



Livelihood Promotion by the Indian Voluntary Organizations with Special Reference to Himachal Pradesh: A Brief Review and Future Directions

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Abstract

Issues surrounding livelihoods have become central to all the developmental debates across the globe during recent years since livelihoods appear to be integrally tied to the three main developmental concerns of economic poverty, social inequality, and environmental non-sustainability. Yet, despite significant expenditures and good intentions, many people's livelihoods in India, notably those in the hilly state of Himachal Pradesh, are still insecure. While the onus of ensuring livelihoods for teeming millions lies with the government, non-government entities also play a significant role in providing and supporting sustainable livelihoods for the people. The present paper begins by giving the conceptual context of voluntary organizations. Using secondary sources, then it goes on to present a brief overview of efforts made by the Indian voluntary organizations for livelihood promotion with special reference to Himachal Pradesh. It concludes with listing ideas for further research.

Keywords: Livelihoods, Himachal Pradesh, Voluntary Organizations, NGOs, Third Sector

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I. Introduction

While livelihood has been one of the core concerns of humanity in general and academicians and policymakers in particular, the issues surrounding livelihoods have become central to all the developmental debates across the globe during recent years. This unprecedented level of importance can be attributed to the fact that livelihoods appear to be integrally tied to the three main developmental concerns of economic poverty, social inequality, and environmental non-sustainability. Despite significant expenditures and good intentions, many people's livelihoods in India, notably those in the hilly state of Himachal Pradesh, are still insecure (Singh & Heitala, 2014). Additionally, recent events have seen a number of stressors interact and reinforce one another to affect prospects for employment. These stressors could be technological advancement, globalisation, and climate change on a macro level, while institutional frameworks and public policies could be present on a regional, national, and local scale (Olsson et al, 2014). In the context of livelihood promotion, efforts have been made by the government as well as non-government entities (Datta, Kandarpa & Mahajan, 2014). While the onus of ensuring livelihoods for teeming millions lies with the government, non-government entities also play a

significant role in providing and supporting sustainable livelihoods for the people. The present paper begins by giving the conceptual context of voluntary organizations. Using secondary sources, then it goes on to present a brief overview of efforts made by the Indian voluntary organizations for livelihood promotion with special reference to Himachal Pradesh. It concludes with listing ideas for further research.

II. Understanding voluntary sector

Non-state actors include the corporate sector as well as civil society or the voluntary/non-profit sector which has also been referred to as the third sector occupying a space beyond the public and private sectors. This space is occupied both by individuals and groups-formal and informal. When civil society groups come together to form a more organized entity, the resultant institution is popularly known as a civil society organization (CSOs) or voluntary organization (VOs) or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or non-profit organizations (NPOs) which, in reality, encompass a diverse array of institutions with varying purposes, structures, and outcomes, defying any commonly accepted definition. As a consequence, there are nearly 50 acronyms being used for NGOs with a bewildering multiplicity of conceptualizations (Lewis & Kanji 2009). (For a detailed discussion on conceptual differences, see Lewis & Kanji, 2009; Martens, 2002; Tandon, 2017; Mohanty & Singh, 2001; Kilby, 2011; VANI 2013).

The National Policy on Voluntary Action recognizes all formal as well as informal groups such as community-based organizations, non-government-development organizations, charitable organizations, networks or federations of such organizations and professional membership-based associations as part of the voluntary sector (Planning Commission, 2007), while Steering Committee on Voluntary Sector for the 12th Five Year Plan (2012-17) asserts that civil society should be understood as different from the voluntary sector. The former represents any individual/group that possesses the identity of a 'citizen' and the latter embodies entities that are legally recognized as trusts, societies or section 25 non-profit companies registered under either state or central legislation (Planning Commission, 2011). In the Indian context, an NPO/VO/NGO can be incorporated under: The Societies Registration Act, 1860; The Indian Trusts Act, 1882; The Co-operative Societies Act, 1904; The Trade Union Act, 1926; Section 8 of the Indian Companies Act, 2013 (earlier Section 25 of Indian Companies Act, 1956 (Tandon, 2017).

For the purpose of the present study, VOs include those NGOs which have been defined by Vakil (1997) as "self-governing, private, not-for-profit organizations that are geared to improving the quality of life for disadvantaged people (p 2060)". VOs/NGOs have played an increasingly prominent role in the development sector since the late 1970s due to their intention and ability to adopt people-centric solutions to ameliorate the conditions of the poorest of the poor at the grassroots where the state could not reach (Banks & Hulme, 2012). In the Indian context too, these organizations have played an important role in poverty alleviation, social mobilization, increasing empowerment, and improving the livelihoods of people (Premchander, 2013). They have been found to be better at targeting the poor than the government (Murthy & Rao, 1997). Since sustainable livelihood development primarily depends on local contexts, needs, and priorities (UNESCO, 2005), NGOs are best placed to understand these contexts and priorities in designing relevant livelihood solutions not just due to obvious economic imperative but also due to their unambiguous social justice agenda. At the same time, as VANI (2013) notes, ever since the Edelman Trust Barometer was initiated, out of the four major public institutions-Media, Business, Government, and NGOs, .it has always found NGOs to be the most trusted institution. It is important to capitalize on their growing legitimacy and inherent transformational possibilities in order to develop sustainable livelihoods for the people at the grassroots.

III. Voluntary organization and livelihood promotion in India

The voluntary work in India registers a rich, vibrant and variegated history perhaps as old as the civilization itself (Kilby, 2011, Mohanty & Singh, 2001). Guided by the *dharma* (duty) of *daya* (kindness), *daan* (charity), *seva*(service), and *parmaarth*(altruism), voluntary action has been regarded as a superlatively exalted characteristic of a human being. It has always found the backing of religion as well, earlier of Hindu religion, later of Islam and Christianity as well. While an account of these layered antecedents is available in a number of publications (Kilby,2011; Mahajan, 2002; Mohanty & Singh, 2001; Sheth&Sethi, 1991), it can be said that in the Indian context, voluntary action has emerged though three strands as identified by Sundaram (1986) in the context of developing world: first, it is based on social conscience, defined by Beveridge (1949) as "the feeling of discomfort on the part of people in comfort about the people in discomfort". Second, voluntary action has emerged from social consciousness generated by organized interest groups of people who are committed to a people-centered approach. Third, organizations of various target groups, particularly from among the weaker sections, have emerged. While these organizations have contributed in various areas such as health, education, sanitation, innovation, environment, and livelihood, this section of present work aims at summarising the efforts of such organizations in livelihood promotion, followed by a brief summary of academic work done in this sector. .

During the pre-independence period, a number of visionaries experimented with the livelihood promotion of the community. Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore conceived of the Sriniketan Experiment (Mukherjee, 1952); Spencer Hatch of YMCA came up with the Martandam project; F.R. Brayne implemented Gurgaon Project (Dayal & Mahal, 1961) and Albert Meyer made Etawah project operational (Mayer, Marriott & Park, 1958). A number of similar, small yet effective initiatives were undertaken to develop model villages with livelihoods as a key component (e.g., Bhattacharya & Ponnusamy, 2017). However, it was Gandhi, who can well be regarded as the father of community-driven livelihood promotion in India. He vehemently expounded his ideal of developing a self-reliant village in order to achieve *Gram Swaraj* keeping the poor and disadvantaged at the very centre of initiative and adopting sustainability as his key guiding philosophy (Datta, Kandarpa & Mahajan, 2014). He championed the idea of developing local economies by promoting inter-dependant activities, as a member of a mutually supportive community. He founded a number of organizations to facilitate Gram Swaraj but the one named Gram Udyog Sangh (Association for Promotion of Village Industries) was the one that was directly linked to livelihood promotion. Voluntary work in this period largely focussed on developing awareness and capabilities of people about the productive possibilities and abilities in the rural context.

In the post-independence era, when the Government of India adopted a welfare state model, an institution inspired by Gandhi became the official organ of the State, namely, the *Khadi and Village Industries Commission*. Other Gandhian institutions got federated under the nomenclature of *SarvaSevaSangh*. Its workers known as *Sarvodaya* workers and other Gandhians became active in different parts of the country working as per the social and economic ideals of Gandhi jee. They established transformative institutions such as Bhartiya Agro Industries Foundation in Pune for rural development and; Textile Labor Association in Ahmedabad for ensuring workers' rights in industrial setup (Mahajan, 2002). Few Gandhian like Vinoba Bhave shunned institutionalization and instead worked alone for ensuring land rights for the landless, the most vital resource base for livelihoods.

The drought of 1966 inspired a number of voluntary relief efforts often initiated by Sarvodaya workers in most of cases. After the relief efforts, many of the workers decided to take up longer-term efforts to reduce dependence on rains, increase agricultural production and generally work for rural development. Later in order to integrate these country-wide efforts, Association for Voluntary Action in Rural Development (AVARD) was established on the insistence of Jai Prakash Narayan. A number of young men and women who volunteered during the drought and later during the Bangladesh refugee crisis, either stayed on with the community supporting them or came back and started their own community-centric initiatives. For example, Bunker Roy established the Social Work and Research Center (SWRC) at Tilonia, district Ajmer, Rajasthan; Joe Madiath set up *Gram Vikas* in Ganjam district, Odisha. A number of similar efforts were made in rural health and rural technology as well. These efforts attracted and inspired an entire generation of young and educated persons who could have enjoyed a comfortable life but who chose to live and work in remote rural areas with poor people.

By this time, many international relief and development groups began work in the country, using donated food grains for *food for work* programs, offering short-term lean season wage employment, and building rural community assets such as roads and tanks (Datta, Kandarpa & Mahajan, 2014). A number of foreign donor agencies also started to give funds to Indian VOs/NGOs for carrying out development programs that supported a number of organizations. Jawaja experiment initiated by Prof Ravi Mathai in 1975, involving 200 villages with a total population of approximately 80000 people in the drought-affected areas of Rajasthan helped communities to identify and develop sustainable livelihood options which demonstrated that political, environmental, and political challenges can be overcome by empowered communities (Gupta, 1988). The Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC) established by Bunker Roy got morphed in 'The Barefoot College' which focuses on skill development and education. Dr. Kurien became successful in organizing milk producers into a dairy cooperative (AMUL). It was a time of realization that good intentions or ideological zeal alone were inadequate for successful and effective community work. Professional training for development work was felt missing. The Institute of Rural Management, Anand (IRMA) was set up in 1980 and became a nursery for nurturing generations of professionally equipped young people for the rural development sector. PRADAN, set up in 1982, also contributed in preparing young professionals for developmental work around livelihoods at the grassroots with tribal and other disadvantaged communities in remote locations.

Jawaja experiment, IRMA, PRADAN, Barefoot college and similar initiatives made a paradigm shift possible by the 1990s. By the 1990s, the working paradigm had shifted from volunteerism to professional voluntarism (Datta, Kandarpa & Mahajan, 2014). While volunteerism implied working for no or a token remuneration, latter believed that moderate remuneration did not vitiate the idealism of community work.

The state has also been supporting and promoting livelihoods since independence largely by development and stabilization of agriculture through irrigation. Then integrated sectoral strategies were adopted in the 1950s-60s: KVIC promoted the biggest opportunities in the non-agricultural sector; Green Revolution fuelled opportunities in the agrarian sector increasing productivity; NDDB supported livelihoods in livestock

rearing and allied activities (Datta, Mahajan & Thakur 2004), In the same vein, the Central Silk Board, the Coir Board, the National Horticultural Board, and the Development Commissioners for Handloom and Handicrafts promoted related sectors. These efforts needed heavy investments and still left out millions of people including landless, small and marginal farmers, tribal and women. Hence strategies for promoting vulnerable segments of the population were needed. A nationwide poverty alleviation programme, Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) was launched. It got refashioned as the *SwarnaJayantiGrameenSwarozgarYojana* (SGSY) to promote self-employment among the poor through the acquisition of an income-generating asset with the help of a bank loan and a government subsidy. (This scheme got merged with National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), which got combined later with National Urban Livelihood Mission to form DeenDayal AntyodayaYojna –DAY in 2015.) Such initiatives still did not generate sustainable livelihoods. New thinking dawned which said poor people know how to take care of their lives and livelihoods, they need credit support (Datta, Kandarpa & Mahajan, 2014). SEWA Bank in India and later, a number of other organizations started running micro-credit programs through solidarity groups. These efforts quickly multiplied. The minimalist credit approach and integrated sectoral promotion approach began to converge in the 1990s (Datta, Mahajan & Thakur, 2004).

It is important to note that all of these programmes and schemes are provided for the role of VOs/NGOs. For example: in the First Five-Year Plan (1951-1956) Rs. 40 million was earmarked for voluntary organizations; the 3rd Five-Year Plan (1961-1966) accepted voluntary action as an aspect of public cooperation; the grant-in-aid in the Fifth Plan (1974-1979) soared to Rs. 830 million; the 7th Plan (1985-1990) earmarked a sum of 1- 1.5 million for voluntary organizations. The emphasis in the seventh plan was on professionalizing voluntarism, and introducing professional competence and managerial expertise so that voluntary agencies could meet the basic requirements of government, such as accountability. NABARD got established in 1982 and the Council for Advancement of People's Action of Rural Technology (CAPART) was created in 1986 after merging PADI (People's Action for Development India established in 1973) and CART (Council for Advancement of Rural Technology established in 1983). These organizations funded VOs for accelerating rural development in the country.

In 2005, a landmark legislation came up in the form of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) later prefixed with Mahatma Gandhi becoming MNREGA. Aiming to realize the right to work, it makes it mandatory for the government to provide 100 days of wage employment in rural areas. CSOs were involved as LokSewaks to ensure the proper implementation of this Act in letter and spirit. They also worked to propose a needed amendment to make it more effective.

Besides these schemes and programmes of the government, a number of NGOs have been involved in promoting mass livelihoods in various sectors. These organizations include SEWA, BAIF, MYRADA, AKRSP, PRADAN, RGVN, and BASIX. Some of their initiatives have been studied by Srinivasan (2008) in terms of key features of their projects and challenges faced in the process of impact maximization. Besides these organizations, a number of smaller groups and institutions have made attempts in promoting green livelihoods. A series of compendiums published by ACCESS Development Services (2011-2016) containing prize-winning entries of the Sitaram Rao Livelihood Case Studies Competition has made an important contribution by documenting effective strategies and efforts. These volumes contain useful insights for development practitioners and policymakers summarising cases around various themes such as: innovation in sustainable agriculture, equipping youth for employment, enhancing livelihoods of the poorest of the poor, catalyzing markets through collective. Another collection of case studies by WFP & IFAD (2006) describes 5 initiatives in Odisha, Gujrat, Jharkhand, and Chhatisgarh summarising the process of intervention, sustainability, and scalability aspects, the role of intuitional and financial linkages.

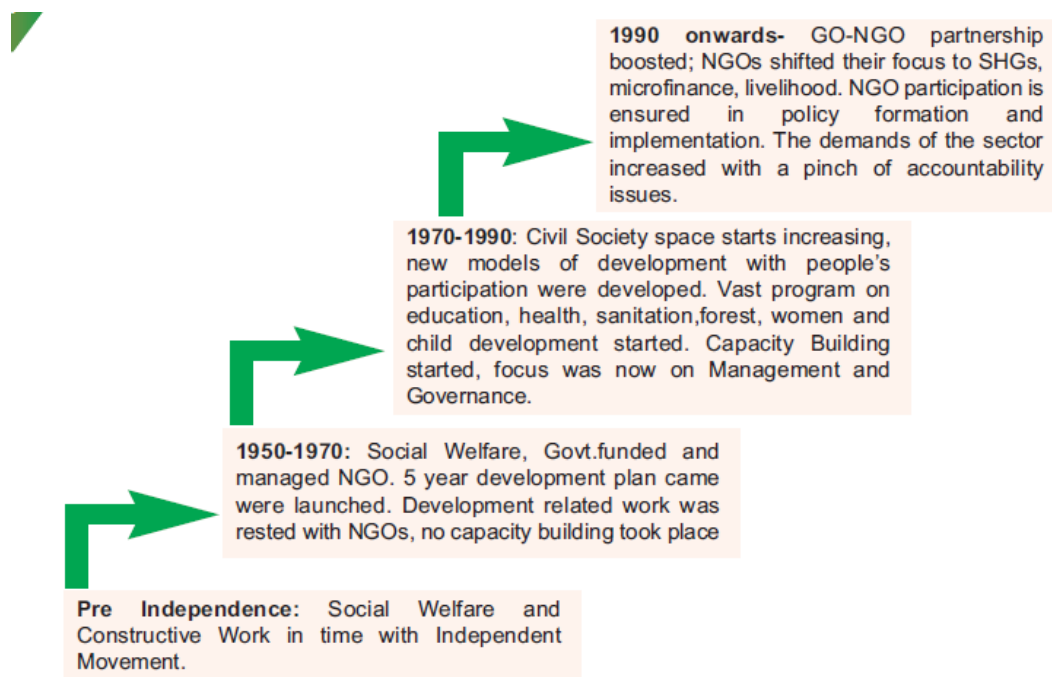


Figure 1. Evolution of voluntary sector in India (Source: VANI, 2018)

By 2012, CSOs have been found playing the role of service providers, activists, aggregators of voices for the people, or extended arms of government or private sector simultaneously working as a welfare organization, income generation organization, microfinance institutions, and enterprise support entities (ACCESS Development Services (2012). A conference in 2012 by the ACCESS Development Services focusing on the role of CSOs in livelihood promotion notes that:

- a. these organizations are increasingly transitioning from being a partner to a sub contractor of the government;
- b. they are taking up advocacy and rights based issues;
- c. traditional CSOs are being replaced by commercial management firms;
- d. they are taking up more advocacy and rights-based issues;
- e. grant-based models are giving way to a new emphasis on sustainable social enterprise model;
- f. they are adopting a value chain approach for reducing poverty ;
- h. perhaps for the first time, the urban poor are also being targeted;
- i. impact investment is being talked about;
- j. adaptation strategies to combat climate change, specifically in the agriculture sector are being worked out and are being experimented with.
- k. collective action to benefit smallholder producers is being supported.

This publication advocates for making a distinction between livelihoods protection and livelihoods creation and articulates that CSOs have a clear role to play in livelihoods protection by opposing projects disastrous for the livelihoods security of the vulnerable populace as well as monitoring of the performance and outcomes of government programmes of livelihood promotion.

Outlining contributions of civil society organizations Premchandrar (2013) observes that moving from welfare to self-reliance and rights-based approaches, the organizations in the third sector have been involved across all areas of livelihoods- creating enabling environments, livelihood protection, livelihood support, and livelihood promotion. They are also working across target groups- with the extremely poor and with those who can start businesses. They are promoting a range of people's organizations-cooperatives and producer companies. They have been partnering with as well as challenging the government, private sector, and national and international donors.

At this point, it must be noted that role of NGOs/CSOs in rural/watershed development and poverty reduction in the Indian context is a much-studied theme across many disciplines (e.g., Farrington & Lobo, 1997; Ramakrishna, 2013; Bhose, 2003) but barring a few exceptions (e.g., Srinivasan, 2008; Premchandrar, 2013, WFP & IFAD, 2006) studies focusing on their contribution in livelihood promotion could not be found during the current literature search. In geographic literature on the Indian context, no study could be located on *Shodhganga* and other databases.

IV. Livelihood promotion by voluntary organizations in Himachal Pradesh

Community-driven initiatives spearheaded by voluntary organizations have a long history in the context of Himachal Pradesh, particularly in sectors such as health, education, environment, and rural development (Sharma, 2013). But there is no information available about their exact number, areas of work, and impact on the community. However, in order to capture the contribution of non-profit institutions (NPIs) in the System of National Accounts (SNA), a study was conducted by the Department of Economics and Statistics (DoES) in the state on the insistence of the Central Statistical Organisation in 2010-11, which in turn, got guidelines from UNDP in this regard. For the purpose of accounting, NPIs have been defined as those legal or social entities created for purpose of producing goods and services whose status does not permit them to be a source of income, profit, or other financial gains for the units that establish, control, or finance them (DoES, 2011). The other three major types of institutional units defined within SNA are: corporations (financial and non-financial), government agencies, and households. It must be noted that registered under Himachal Pradesh Societies Act 1860 amended to 2006, these NPIs include: non-profit service providers (e.g., hospitals and schools); non-governmental organizations engaged in poverty reduction programmes; arts and culture organizations; sports clubs, advocacy groups, foundations, community-based or grass-roots associations, political parties, social clubs and unions, business and professional associations, and religious congregations. Hence it must be noted that NPIs cannot be termed as synonymous with development NGOs, the object of the present study. Yet due to the dearth of relevant information, the information pertaining to NPIs is being treated as a proxy for the object of the current study.

While there were just 52 such NPIs in 1970, the number increased to 39642 in 2008 (DoES, 2011). The maximum number of registrations (16418) took place during the last decade of the previous century. The current number of such institutions stands at 47025 as per the website of the Department of Cooperatives, Himachal Pradesh (<https://coophp.nic.in/>). Currently the largest share of these institutions is covered by the three districts: Kangra (22.35%), Shimla 15.76% and Mandi (10.46%) covering nearly half of the NPIs in the state. 92.22% of these NPIs were households while 6.97% were serving the government in 2008. In Himachal Pradesh, about 93 % of NPI are located in rural areas and only 7 % in urban areas, which was the highest in the country (Central Statistical Organisation, 2012). These NPIs have been found to be engaged in 12 activities. Most of them (49%) claimed to be active in Social Services followed by 9.52 percent in Cultural & Recreation, while the least preferred area of work (0.02%) termed International Activities (DoES, 2011).

It is important to note that most of these NPIs exist on paper. To illustrate, when field visits were made, out of this total 39642 societies, only 40.2% could be traced. Further, out of these traced NPIs, only 7.69% of them had audited accounts. The remaining 92.31% have either not prepared their accounts or they have prepared but either they were unaudited or unavailable at the time of filed visits (DoES, 2011).

In the context of HP, the pattern of livelihood promotion by VOs/NGOs can be said to be almost coterminous with developments on the national arena primarily due to the fact that larger processes and engagement of key actors-government, donor agencies, and CSOs-can be surmised to be at work almost at the same time barring a few exceptions. However, it is important to note that this is largely anecdotal and no account is available of the promotion of CDGLIs in the state.

During the current literature review on the role of NGOs in the context of Himachal Pradesh, one book (Kapoor & Singh, 1997), three research papers (Kumar & Marh, 2019; 2022; Sharma, 2013) and three unpublished Ph.D. dissertations (Kumar, 2013; Sharma, 2010; Kumar, 2019) were found. The book published in 1997 is not available with the authors or the publisher or in the bookshop or in the libraries contacted for this study. However, a discussion with the co-author and citations of this work in the extant literature informs that it captures the history of voluntary organizations in 9 distinct phases and presents case studies of works of NGOs in Himachal Pradesh. Sharma's work (2010) briefly describes 10 NGOs in the state, and gives a detailed description of 3 of them-namely Chinmaya Organization for Rural Development (CORD), Himachal Pradesh Voluntary Health Organization (HPVHA), and Society for Rural Development and Action (SRDA). Being a dissertation submitted in the Department of Commerce, it studies in detail financial aspects of these organizations. In her later work, Sharma (2013), sums up beneficiaries' perception of the contribution of NGOs in rural development in terms of the construction of link roads, irrigation facilities, and water conservation, watershed development, promotion of alternative livelihoods (sericulture medicinal and aromatic plants), promotion of organic farming, and implementation of MGNREGA. Kumar (2013) in his dissertation submitted to the Department of Political Science, gives a detailed account of three NGOs namely: HPVHA, Himachal Gyan Vigyan Samiti (HGVS) and Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA). He studies the impact of these NGOs in various aspects of rural life.

Kumar and Marh (2019) document a green livelihood initiative of *Dona-Pattal* (bowl and plates made using leaves) making supported by the Society for Environmental & Rural Awakening (ERA), an NGO working in the resource-deficient *Changar* region in the Khundian *tehsil* of Kangra district in Himachal Pradesh. Based on the information collected through a review of documents, a series of in-depth interviews, and two focused

group discussions, the project is being described in terms of its context, target group, objectives, strategy, impact, challenges, sustainability, and scalability. In his other work, Kumar (2022) attempts to present the findings of a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with 16 key informants in order to understand the perspectives of practitioners engaged in the promotion of livelihoods in the state of Himachal Pradesh pertaining to: the journey of promotion of local green livelihoods in the state of Himachal Pradesh; facilitative and prohibitive factors for the promotion; and, imperatives for policymakers, practitioners and researchers.

V. Conclusions

This brief review sums up the story of livelihood promotion by the voluntary sector in India with a special emphasis on Himachal Pradesh. It is evident that voluntary organizations have contributed immensely to enhancing livelihood opportunities for poor people and continue to do so in various parts of the country including Himachal Pradesh but their stories largely remain untold or inadequately told at best. Data deficiency remains one of the key limitations of the proper study. On the other hand, a number of challenges are also looming large over the voluntary sector in the state that needs urgent attention which includes (but are not limited to): tokenism in the name of community participation; pro-corporate neoliberal policies; lack of value addition opportunities and marketing linkages; initiation of a project without proper study of feasibility and viability; apathy of community perhaps due to comparative affluence; and, lack of end-to-end support to the community projects across the value chain. Studies need to be undertaken on various aspects of livelihood promotion. Documentation and impact evaluation of successful, partially successful as well as failed livelihood initiatives would create a database that would not just help practitioners, they would also help theoreticians to build new frameworks and models and help them modify existing ones. Further, investigations on the role of the legal status of the organizations and the effectiveness of initiatives need to be made. For example, it is not yet known in the context of Himachal Pradesh, what are the advantages and disadvantages of registering an organization under various Acts (Society, Cooperative, Company). At the same time, a number of formal and informal mechanisms of community engagement are successfully working in the state for centuries. It is important to find out the reasons why these communities managed systems are working effectively and efficiently without any external interventions for so long. Traditional benefit-sharing mechanisms should be found out, models available in other states should be studied, and alternative models should be suggested which are contextually relevant and applicable.

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