

Community Engagement

Introduction

“Service should proceed from an awareness of what one owes to society. One's name and fame, all the comforts one enjoys, are derived from society. One finds fulfilment in society”

- Sri Sathya Sai Baba

1) **That being the case, if one does not serve society, whom else can he serve?** *Sheer gratitude demands that one should serve society which is the source of all benefits enjoyed by man.*

2) **Offer service according to the needs of the situation.** *Today, the needs of the poor in rural areas are quite great.*

3) **In this situation you must go out into villages, organise service activities and encourage the rural population to participate in them.**

4) **The village folk should be taught the importance of health and hygiene and how to keep their homes and villages clean and healthy.**

5) **The Sathya Sai Seva Organisations have to set an example to service organisations all over the world.** *There is no place in them for differences in caste, creed or community.*

- Sri Sathya Sai Baba, Discourse in the Poornachandra Auditorium, 21 Nov 1988

These five salient points were extracted from the above discourse made by Sri Sathya Sai Baba in 1988. It is profound that in this discourse, Swami revealed the exact mode of engagement expected of the Sathya Sai Organisation. This has been turned into the five 'E's reflecting the 5 pillars of effective community engagement.

The Five Pillars of Community Engagement:

- 1) **Energise** ourselves to serve SOCIETY
- 2) **Empower** ourselves with the right understanding of what is really NEEDED in society
- 3) **Encourage** community PARTICIPATION
- 4) **Enlighten** communities with right KNOWLEDGE AND TOOLS
- 5) **Excellence** in all that we do, to become ROLE MODELS

Pillar 1: Energise ourselves to serve Society

The challenge

- a) Sathya Sai centres are like lighthouses which should spread the light of love to their respective communities in which Sathya Sai centres exist.

- b) Many read Sathya Sai literature and interpret the teachings according to the level of understanding of the reader. Understanding the significance of Sri Sathya Sai Baba's teachings and to embrace the ideal of service in society is very important.
- c) In many places, Sathya Sai centres predominantly focus their main activities upon devotional singing (bhajans), service programmes and other activities such as study circles. Generally, Sathya Sai centres do not engage with their respective communities or do so on a very infrequent basis.
- d) Often members of a Sathya Sai centre (apart from the occasional service activities planned by the centre) will not generally move too far from their respective comfort zone or area.
- e) Sustainable community engagement often requires time and commitment which members often find challenging.
- f) Often Sathya Sai Centre activities are referred to as "extra-curricular activities" and may not be the priority for everyone.
- g) There is a need to make a list of all possible reasons that prevent individuals from engaging with communities.
- h) For each reason identified above, let us find a quote from Sri Sathya Sai Baba giving clarity and guidance as to why such obstacles should be overcome.

Action plan

- Study circles on why we need to engage more actively with the communities.
- Discuss salient points of Sri Sathya Sai Baba's teachings on the need to engage in community service.
- Discuss and empower members with the right enthusiasm to see the benefit in undertaking such community engagement activities and the impact it can have on individuals and the communities served.
- Identify people in the community (Sathya Sai centre or public member who is already deploying such programmes) and invite them to share their experience with members of the Sathya Sai centres.
- Make a list of all reasons that could hinder individual's engagement in communities.
- For each reason, identify Sri Sathya Sai Baba's quote giving guidance as to how such obstacles could be overcome.

Pillar 2: Empower ourselves with the right understanding of what is really NEEDED in society

Challenges

1. Lack of real information on community needs. Even within the Sathya Sai community, we need to be familiar with the talents and resources of the Members. Basic information on membership must be collected to assess our resources.

2. Sometimes Sathya Sai centres do not go the extra mile to assess such needs in the community for fear they might not have the resources to meet the challenges once a problem has been identified.
3. Service of real need should replace service of convenience. Often members of a Sathya Sai centre get engaged in routine service programmes that may not be the real need of the community. Often enough other NGO's and social bodies may already be doing similar work in these communities.
4. There is a need to pull back to strategize initiatives better and to gain a better overview on assessing the real needs of the community.

Action plan

1. Collect accurate and extensive data with the help of Sathya Sai members. The members should carry out a survey in the following areas to assess the real needs of:
 - i) the community where the centre is located
 - ii) the community belonging to urban and rural settlements further away from the centre
 - iii) school communities
 - iv) colleges and universities
 - v) Local authorities, district and national bodies (It is advisable to visit these offices and get first-hand information from an official member).
2. **Categorise the needs based on the following criteria:**
 - i) whether the service deployed will bring maximum benefits to the community served
 - ii) whether the community is already served by other NGOs'
 - iii) whether the task ahead requires longer timelines to see the full results
 - iv) whether expertise is available for the deployment
 - v) whether progress of the project can be measured
 - vi) whether there would be follow-ups to ensure sustainability
3. Workshops among Sathya Sai members to be conducted to assess points (i-vi) above and reach a consensus on the kind of service that needs to be conducted

A word of caution

- Always start something which is easy to accomplish, e.g. a children's fun day, cooking in a fun way or a sports activity to gain the confidence of the community.
- Do not declare that you have come to talk or address on a particular topic e.g. drug issues that are prevalent in many communities or do not declare that you have come to wipe out the alcoholic menace in

the community. Such a direct approach always provokes a defensive wall which is hard to break through.

- Follow Sri Sathya Sai Baba's maxim '*Come, test me, experience me, then accept me*'. This is the exact approach that has been carried out in many parts of the world with considerable success.
- Remember competency is about doing the work well. Then, follows engaging and empowering. We must have both.

Pillar 3: Encourage community PARTICIPATION

Challenges

1. Initially, it is important to note that only a few members can be involved in these community engagement programmes.
2. The first challenge is to maximise centre involvement by encouraging more members from the centre to enter into the community.
3. The second challenge is to ensure that members of the community come forth and participate fully in these programmes.
4. Another challenge is to ensure that their enthusiasm is sustained and the engagement continues to fructify into results.

Action plan

1. If the engagement is with the community, then the leaders of the community must be identified.
2. Community leaders must be briefed about the outline of the project that has been planned and its relevance to the community.
3. An Organisational structure should be created involving a joint committee between members of SSIO and the community.
4. The type and frequency of meetings must be determined.
5. It is important to note that effectiveness of such a meeting is the indicator of the success of the community engagement.
6. Minutes of meetings should be circulated and feedback must be conveyed to all stakeholders.
7. If the community identified is a school or a college, letters must be written and the right permission must be sought from the authorities. Protocols should be strictly followed at all times.
8. It will be good to identify key people from the community for the training programmes so that we create community pillars to hinge the success of the entire programme.

Pillar 4: Enlighten communities with right knowledge and tools

Challenges

1. It is always better to enter into communities to deploy programmes that are really meaningful and impactful. Often, many programmes are deployed similar to what other NGOs or social groups are doing.

2. It is a necessity to check, read and have relevant information on the SSIO website locally and globally. This will help in sharing knowledge, raising the profile of key activities and inspiring other leaders to emulate our work. We often spend little time in understanding and learning about important work that is taking place globally.
3. Tools in the form of structured work plans and modules are necessary so that members of SSIO become more skilled and competent to implement what is needed in society.

Action plan

1. Identify local agencies that have skills to empower SSIO members.
2. Identify SSIO organisations globally that have implemented similar programmes to tap into their resources, knowledge and experience.
3. The key premise should be that we embody SAI (Skills, Attitude and Initiative) to launch any programme.
4. It is suggested that weekly meetings be held to get feedback from the community so that future work can be further refined.
5. It is important to collect high-quality photographs during project implementation.

Programme	Target audience	Approach	Countries that have deployed these modules
1. Prevention of teenage pregnancies in school and local community – <i>Reaching for Inner Strength and Empowerment for Values, Innocence and Purity</i> (RISE for VIP)	Teenage girls in school and communities	12-week modular approach / 2 day camps	Malaysia
2. Hyperactive slow learners performing badly in schools especially in higher secondary schools – <i>Student Training in Attitude and Responsibility</i> (STAR)	Poor performers in secondary schools (Form 4 and 5's)	Weekly modular approach / camps	Malaysia
3. Hyperactive students in vocational training institutes with poor attitude and social skills – <i>Strengthening Heart, Attitude, Knowledge, Talents and Image</i> (SHAKTI)	Form 5 school dropouts who have failed and are in vocational training institutions	Weekly modular approach	Malaysia

4. Empowering ladies in the communities with modules on <i>Love, Inner Beauty, Growth, Healthy Living and Tradition and Culture</i> (LIGHT)	Ladies in Sai centres who can empower ladies in the communities to transform house to home	Monthly modular approach	Malaysia
5. Parenting programme	Parents in the community	Modular lessons	Malaysia Australia Thailand
6. Community Adoption Programme	Members of the community	Multi-disciplinary and multi-Interventional programmes	Malaysia
7. Teaching values through English – <i>Reaching out to Students with English</i> (ROSE)	Poor English speaking students	Weekly classes in schools	Malaysia
8. Serving Mankind Inspires Love everywhere (SMILE) is another programme to reach out to communities and schools for infusing values through English		Weekly classes in schools	Indonesia

The above is a list of compiled programmes currently available for any SSIO globally to use. We are currently still in the process of compiling more programmes that have been deployed successfully in other communities which can be emulated. If you are aware of any, kindly contact us so that we can expand the list.

Pillar 5: Excellence in all that we do to become ROLE MODELS

Challenges

1. It must be remembered that whatever programme we do in the community should have the potential to be duplicated.
2. Project implementation details are seldom documented.
3. Photographs and videos are seldom taken and their quality is often not up to the desired standard.
4. Documentation of best practices needs to be uploaded in the respective websites and should be made accessible to everyone. This effort needs to be seriously reinforced amongst members of the SSIO.

Action plan

1. The transformation seen in the community as a result of the project implementation needs to be documented, e.g. the percentage reduction of gang fights in the community since the time the Sathya Sai centre entered into the community.
2. Statistics can be obtained from local agencies and community leaders.

3. Evaluation forms as well as questionnaires should be distributed to assess the effectiveness of the projects.
4. Examples of role models can be in the following areas:
 - a) Social improvement indicators which should be identified at the onset of the programme.
 - b) Reduction in crime and other social issues.
 - c) Increase in community participation for all the programmes.
 - d) Increase in the frequency of meetings and the earnestness to attend such meetings by members of the community
 - e) Increase in the empowerment of members of the community which has resulted in personal transformation.
 - f) Increase in the visibility of the programme deployed in the community in terms of acknowledgment from both local and national governments.