

Study On Self Sustenance of Social Enterprises: A Case of Irula Tribe Women's Welfare Society

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Abstract:

Social Enterprises have become an emerging economy over the last two decades. Like the social businesses social enterprises also provide real employment opportunities for local residents from prioritized target groups. In countries where the Government is unable to fulfill its role in uplifting these unprivileged groups Non Government Organization (NGO's) are coming up with sustainable activities and are becoming the main service providers. This paper is a clear representation of how a particular tribe's (Irula Tribe) livelihood is developed and converted into a welfare measure and a form of self sustaining social effort through a Non Government Organization ITWSS. It explores the various ways in which they have integrated their efforts into a product which helps them to survive as well as provide its essence to the public.

Key Words: Social enterprise, Self Sustenance, Non Government Organization, Tribal Development

Introduction:

One among the popular field of research post 1980's is Sustainable Tourism and Social Enterprises are increasingly appearing in tourism sector since the last decade. The primary goal of any social enterprise is the adaption of financially sustainable strategies to achieve social aims (Haugh, 2005). Many authors have stated that, it is imperative to achieve both financial and social return on investments (Dart, 2004; Peredo et al., 2006; Wallace, 2005). The driving force is the organization's mission, which despite the term " Social Enterprise" can be a social or environmental and sometimes both (Pearce, 2003).

Tourism is a key revenue sector for many low and middle income countries and there is a consistent search for ways of ensuring that a greater share of benefits reaches the poorest segments of the community in the countries through tourism oriented social enterprises (Mitchell & Ashley, 2010). According to Nicholls and Young (2008), there has been a steady increase in the number of socially entrepreneurial organizations globally and their interventions are making a significant difference.

Social Entrepreneurs can be identified on the basis of four economic criteria and five social criteria according to Carlo Borzaga et al; 2004. Economic criteria include a continuous activity producing goods and or services; a high degree of autonomy; a significant level of economic risk and a minimum amount of paid work. Social Criteria includes an explicit aim to benefit the community; an initiative launched by a group of citizens; a decision making power not based on capital ownership; a participatory nature, which involves the persons affected by the activity and limited profit distribution.

Alter (2006) in his study talks about seven types of operational models for social enterprises namely entrepreneurial model, market intermediary model, employment model, fee for service model, market linkage model and organizational support.

Market based approaches are being used by organizations to accomplish social or environmental goals. This paper tries to explain one such kind of a Social Enterprise – ITWWS. It tries to express responsible tourism through developing a segment of people- the Irula Tribe, their culture and their livelihood through various measures. This study uncovers the approach of such social enterprises in balancing the social and environmental objectives and commercial objectives and tries to bring out the determinants of success.

Objective of the Study

The objective of the study is to:

- Analyze the history of Irula Tribe and ITWWS.
- Identify strategies that help ITWWS as a social enterprise to sustain.
- Suggest a sustainability model for similar social enterprises.

Methodology

The study was based on a case study method where in ITWWS was used as sample. Data was collected using both primary and secondary method. Primary Data was collected by conducting and transcribing Interviews from 3 officials and 7 Irula beneficiary and secondary data was collected from websites and published literature sources.

History of Irula Tribe

Irulas are tribal community living in different parts of India. They are recognized Scheduled Tribe by the Government. They contribute 8.2 % of total Indian Population. They are one of the largest semi-nomadic tribes in Tamil Nadu. Irulas as a tribe are snake and rat catchers. There is no longer their means of living and over these years they have been unable to find a sustainable occupation for themselves. In 1978 the Irulas, along with Romulus Whitaker and Revathy Mukherji, sought the help of the Department of Industries and Commerce to start a self employment scheme using their traditional knowledge. Thus was born the Irulas Snake-Catchers Industrial Cooperative Society which was officially registered on 19 December 1978. The main objectives of this co-operative were to harness the traditional skills of the Irulas positively, accord a dignity to their indigenous knowledge and to provide them with a means of social and economic upliftment. In time a specialist snake handling facility was constructed at the Croc Bank to maintain snakes for venom extraction and to market the venom to various laboratories around India. In addition, their traditional skills together with their knowledge of indigenous wildlife were promoted as valuable resources for naturalists and government agencies involved in wildlife work. More recently they have become a popular tourist attraction at the Croc Bank, demonstrating their skills of snake-catching and milking to visitors.

ITWWS is a society established by Zai and Rom Whitaker in 1985 to document and to enhance the traditional skills of the Irula women. This was done in an attempt to empower women within the community and to address socioeconomic inequalities. One of the main achievements was developing self help eco-development programs centering on their traditional knowledge of medicinal plants. Extracts from various

trees and shrubs are used to prepare medicinal products, herbal teas, shampoos and other organic products. ITWWS have an ongoing program creating a seed bank of indigenous flora and a fully fledged nursery offering a variety of useful plants for sale. They are registered under the Government of Tamil Nadu Societies Registration Act, 1975.

Rom Whitaker and Zai Whitaker felt that there was a need for a women's organization. Many Irula women are fine vaidyars (herbal doctors); many of them had patients, both Irula and non-Irula, who came from long distances to consult them. Some of the common cases involved filariasis or elephantiasis, skin ailments and diseases, and the after-effects of snakebite. This was certainly a skill that could be developed and marketed. There were others, such as afforestation. There were two other major incentives in the forming of the ITWWS: the documentation of Irula knowledge and culture (which is fast disappearing) and, perhaps most importantly, creating a strong leadership among Irula women.

The ITWWS center, initially was a collection of huts, is now an eight acre campus with a beautiful central building designed by an innovative German architect. Its social and environmental projects have earned several awards, Indian and International. The social campaigns initiated by its staff and members have brought official and public attention to issues such as bonded labour, literacy, violence against women and deforestation. The school drop-out rate is almost zero, and there are 16 literacy centers, several Irula product outlets, and regular training programs on issues related to empowerment.

Self Sustaining Activities of ITWSS

- ITWWS had taken steps to use the knowledge of the Irula tribe on the trees of Tamil Nadu. They are well aware of the seeding and flowering cycles, its medicinal properties, soil and water needs. The members have developed their knowledge into a plant nursery which bears over 200,000 saplings in the nursery at Thandarai, which include 106 varieties of medicinal plants, 12 fruit species, and 50 types of avenue trees. They have created a forty five minutes' walk through the natural herbal garden called the "Herbal Walk" which provides an enriched feeling of all the herbs with a good source of oxygen. They have reached a stage where they have clients from all over which include: Schools and colleges, Government departments, Hotels, Industries and Residential colonies. They also take on contracts to plant and maintain nurseries, afforest wastelands, plant a venue, fence and plant ornamental trees in gardens and compounds.
- ITWWS has set up a herbal centre where they collect, process and prepare herbal products from the herbs grown there. They also have treatment rooms and IrulaVaidyars are available for consultation and treatment. A massage room is attached to the centre where special herbal oil massage for fat reduction and body relaxation are administered by Irula male and female massage specialists.
- ITWWS has encouraged women to undergo specialized training for packaging. They have utilized the training and have started making attractive boxes for packaging Irula herbal products. They also make stationary holders, baskets and paper racks from waste wood on order basis. The Machinery along with the embossing unit was donated by Government of India.

- ITWWS has a basic and a Hygienic Kitchen which caters Hibiscus and Avaram Tea and a simple vegetarian menu prepared by Irulas Tribal Women for any conferences, seminars or one day visit on a pre-order basis at a very nominal cost.
- Goddess Kanniamma is unique to the Irulas and many songs and dances are devoted to her. Irula culture, in spite of its “equalization” and dilution because of various social factors, remains strong and fascinating. Shamanism is still practiced, and there are ceremonies and rites still to be documented. Through audio/visual recordings, interviews, and performance opportunities, the ITWWS has revived and revitalized Irula culture. Its cultural team includes men, women and children who perform at a range of functions. Several CDs have been produced of Irula songs including the famous Malli Poo. Many of these are sung while hunting-gathering; others are romantic, or religious.
- ITWWS has a village team. This consists of trained and experienced Irula women who make regular visits to the member villages of the ITWWS. Their duties include the formation and strengthening of sangams and self-help groups, mediation and conflict resolution, helping Irulas access welfare schemes and legal aid, and documentation and reporting. Often riding bicycles or mopeds on almost impassable roads, they are the connecting links between the ITWWS and its members. They also bring news of problems and incidents where the Society needs to intervene.
- The ITWWS supports and encourages literacy and education in several ways including sponsoring school uniforms, bags and books, training programs for Irula children, and following up cases of school drop-outs. This program includes 19 learning centres in 19 Irula villages, which function in the evenings after school hours. The animators are local women who tutor students, help them with their homework, and conduct adult literacy sessions. Recent funding has added small libraries to a few centres, with Tamil and English books.

Tourist Pattern of ITWWS

ITWWS at Thandarai receives a whole range of visitors from all over the world for various reasons ranging from school children, Government Officials, Individual visitors for various reasons. They are:

- Photographers, journalists, film makers, botanists, sociologists, anthropologists and educators are some categories of regular visitors.
- School and college groups come to see and work in their nursery and other units. Government officials from various departments are brought on tours, or come individually. The network of community based organizations is wide, nationally and internationally, and these visits are a good chance to dialogue about the many social and economic problems that is faced by adivasis.
- Visitors with a mission (such as making a film) can stay overnight for a reasonable fee. There are rooms with basic facilities, and simple vegetarian food. Thandarai, Their base, is a village about 9 kms from Chengalepet town, Tamil Nadu (roughly a two hour drive from Chennai city, or a 40 minute train ride).

It is a beautiful area surrounded by reserve forest. Night sounds include jackal and nightjar, while peacock and partridges are often heard in the morning. They Welcome Volunteer applications there are several “regulars” who come every year. The volunteers experience mutually enjoyable and useful time. Activities would normally include visits to Irula villages, documentation and reporting, nursery visit and packaging work, office routines and maintenance.

There are opportunities to go “hunting” with the Irulas; no longer for snakes, but for termites, rodents and other small game. However, plenty can be seen and photographed, including snakes.

The best time of the year in Thandarai is January to March. These are the cool(er) months, but any time is good. This area has two monsoons, the south-west (July-September) and the north-east (November-December). They experience a lot of power cuts, and they advice everyone to get a flashlight.

Working Model of ITWWS

The working model of ITWWS are encapsulated based on the following

- Self development of raw materials – Backward Integration
- Making products out of waste and using it further for services – Forward Integration

The Expenditures are covered by generation of revenue. Profits are re-pumped into the system. The members are the stakeholders thus assuring mutual benefit.

Social cause being met by way of environmental protection, regeneration of forests, wild life protection and organic cultivation.

The following model represents the entire working concept of ITWWS.

They generate their own raw materials, produce products and services which could be used or experienced, use the waste and make it into marketable products on demand basis, The costs are recovered from the revenues generated by various activities done by ITWSS. Extra profits are pumped into new concept development, employee training

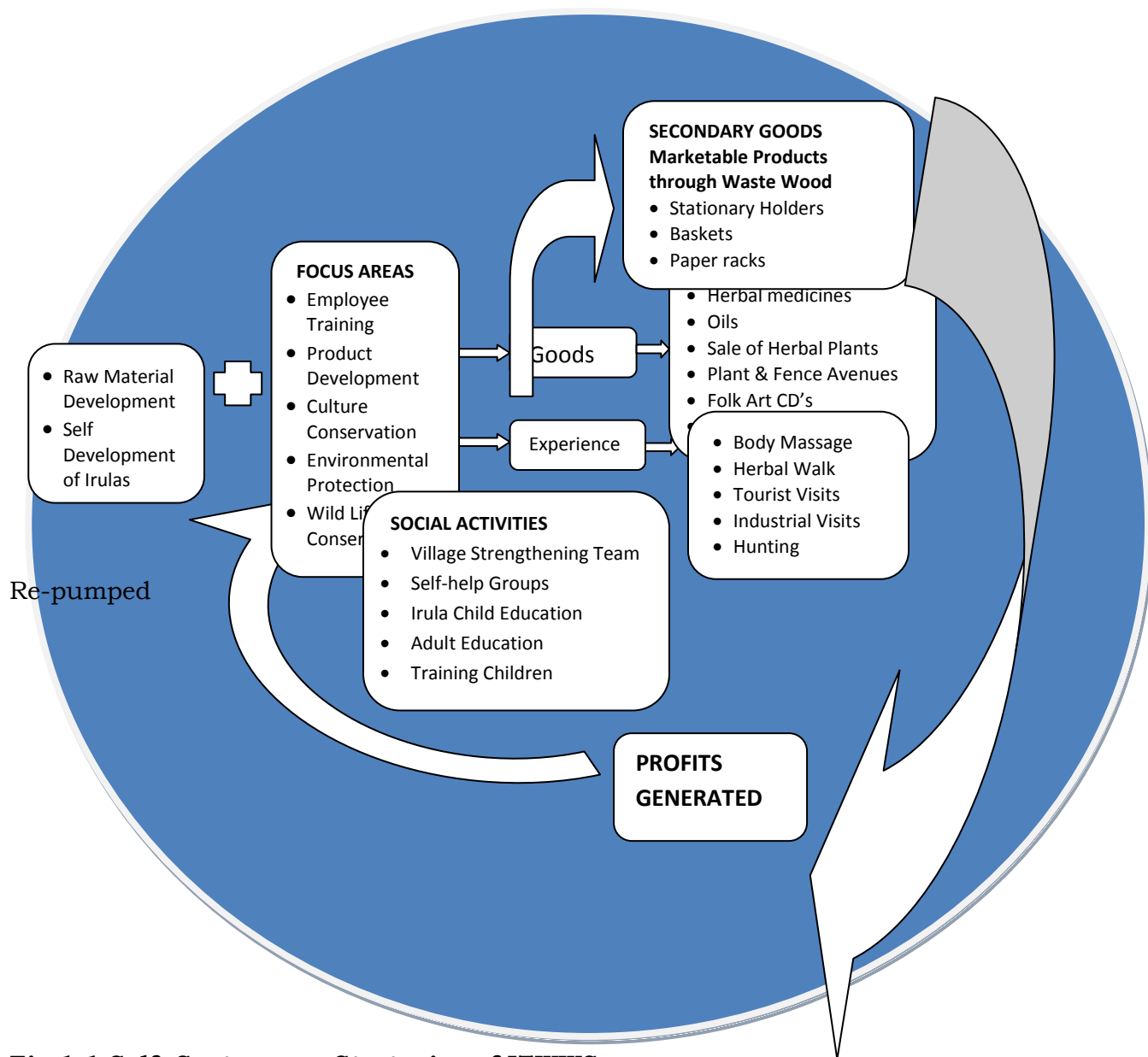


Fig 1.1 Self- Sustenance Strategies of ITWWS

Conclusion & Implications

In the case of ITWWS, the inclusion of a touristic aspect in their traditional organization is a positive adaptation to tourism on their culture. Empowerment is the key determinant impelling the communities towards adaptive responses which has contributed to sustainability because of the ownership of control over the direction of change. The problems encountered by the society in this attempt have been successfully overcome. They have tried to maintain their culture and authenticity. They are still practicing the inheritance transformed from ancestors along with documentation. ITWWS has developed a very strong culture as stated by Austin et al., 2006; i.e, Solidarity, ethics, trust, and mobilization for action. This has helped to create internal cohesion among the members. According to Austin et al., 2006 to create a culture of shared responsibility for results the central messages and

objectives have to be communicated via a constant flow of communication from between the members. ITWWS has followed and sustained this platform by forming village strengthening teams, self help groups. They convene regular meetings to convey and receive messages to and from its members. They have invested in training and coaching members with sharing of lessons and experience and they have converted this into revenue generation scheme through their products and services from their in-house knowledge on herbal plants and medicines and manufacturing products from waste wood. ITWWS are also looking into environmental protection, regeneration of forests, non-timber forest produce; they also have a share in forest collection, Wild life protection and organic cultivation.

Various strategies for sustenance of ITWWS social enterprise include entrepreneur strategy, self sustenance strategy, self employment strategy, skill development strategy, waste management strategy, self empowerment strategy, in-house knowledge development strategy, and subsidiary service strategy, Fee for Service Strategy and Marketing strategy.

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