girls marry before the age of 18 years. The sex ratio is 906 females per 1,000 males, the literacy rate is 56 per cent, the infant mortality rate is 60 per 1,000 live births and the maternal mortality rate is 275 per 100,000 live births. Only 16.3 per cent of households have access to toilets. To improve lives and build a brighter future for rural communities, the Institute partners with such communities by designing and implementing models in areas vital to village development: water management, agriculture and good local governance. It also advances research and policy dialogue and works with and for communities at the grass-roots level to provide them with ways to exchange knowledge, ideas and experiences.

The core areas on which the Institute works are water and agriculture, so as to improve the availability and quality of water for drinking, households and agriculture and at the same time increase agricultural productivity using customized and scientific agricultural practices. Emphasis is laid on increasing the participation of women in the programmes, given that they are the primary stakeholders and are uniquely positioned to drive village development. The Institute organizes rural women into women-led water management committees to raise awareness and mobilize communities with regard to the need to manage water resources. Women's knowledge of scientific agricultural techniques is improved in order to increase their role in agricultural decision-making. The Institute promotes gender-inclusive research by employing gender-disaggregated research methodologies in theoretical and empirical research to address rural development and poverty.

Strong governance at the local level also supports sustainable development. The Institute addresses the synergy between the demand and supply aspects of governance at the village level using good governance and capacity-building initiatives. The initiatives are inspired by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Declaration on the Right to Development, among others, and are rooted in human rights law and the decentralized governance approach to development. They also take strength from constitutional rights and legislation in India, such as the rights to information and education.

Through the good governance initiative, the Institute selects active rural citizens and trains them, through structured programmes, on their rights and entitlements and builds their skills to monitor compliance of government programmes.

The capacity-building initiative builds the capacity of village-level institutions to implement social and legal mandates of the Government. This bridges the gap between government service providers and village-level institutions by providing a platform for dialogue and discussion.

In its work on local governance, the Institute tries to address issues of poverty and unemployment by creating awareness on the part of rural communities of their rights under the National Food Security Act, 2013, building the capacity of community leaders through structured training and advocacy for policy reforms in order to have transparency and accountability in governance. For example, awareness of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, enables villagers to gain access to rightful employment for 100 days in a year. With increased emphasis on decentralized governance, people are realizing the strength of collective action. The demand-supply synergy aims to channel the collective action of people towards their own growth and development through focus on mass awareness, empowerment, capacity enhancement and leadership development at the grass-roots level.

The good governance initiative has engaged 76,000 citizens, including 34,200 women, through community meetings. More than 12,000 citizens have participated in legal literacy camps and 1,400 villagers have been trained through a structured year-long programme. The Institute has also trained 1,850 elected representatives from 308 village councils, 600 members of 50 school management committees and 500 members of 35 village health and sanitation committees on their roles and responsibilities.

As a result of these interventions, access by villagers to government programmes such as those on integrated child development, midday meals and the public distribution system has increased tremendously. In 2012, 121 midday meal centres started functioning well, thereby ensuring that food and nutritional support were provided to 12,000 schoolchildren. In addition, 116 integrated child development centres were made functional, leading to food support being provided to 4,500 children between the ages of 0 and 6 years. A total of 69 public distribution system food shops have been made functional, providing access to subsidized wheat, fuel and sugar to about 3,450 families. In this way, the good governance initiative has addressed the problems of poverty by focusing on government food security programmes.

While informed citizens have helped to create a culture of transparency and accountability, most of the information is not available in the public domain, rendering it challenging to obtain access. The availability to citizens of appropriate and relevant information about government departments can ensure that the State is accountable to citizens by exposing loopholes and corruption in public services. Today, village-level groups monitor the functioning of government programmes and make representations and complaints in the event of rights breaches. Such efforts reflect the gradual empowerment of rural citizens from watching things happen to making things happen.

To spread this empowerment further, the Institute uses local-language print media and a community radio platform, Alfaz-e-Mewat FM 107.8. Established in 2012, the community radio station reaches nearly 200 villages. It broadcasts locally relevant information in the local dialect and encourages community participation. In this way, the mass media give power to rural communities to share and learn from good practices around them and enable efforts to be scaled up and replicated, so as to widen their impact.

Today, the Institute is at a crossroads of tremendous opportunity with the potential to build a movement through knowledge-sharing, cooperation and

meaningful collaboration. There is still a long way to go in achieving our mission of strengthening community-led development initiatives to achieve social, economic and environmental change across rural India.

The wave of empowerment in achieving poverty eradication and social integration in Mewat is yet to translate into full employment and decent work for all. The Institute strongly recommends strengthening the demand and supply synergies for governance to create a platform for multisectoral sharing and learning for collective action and policy change that builds an environment conducive to people's empowerment. The Institute continues its efforts to enable rural communities to realize their full potential.

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