
SIVA Trust: Building relational capital

Transforming the resolve of one to that of many

Abstract

This case study unfolds the evolution of a small and local Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), **Service Initiative for Voluntary Action (SIVA)**, set up in 1994 in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, in Southern India—an area in which industrialisation and commercial development have been ignored for a long time. Diving deep into local issues at the grassroots level, the founder Subramania Siva, addressed the needs of distressed, marginalised families directly. SIVA Trust began small, and remained in a hyper-local mode for close to 30 years, but made a disproportionately large impact due to the founder’s personal commitment that helped root a “culture of volunteerism” throughout SIVA and its work.

Away from the mainstream gaze, SIVA does not work in a project mode; rather, it has chosen to focus on a fixed geography treating no individual or community issue as being too small. In fact, it is unique in working with the disabled, to provide them relief and with the most marginalised backward communities engaged in manual scavenging. It also focuses on child education, women’s empowerment and health. Recognised for over two decades of work in Tirunelveli the HEKS, Switzerland, made SIVA the state-level convenor for tribal land rights to forests with the State coordination office at Coimbatore; this expanded the ambit of their work to Coimbatore district in 2017. This case untangles the familial culture the NGO works with, where value is appraised through the impact on the families in the communities they work with.

SIVA represents the NGOs working with, in the words of its founder, “a service mentality to serve people”, doing significant work, largely unnoticed by the media or larger non-profits, and philanthropic actors. Their importance lies in reaching where much larger organisations fail to reach, through building long-lasting bonds with communities, by operating within the frame of “constructive work”(Govindu, 2019). And all this is despite constant challenges of financial stability. How such an organisation, and many like it—whose work has been based on sustained commitment centred on the personality of the founder—can deal with succession without disturbing this cohesiveness becomes a systemically important question.

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Keywords: Social work; relational capital; constructive work; volunteerism; grassroots; succession; disability; revolving funds, Tirunelveli, Arunthathiyars

Author(s): Menaka Rao,¹ Priti Dargad,² Kushagra Merchant³

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About the Authors:

Menaka Rao is a consultant at ISDM

Priti Dargad is a Senior Research fellow at ISDM

Kushagra Merchant is a consultant at ISDM

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The Location: Tirunelveli

The story of SIVA originates in Tirunelveli, the southernmost district of India, in the state of Tamil Nadu. It is flanked by Kerala on the West and the Gulf of Munnar on the South; the East has Kanyakumari (and Vivekananda's Rock) in the Indian Ocean. Apparently idyllic surroundings but caste tensions simmer underneath (Naig, 2022). Part of the reason is underdevelopment; the society is largely feudal with a relatively high degree of gender and caste discrimination. Though, within India, Tamil Nadu state ranks third in per capita income, with centres like Coimbatore and the surrounds of Chennai, the capital, being highly industrialised, this progress has escaped Tirunelveli in the deep south (Business Standard, 2023). For better administrative focus on development, with effect from 1986, the district was bifurcated and a new Tuticorin District was formed, and in 2019 the district was further bifurcated and a new Tenkasi District was formed (*Tirunelveli District*, n.d.). The Tirunelveli district has a geographical area of approximately 3876 sq km, in the southeastern portion of Tamil Nadu (refer to Exhibit 1).

MANUAL SCAVENGING

Manual scavenging was outlawed in India in 1993 through "The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act". In 2013, another legislation was introduced prohibiting the employment of persons as manual scavengers (Prohibition, 2013). This banned the employment of people to clean human waste and allowed for imprisonment of up to five years, for those who employ manual scavengers. Scavenging includes cleaning septic tanks, removing animal carcasses from human habitation, skinning them, removing human excreta, and other such tasks as perceived to be abominable to castes higher up in the hierarchy but continued traditionally by pushing them to the bottom of the hierarchy.

In places like Tirunelveli, Tenkasi and Tuticorin districts, Arunthathiyars are the most marginalised groups among Dalits and are called "Dalit among Dalits." Untouchability against Arunthathiyars is not only practised by Caste Hindus but also by dominant fellow Dalits (IC Case Study, n.d.). Within the Arunthathiyars, the prevalence of abandoning women is high, resulting in a substantial population of single women. These women are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and economic abuse by feudal-minded men of their communities. To combat this, the Neelam Trust and Arunthamilar Viduthalai Iyakkam were founded in 2009 under the leadership of Mr Jakkaiyan and six other Arunthathiyar women (Anandhi, 2013).

Dr B R Ambedkar¹ fought all his life to bring equal opportunities to the Dalit communities. It is ironic that while the UN and the Indian government celebrated his 125th birth anniversary in 2016, over 1.8 lakh people were engaged as manual scavengers, removing human and animal excreta from the streets and dry latrines, cleaning septic tanks, sewers, and gutters (Permanent Mission of India, n.d.; Vitta, 2016).

From contemporary society such injustice was being contested legally in courts by public rights activists. An example is S. Ayyaa, an activist from Tirunelveli, who filed a public interest litigation in the Madras High Court (Times of India, 2022).

¹ Dr B R Ambedkar (14 April 1891 – 6 December 1956) was an Indian jurist, economist, social reformer and political leader who headed the committee drafting the Constitution of India. He advocated political rights and social freedom for Dalits in India (*Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar | Biography, Books, & Facts | Britannica*, 2024)

S Subramania Siva

These issues also caught the attention of some who were not necessarily within the fold of civil society, yet were deeply affected by what they saw and harboured a desire to contribute. Concurrently, there are individuals working quietly through grassroots organisations to bring about a change in the lives of Dalits and the disadvantaged. One such individual was S Subramania Siva (Siva), who was born to a freedom fighter. Young Siva and his family members were, undoubtedly, influenced by the family upbringing of selfless and morally upright service to the community. Of his early life influences and choices, Siva had this to say:

I have had a passion for social work, right from my college days. I had an interest and in college there was an option whether you join the National Cadet Corps or Social Service League. I opted for the Social Service League. So, after college hours, I used to go to the nearby *basti (rural)* areas to teach children like that, it is my passion.

Said Siva, in the context of why he founded the SIVA Trust.

In many cases organisations were started for the survival of the person, who started as a means of a profession for him, because he couldn't get any other job. So, he would start a "Trust" and do something. So, very few people were having some specific motive to improve or bring about changes in society, many of them were just career-oriented.

This motivation to serve is what has kept Siva, the man as well as the Trust, to hold ground for three decades. But the beginnings were made when a relatively young Siva, as an officer of the central government, was posted in Tirunelveli. It gave him a formal opportunity to make a difference in an area where most of his working years were spent.

The Beginning

Subramania Siva recalls,

It is a long story, spanning a period of more than 28 years. I was working in the southernmost district of Tamil Nadu, Tirunelveli. As part of my job (at the Central Home Ministry), I used to visit and interact with many NGOs functioning in that region. Many of them were just functioning for the survival of those who had started it, and did not pay much attention to aspects like legal compliance, financial regularity. I was from a family of freedom fighters and social servants. I discussed with some friends in the social sector and floated an NGO as a "role-model" organisation for others. Thus, Service Initiative for Voluntary Action (SIVA) Trust—which coincides with our family name, Siva—came to life (NGOStory, 2022).

Driven to respond to what he saw, in 1994, SIVA Trust was founded by Subramania Siva's family, with financial support from him. Elaborating on the formalisation into an NGO, Siva says

It was formally registered on 6th April 1994. As a start-up organisation, we took up poverty alleviation and improvement of educational status in the nearby villages. Since I was in government service, I did not involve myself fully [with SIVA Trust], but contributed some amount for its initial financial

expenses.

However, the beginnings were modest. The intent was to act now using whatever resources were available rather than wait. And, in contrast to the general approach of a welfare trust, SIVA had a grassroots beginning. This has continued to remain so, as Siva highlights “... basically, we are focusing on the rural public, not even the semi-urban.”

SIVA was different in its guiding principle from the typical top-down approach of a larger non-profit, where the work may not necessarily emerge from direct engagement with the last mile or the farthest of the farthest. This distinction is worth noting. In the case of SIVA, the work started small, modest and was direct. In Siva’s words:

In that way, whatever I could contribute from my salary and alongside my friends’ contributions, we started (in) some small way with nearby villages, especially focusing on the Dalit pockets. [In particular], we started [small activities] like some tuition classes or skill training classes with some sewing machines in Tirunelveli district.

As Siva highlights, there were no specific sets of issues but from the very beginning the idea was to engage with the marginalised as well as address social concerns that affected the broader community and also look into individual concerns.

We gave representation in the Trust to different religious and caste groups and that tradition is being followed by us even now. Because of this secular background, when there was a communal flare-up and a series of reprisal killings in our working area, we intervened and worked to restore communal harmony.

SIVA was religion and caste neutral; in fact, work for emancipation from manual scavenging meant a focus on the lowest rung of the Dalit families—not a high-visibility programme or a numerically large or concentrated political constituency to garner meaningful political backing.

The First “Intervention” (1998–2007): A formative period

Sincere grassroots developmental work at the family and individual level went unnoticed by the media and larger agencies—governmental and non-governmental. This was not a de-motivator to Siva and his associates in the Trust whose work was imbued with a sense of motivation and modesty. They were also not seeking rapid growth or more funds for that. Their attention was entirely on the impact they could make on a family, within the resources on hand.

However, work with this mindset eventually draws attention. SIVA got its FCRA registration, making it eligible to receive foreign grants. As Siva relates, the work eventually came to attention in 2002:

After seeing the work we had done in the field and the sincerity with which we did it, one foreign donor came forward with a project for us [even though] we never directly reached out to.

He continues,

... That, donor agency [HEKS/EPER]² from Switzerland, came forward to support our organisation: for improving the lot of 1000 families from the scavenging community. This was SIVA Trust's first project with the specific objective of creating awareness and changing the attitude towards the scavenging community, or the Arunthathiyars. So, around 1000 families in four blocks of the district were included, and HEKS/EPER agreed to give Rs 10 lakhs–11 lakhs per annum.

With those funds the Trust had to [carry out] a number of tasks with the community such as making them aware of their rights; providing a legal orientation; suggesting activities they could undertake; encouraging participation in the Panchayat's activities; and such domains hitherto unfamiliar to SIVA's small team.

The project actually lasted eight years and then was extended for one more year as SIVA Trust was able to be frugal and complete the project well under the sanctioned budget (NGOStory, 2022).

The approach involved educating the Arunthathiyars on what they *were* doing in the killing and skinning of animals versus what they *could be* doing. Even if it was too late for the elders, SIVA wanted to make a difference for the youth (i.e., the next generation) in their families by helping them come forward to take up education, learn new skills and secure better employment in the future. For once, the Trust had funding and they could make a material difference, using it to form local self-help groups (SHGs) and create possibilities for the community to engage in alternative occupations. In Siva's words,

They helped us start a savings and credit system. We started self-help groups and formed them into a federation. Most of them were working in others' fields [cultivable land] and only very few had their own strips of land for cultivation. They were helped with training on organic farming methodologies and distribution of seeds. Further, some widows and destitute in that group [facing economic hardships] were helped with milch animals, goats etc., for them to develop sustainable livelihoods.

While the intervention formally concluded in 2010, the grant still had some unutilised balance left and SIVA was able to continue the activities for a year. The relationship with HEKS/EPER would continue and SIVA would again join hands with them, when it came to issues of tribal forest land rights in 2016–17. Meanwhile, the savings and credit activity which this intervention had helped to 'incubate' would later come to occupy central stage in SIVA's work, and perhaps unknown to itself at that point, in sustaining it through a period of financial austerity.

A follow-up intervention (2007–16): Laying a spark

Over time, the savings and credit feature would take the shape of sustained activities concerning livelihood and women empowerment features. In 2007, SIVA was looking for other donor partners also and

² <https://en.heks.ch/>

it found one in a Dutch donor, TdH-NL which assigned SIVA a project in their (TdH-NL) core area: *children are at the centre of everything we do* (Terre Des Hommes, 2020)

As Siva outlines,

Thereafter, another donor agency, Terre des Hommes, Netherlands, gave us a project for child rights protection in 15 villages, which lasted another nine years.

Its geographic reach remained small but Siva got a chance to work with a critical constituency: children of the marginalised, especially on the issue of child rights among the marginalised communities in these 15 villages. The long-running nature of the project also meant that it was able to work on several aspects of the issue.

Another initiative with these children was securing their education. To quote Siva,

Right from the Anganwadi stage, we had small early learning centres. Then we had supplementary education centres, that is, those who are already going to school and require further coaching to improve their educational standard. So, we started several evening tuition centres in different places. Then (there were) some who were school dropouts because they couldn't get on further with education. So, we identified them, and coached them at the non-formal education centres that we created, to appear for public examinations like 12th standard, 10th standard, and 8th standard like that.

The Programme Coordinator, Hemima, adds,

Under [our] education [activities], we have these programme-level indicators where we compare the initial target with the actual achievement with each person in the team having certain targets. [These targets were identified from experience.] For example, let's say that if we find [that] there are 10 children who are working and there is child labour exploitation, then we would make it a target and somehow intervene and educate these children by the end of the year.

The team followed up on the progress of each child by involving the parents and the school administration too. As Hemima elaborates,

And we have parent-teacher meetings to speak with the parents about whether they are studying. We also keep track of dropout rate at the schools. We are constantly in touch with the headmaster and have reports of how many children are studying there and how many are attending the schools, what is the absence rate, etc. In case we notice somebody is not attending school for a while, we intervene immediately. We talk to that child and its parents and make sure they go to school again.

Furthermore, to protect the rights of girl children and combat the insidious influence of child marriage, SIVA kept its ears to the ground. Before a girl's education could be aborted, SIVA intervened. Emphasised Hemima, "Another example is that we also discreetly keep a track record of child marriages that happen. We [try to] make sure that no child is married off."

The groundwork on this project led the foundation to work on child rights protection which sustains till today. It continues to create awareness on child labour eradication, mobilising gram sabhas for child protection, and running campaigns to enroll children in school. It has over time also added elements of supplementary education, non-formal education as well as vocational training. It continues to raise awareness outside through publications, in both English and Tamil, on these concerns, including those of child trafficking.

Revolving Fund

While SIVA has formally incorporated the work with children into its programmes (See Exhibit 2), the project with TdH-NL also allowed it to support the families of those children by expanding on its work on women empowerment and livelihood that it had started in partnership with HEKS/EPER. In particular, through its partnership with TdH-NL, it was able to significantly expand on strengthening the instrument of savings and credit. This happened through TdH-NL providing a "revolving fund" of Rs 60 lakh in instalments as part of the project.

The revolving fund operation translated into aggregating women as a SHG first. Thereafter, women from these communities were able to get loans—literally at their doorstep—for their income-generation activities and even for emergencies. Another significant benefit was that such loans helped beneficiaries get freedom from the detrimental hold of moneylenders, from whom they had already taken loans. Given that access to formal banking facilities was a challenge in such remote locations, the revolving facility allowed SIVA to significantly expand its SHG-driven savings and credit programme in a meaningful way, even in the limited areas it operated in.

Under the revolving fund mechanism, SIVA would charge a service fee to cover its cost of lending, collecting, and other related operating expenses. Whatever remained after deducting costs was added back to the capital. Siva is emphatic that it is not charity but a developmental initiative: "Once you start giving loans to them, you should ensure that the loan is returned so that another person is also benefited from it. It's revolved, accumulated and again new persons are given loans. Furthermore, even older borrowers, after repayment, ask us for a loan again if there is another need, and we give. Like that, it goes on."

He recognises the high degree of responsibility attached to this and concedes that "this is also a specialised focus area because everyone cannot do that." This was a systematic operation—lending small, recoverable instalments backed by close monitoring of collection without exercising any coercive force. The revolving fund was supported by reasonable loan service charges, with the surplus subsequently reinvested. All in all, this enabled the corpus to grow significantly.

In Siva's words the mechanics were:

We levied loan service charges on the funds given to these women groups, and with whatever service charge we got, a portion of it was rotated again as capital and the remaining amount was used by us for running our project activities like salaries, travel, and all.

Siva proudly asserts that "except in one village, we have seen almost 100% recovery for the last say 10–12 years in which we have been doing this operation". Even during the COVID pandemic the operations were

intact; “the recovery was affected for only a few months and re-established by December, 2020.”

Many microfinance set-ups have lost their capital overtime by failing to understand the repayment capacity/willingness of creditor families. An understanding of the grassroots organisations and local connect (“relational capital”) safeguarded SIVA Trust from delinquencies. For a small organisation operating with a small geographic footprint that is an incredible asset to provide custodianship to.

It has been nearly 14 years since the operation first started under this project and the capital pool has expanded four-fold from the initial Rs 60 lakh to Rs 2.5 crore. And over these same 14 years, this relatively modest sum of money has supported disbursement of nearly Rs 13 crore cumulatively, as of 31st December 2021. In other words, the revolving fund has been revolved nearly 23 to 24 times [SIVA Trust]. Siva has this picture to present on the cumulative impact of the fund saying, “In the past 14 years, cumulatively we have helped around 22,000 [SHG] members with Rs 13 crore of funds. Along with their internal lending, the total figure has gone up to Rs 29 crore.”

Relational capital

The “revolving fund”³ became an important point of departure in the life of SIVA Trust. Not only did it address the need for credit for the women SIVA worked with, the processes of savings, but lending and collection also ensured that the Trust was constantly in touch with these women. It is in this constancy that SIVA established its relational capital: a form of trustworthiness and credibility that enables it to enter into a constructive, continuous, reciprocal relationship with different households in the villages.

As a result, the fund continues to support SIVA’s activities in a variety of ways. As Siva points out that activities, such as education, initiated through earlier projects continue courtesy the service charge from the revolving fund,

We run evening tuition centres in eight villages, catering to the academic improvement of 300 rural children. We also have two vocational centres where adolescent girls are trained on sewing and embroidery to earn a living.

Vennila, one of the women SIVA works with, says “I am learning tailoring in this training centre. I stitch blouses. Neighbours give me blouses for stitching, [and] by stitching blouses I am earning money. Those earnings are useful for me and my family” (C Venkatasubramanian, 2022).

Krishnaveni, another participant in these programmes, recounts,

We are a struggling family of 9 people. People from the tailoring training centre came here; they asked me what I have studied. I told them I completed up to 8th standard and I am at home presently. They made me join the training class. They bought all the needed material and trained me. After training I bought a machine and I am stitching from home and earning

³ Overall, revolving funds are designed to provide a sustainable and reusable source of financing for the organisation to help them carry out their missions and projects without constantly seeking new external funding sources. The term “revolving” implies that the funds are used for activities and generate returns. These returns flow back into the fund, making them available for future use.

through that. Many thanks to SIVA Trust (C Venkatasubramanian, 2022).

The revolving fund made a lasting impact on the community. It helped SIVA strengthen its SHG base and through SHGs the Trust helped disadvantaged individuals raise their capability and income. The approach was not to merely impart charity out of benevolence. The saying “give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, teach him to catch fish and you feed him for a lifetime” applied to SIVA’s activities. As Siva illustrates,

Now what we do is [that] we have these evening tuition centres at seven places for around 300 students of different classes. Here we allow the tuition teachers to take a minimum amount, say around 50 rupees per student per month, for teaching all subjects because if everything is offered free, they will not be regular in attending classes. They (tuition teachers) are all volunteers. So, we give them allowances of 1,000 to 2,000 rupees depending on the strength of the students.

Students are involved in self-development, teachers also earn some livelihood and the overall local community benefits in the entire scheme of things. To quote Siva, “and through our revolving fund scheme, we also help in the purchase of a new sewing machine to those trained in our training centre, keep [it] in the village and earn some income from it”.

The emphasis was on concentrating resources and remaining relevant locally, rather than spreading resources thin. There was a personalised, empathetic response to local issues driven by a commitment to social causes. Siva continues,

We are not looking to become a bigger organisation or focus on a bigger geographical area. We [continue to] concentrate on select geographies. So, as a result, instead of setting up a home or an institution or something, we help individuals who need help.

Inclusion of the disabled

Of course, it helped a lot that Siva retired from his government job in 2007 (as the project with TdH-NL commenced) and was able to devote full time. In Siva’s own words, he “took over the reins of the organisation”.

But it was not just a post-retirement vocation for Siva. He took his new full-time role very seriously. Interestingly, he obtained a social work degree *after* his retirement indicating how serious he was about stepping wholeheartedly into social work. In his words, “When I took over the reins, to equip myself with professional knowledge, I studied a Masters in Social Work after my retirement, to become a professional social worker.”

Shakila Ramanathan [Trustee, Finance, SIVA Trust] underscores that, “He is a very, very strict leader; very, very punctual, very, very, like you know, organised.” This diligence that Siva brought to operations certainly showed up in the success of the revolving fund operations. At the same time, Siva was like a father

figure to those who worked with him. And this ability to nurture and care could be seen in the work at SIVA when it concerned the disabled.

In Siva's words,

Because of my association with a disability organisation—UDIS Forum—for about eight years, I developed knowledge and interest in that field too and as a result started helping persons with disabilities on an individual basis, and got some funds for this through Global Giving, USA.

Evidently, the work with PwD (Persons with Disability) was dear to Siva. He talks at length on this subject, where he says he personally works with these people. They are not taken on simply as part of a "programme." The team at SIVA is engaged in getting the persons with disability the National Disability ID card, pension, aids and appliances, rail/bus pass and other Government schemes available, by interacting with the Tirunelveli District Differently Abled Rehabilitation Officer. It is noteworthy that, even today, there are those women who remember how these small efforts went a long way in helping their own lives such as the one below (Project Progress Reports, 2018),

One youth whose both legs got amputated during an accident was helped in getting artificial limbs. All these efforts were possible only with the generous donations given by the donors. With the help of a doctor from nearby state of Kerala practising homoeopathy, medical assistance was provided free of cost to 46 persons with disability in the area, including three children with intellectual disability, and for various other ailments.

Muthulakshmi who is visually disabled appreciates the support she got:

SIVA Trust gave me Rs 25,000 as loan. I bought a cow using that loan; that cow yielded a calf now. My father is blind and I am also blind. Knowing that we are blind, Kala madam helped us. The cow gives 4 litres of milk in the morning and evening. So I am getting a good income from that. Thanks to SIVA trust for helping us (C Venkatasubramanian, 2022).

SIVA's work does not end here. It also supports them with opportunities of self-sustenance as needed. Murugan, a young paraplegic boy, recalls his initial interaction and is thankful for the subsequent follow-up and support:

First, they came to meet me from SIVA Trust. They came and enquired what business I know. I told them if they [could] help [me] to establish a shop, I could earn from that. They asked me how much I needed for opening a shop and I told [them] I needed Rs 20,000. They gave Rs 10,000 worth materials and Rs 10,000 as cash in hand. First, I was without a job [but] now I am looking after a business. They should live long and I should also grow more in my life (C Venkatasubramanian, 2022).

It is difficult for a non-profit operation to actively bring the disabled within its fold of work, especially if they remain small, involved in other activities and constrained with funds as SIVA Trust has been. The disabled are, in effect, the *hidden* marginalised. But SIVA's approach of moving beyond the frame of a "programme" to actually dealing with each instance has helped it stay the course. As Subramania Siva points out, SIVA's approach to disability is perhaps a clear expression of its attitude to serve others: a desire to "assist versus giving alms."

Just as well, the issue of disability is a wide spectrum and the accounts of support that SIVA has provided to the differently abled or PwD (Progress, 2019). These instances include helping one deaf and dumb woman, aged 35, get a free sewing machine from the Government. Similarly, a 17 year-old girl (suffering from intellectual disability) who had studied till 8th standard and was doing menial work for the past four years, was counselled to undergo vocational skill training and was admitted to the tailoring class conducted by SIVA.

Five senior citizens having orthopaedic disability were issued adjustable walkers for easy mobility within the village and to their workplace. Likewise, "homeo-medical" assistance was provided free of cost to 46, including three mentally retarded children for various ailments (Progress, 2019).

Overall, its work with the disabled, which continues even today, in a sense, exemplifies its understanding of marginalisation and showcases a distinct sensibility. It has over the years worked closely with families of the Arunthathiyars, the disabled, and later on, as it will be seen, the tribal people. All these constituencies undeniably manifest marginalisation in their own poignant manner.

There are many programmes and agendas that are designed around them, but there are not many who take persistent pains to involve themselves in the circumstances and travails of individual families and stay the course with them. It is this resolve of SIVA, and organisations like it, that, some may argue, constitutes the heart of civil society.

But in the case of SIVA this heart was soon to be tested.

A crisis and a resilient response

The period from 2008 was highly valuable for SIVA. Though its footprint remained small, the success of its revolving fund programme and Siva's taking on a greater formal role appeared to set the organisation to expand and widen its scope of work.

In 2016, not only did the TdH-NL funding stream end, there were also no new projects. For Siva, it was an excruciating moment. In the face of the funding drought, Siva was upfront with his talent and told them that there is nothing coming up now. The organisation would sustain with whatever funds were available but those who would like to seek a better future could leave—at this juncture there were nine full-time employees.

He recalls with a tinge of sadness, "I said, this year we can only pay so much and next year if the income from the revolving fund increases, we will also increase your salary". Of the nine persons, six stayed on.

But luckily, as the TdH-NL project ended in 2016 TdH-NL allowed SIVA to retain that revolving fund (a common practice when it comes to revolving fund contributions). As a result, it enabled the Trust to continue the work. The service charge earned on it over time served as a minimum income floor for SIVA's operation. This basic financial stability allowed it to have a broad-based, need-based approach tailored to target individuals and families supported by coverage from the revolving fund, independent of project funds.

As Siva pointed out that even today "as part of that project, we have an on-going 'revolving fund' operation with around 110 women SHGs paving the way for women's economic empowerment, healthcare and prevention of child labour, child marriage and child abuse."

Conducting affiliated programmes like women's leadership promotion, tuition centres, vocational training centres and the carrying out of campaigns against child labour and child marriage prevention, all these continue even now in that area with the service charge the Trust gets from this revolving fund operation (See Exhibit 2).

The organisation sustained its talent and it was able to continue the work with SHGs, thanks to SIVA's thrift, prudence and frugality, which made sure that it was able to skillfully channelise a "grant of Rs 60 lakh into a financial sustainability strategy." It is notable that the funding which started in 2007 continues to be a big part of their operations in 2022, indicating a lot of credibility and trustworthiness. Equally important, it points to a robustness of the grassroots connect that SIVA had.

But perhaps what mattered more was an inner clarity to remain locally relevant rather than spreading resources thin.

Helping individuals who need help

This last-mile delivery and focus on individuals served as the safeguard that saw SIVA survive the crisis. Overall, it has developed a very close relationship with its community and maintains a close pulse check on overall "community health", responding to changes in it. This pulse check is highly granular, down to individuals within the community. This translates to how work is organised and monitored at the project and programme level.

The work in SIVA is distributed across different divisions, including those for health, education, community, and child marriage. In each division, as per Hemima, "programme-level indicators are then set based on actual experience." A more or less similar approach applies to the "targets" set for individual team members too, wherein the actual area where the team member is active and its particular context determines the targets.

SIVA is sensitive to the fact that while there has to be accountability for the work of individual team members, there can be no rigidity. Thus, while there are no performance *measurement targets*, the focus remains on the overall progress of individuals in the communities they work with, taking into account their particular circumstances. Meanwhile, talent is deployed on a beneficiary programme or task under "Siva Sir's" guidance. His involvement in this regard, as Siva explains, is quite hands-on:

There is no post of chief executive here in our organisation so far [see Exhibit 4]. So, I give them directions on how to work, and what is expected of them and they do it. I go there personally twice or thrice in a month. Then, on a day-to-day basis, we keep in touch with them through WhatsApp groups, by email and all, so it is a regular interaction between us.

However, Siva puts this into context saying that “in fact, he [Siva] sees his involvement in building capacities of individuals as one of the most critical aspects of his role.” As Siva says,

Whoever comes to me as staff, my main work is to train them first, for future work of the organisation, rather than expecting work out of them immediately. I understand my limits. So that’s why my idea is to promote/develop other people who are with me so that they take a role which I play now.

While this may not conform to established management norms, it nonetheless underscores an important point: grassroots work demands a certain kind of motivation and temperament. In the case of SIVA, it is centred in the idea of “helping individuals” which was sustained by the, now less talked about, notion of “service mentality.”

“A service mentality to serve people”

This service mentality was Siva’s guiding principle which, in some ways, is how some people find deeper meaning to their lives. When asked to elaborate, Siva, in his characteristic manner, put it simply as,

Service is something you do voluntarily to help someone who needs help. It is (simply) having empathy for the suffering of others. It has both an immediate aim to help that individual but a longer-term desire to bring about some change in the system itself.

At the same time he is categorical that he has no illusions of changing the system in its entirety but “doing the best he can within his limits.” This naturalness (with regard to the idea of serving) may be due to the fact that coming from a family of freedom fighters, service for Siva is not linked to any “ism” but is simply a value-system he happened to be raised in and was second-nature for him to accept and practice. And this simplicity and humility in the understanding of service reflects in the fact that to deliver service, remaining rooted is a choice SIVA made as an organisation and has stayed firm on it.

As of April 2022, the organisation had staff of only seven full-time employees supported by a maximum of ten volunteers. In terms of educational profile, only two were graduates; the rest were higher secondary pass. The monthly salary started from Rs 8,000 at an average of Rs 10,000. Siva was acutely aware of the reality that,

There is no project as such and the team is paid out of whatever we earn from the revolving fund service charge. So, salary-wise it may not be a very big salary and they don't have any other occupation [to supplement their income from SIVA].

He emphasised, however, that there is a constant effort to provide them compensation through other means, “.. we did this (COVID) vaccination drive and during that time they got two thousand rupees more. And if we get a new project, we will take them as project staff and pay them more.” So, even today

(2022) when there is no committed funding to speak of, what is it that motivates the small band to stick together?

For Siva, it was clearly a case where motivation was not trumped by money constraints. He puts it pithily: “they come because they have a service mentality to people and so they continue with us.” And SIVA’s culture recognises and values this very distinctly. Siva continues,

They like the work of the organisation [as well as] the way in which we treat them. The Board and I personally [relate with] them [which they appreciate]. This is a motivation we [all collectively] have and [they have faith in this] because they know about me and my background.

Shakila who in her capacity as Trustee (Finance) is involved in all financial matters, including compensation, asserts that while compensation may not be high, it is also not neglected:

And here, when it comes to the remuneration part, it's been very clear and open, and they have been taken care of [in terms of] their medical insurances, their ESI, and other welfare measures. Remuneration is not a complaint when it comes to those staff levels because [despite the financial constraints] every year there is an increment, and it happens with discussion with them.

Outsiders may find this puzzling, but she makes an important point that in the geography where SIVA operates, there are many other competing considerations along-side money. The first of course is that “... they might be very driven by a social cause.” But in addition, she says that the identity this work gives them equally matters,

We also think that there is one [other] factor that working for an organisation like SIVA Trust gives, and that is an identity in the community that they live in. Yes, [it is] at a smaller scale [but] they are recognised as representatives of SIVA Trust. And they are recognised as the person who has helped them to change their lives.

Because of the area where they're working and the [several] social stigmas which [exist] there, these people have kind of helped to [build assurance that] there is somebody who can take care of us and that can build confidence.

She outlines that this work offers them an opportunity that may be harder to otherwise come by:

[While] they don't have any other occupation [nonetheless], what drives them to come to work every morning as they wake up? After all, it is painstaking work that they do in the field. It is the social status that came from discharging social service, counterbalancing the low salary.

Shakila points out that whatever be the motivation one cannot fail to appreciate the doggedness that has sustained SIVA,

SIVA Trust is really gifted to have people around us who carry the same thought process [and] share the same energy to [translate it] in the field. [And] Sir [Siva] has been very humble. SIVA Trust is a very small organisation [but] in my perspective, it is a very established organisation, which has been here for more than two decades in fact, and the strength for SIVA Trust has been its staff.

[Indeed] we don't call them staff [but] the family of SIVA Trust. And they have been very, very instrumental in [seeing] the vision [through]. If you see [many in] the team, which is there now with us, they are almost touching a decade with SIVA Trust.

This for Shakila is perhaps best captured by the fact that,

This is a different category of staff. And when it comes to the development sector, you have people who have barely passed their matriculation [and then] you have people who are degree holders. But [it is quite possible that] when it comes to the output, from both of them [it] might be the same. [And there are] many times [where] a person who's just 10th pass can surprise you with better results than a person with a degree.

In the “debate on development”, this breed of motivation may appear to belong to a different age. But its need and value is not lost on many practitioners themselves. Prasanna (Director, Aram Porul), who has closely observed and participated in many of the developmental actions in Tamil Nadu, is increasingly convinced that,

What we need today is good old social service, which came from the heart. But today we have more managers, who can identify needs, develop projects and measure impact. ... I think Tamil Nadu, in large part, has achieved external infrastructure that might be needed for basic living for people. What it needs is mental health. This is what I hear from many. Broken families, substance abuse seem to be major issues of the poor. We need old social workers who worked to build relationships, who worked out of love and care. There was a time when the development sector needed professionals, but today it seems we have lost the good old value of individual care in “professionalism.” We need individuals who have the capacity to care and influence people.

Though perhaps put sharply, the team that makes SIVA echoes the underlying message. And increasingly more quarters are sensing the message in their own ways, a reason that has enabled SIVA to gain recognition.

Going beyond Tirunelveli

This band of committed “social workers”, represents a perhaps fast evaporating sub-set within the larger world of NGOs. Even amongst NGOs that work frugally, it is certainly not the norm to have no specific programmes, an acute shortage of external committed funds, staff working on meagre salaries for an

extended period of time, along with a large proportion of volunteers working, far from the limelight, in remote rural areas. And it is all the more ironic, given that SIVA's balance-sheet carries a sizeable revolving fund balance of Rs 2.5 crore.

But, perhaps, what distinguished SIVA was that it never lost its focus on Arunthathiyar women and children, and of equal note—the disabled. To that, it would soon add the tribals in the forests of Western Ghats, specifically, their right to their land (under the landmark “Forest Rights Act, 2006” legislation), a fact lost amidst the “din of development.”

Though there existed a historic symbiotic relationship between forests and its dwellers mainly tribals—it was only in 2006 that this was officially recognised in the statute under the “Forest Rights Act, 2006” (FRA), a nationally passed legislation. Both, individual rights to habitation within and self-cultivation, as well as collective community rights to grazing, fishing and habitat rights for Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) were recognised (Ministry, n.d.). All told, the Act empowers the forest dwellers to access and use forest resources in the manner that they were traditionally accustomed—to protect, conserve and manage forests; and protect forest dwellers from unlawful evictions. It also provides them access to basic developmental facilities such as education, health, nutrition and infrastructure. (Refer Exhibit 3).

In Tamil Nadu, the forests lying within the Eastern and Western Ghats had various tribal communities. It was in this context, and in recognition of his painstaking work in and around Tirunelveli, that the HEKS/EPER called upon Siva to work in this field. He points out that,

They asked me to take up the work as a state convener for organising that project for getting land rights, [specifically] forest land rights, to the tribal communities [thereby] improving their agriculture and setting up market linkages for selling their products so [that] they are economically secure.

[And] we [became] part of the Tamil Nadu People's Forum for Land Rights (TPFLR) project, funded by HEKS/EPR Switzerland, between 2017 and 2020.

With this project, a significant new chapter began in terms of recognition, because until then they had been focused on Tirunelveli only. This period led them to open a project office in Coimbatore as well. Siva recalls,

As the state convener for that project, I was managing forest land rights and economic improvement work for tribal people in Tamil Nadu. From that time onwards, we had two offices: the registered one in Tirunelveli, and the project office in Coimbatore.

The work was cumbersome as securing land titles, or *patta*,⁴ is a long-drawn-out affair. For SIVA Trust, it was also an opportunity to work with a much larger cohort of people on complex issues. However, as Siva outlines, it was a satisfying four-year period:

In Tamil Nadu, for about 6,500 tribal families, we have procured “individual patta” under the Forest Rights Act, and for about 142 families, we have secured “social patta” for collecting minor forest produce (NGOStory, 2022).

⁴ In India, a Land *Patta* is a legal document that certifies a person's ownership of a certain plot of land. It is also known as the Land Revenue Record or the Record of Rights (RoR).

Extension into Coimbatore, compared to remote Tirunelveli, provided Siva with better access to the State Government and the private bodies that he had to liaise with. But it also brought into contention something SIVA had been able to avoid all along, working comfortably under the radar, in close contact with the community.

SIVA was clearly exposed to the inherent conflict between the rights of tribals and industrial development, such as those of misclassified tribes likely to lose out on newly conferred rights. It also brought Siva himself into contention with the State Government at large, and the Forest Department in particular. Of this new dimension to his work, Siva clarifies that,

We are not competing with the government [nor can] we compete too. But we know [that] as we are in the field that the government has not reached the goals properly. So, we [can only continue to] appeal to the government to reach them.

The FRA had its own advantages and disadvantages. Its advantage, for instance, lay in a focus on conservation and climate change, both in the long-term interest of forest-dwellers. On the other hand, it exposed an entire community to legal action for the misdeed of one individual within the community. For example, if a fire is reported in a reserved forest, caused by personal negligence, the rights of an entire community in the region to the pasture and forest produce may be suspended by the government for a fixed period. In such matters the aggrieved could only appeal, stirring a debate as reported in the press (Choudhary, 2019).

The project for tribal development in the nine hills of Tamil Nadu with the financial support of HEKS/EPER, Switzerland, continued even during the COVID-19 pandemic and came to an end by December 2020. It was an important project, and the Trust, as it has done so many times before, began to look for other donors to sustain the staff members of this project.

It was fortunate to find support from the Azim Premji Foundation (APF) in October 2022 to expand the work of “fostering tribal development” across 24 villages in the Krishnagiri District of Tamil Nadu. FRA has provision for both individual and community rights. Accordingly, building upon its earlier work, SIVA was able to put together 341 applications for individual titles and applications covering 352 tribal families under the community rights provisions (Service, 2023).

Nonetheless, the intervening period following the onset of curtailment in mobility because of the COVID-19 lockdown was not conducive. There was a significant drop in regular work at SIVA. The initial one or two months of the lockdown resulted in lack of personal contact among staff and between the staff and the public they serve. The Trust sustained the staff by paying salary even for the months they could not work. But, slowly the momentum picked up, and before the end of the year a semblance of normality returned.

COVID-19 put to test, once again, the resolve of SIVA Trust, much like it was during the funding crisis the Trust faced in 2016. It made amply evident that the strength behind this resolve lay not in the programmes of the Trust but the culture it had managed to build for itself through these strains and struggles.

“A familial culture”

The secret sauce—a thread that has always provided the team at SIVA the capacity to grit-their-teeth through crisis—is the presence of Subramania Siva. In him, the rest of the team is able to find a role model

and a guide through which they are able to channel their motivation. While the older employees had imbibed this culture through an intimate relationship with Siva, even a new entrant like Shakila felt the same soon enough.

Shakila joined SIVA, just as it was nearing completion of two decades. As a Trustee, she had to consider what lay ahead but to do that well she acknowledged that she must properly value the effect that Siva has had, for, a future without Siva should not mean a Trust without the values and the energy he carried. Shakila started with recollecting the effect that Siva had on her personally as she stepped into this role:

I'm actually humbled to be part of SIVA Trust because you don't get an opportunity to work with the amount of experience of Siva Sir. More than a Trustee of SIVA Trust, I would say I'm a student of Siva Sir.

I'm motivated by Siva sir much as they (employees) too are. And for me to get into the role of a Trustee at SIVA Trust has been (strongly influenced by) Siva sir. When you see him at his age doing multiple works you [realise that you] are hardly there yet and there is much more to do. This is what [really] pushes me to apply myself to this role.

Furthermore, she notes that Siva's leadership style is characterised by a certain balance,

I see him as more of a leader. He gets on very familial terms with everyone: if you ask him, he will know many members, family histories [of those who work at SIVA], which I might not know because I'm not involved to that extent. But this is the environment which he has [been able to cultivate]. And that is his [true] strength.

Certain things come from experience but many things come sort of on their own [such as] attitude and inbuilt nature. For many people here and for him, most of it is inbuilt. When you see as an outsider like me you see him that way.

This personal bond that Siva has is not an understatement and it serves as a source of greater comfort to the team. Shakila cites a recent instance of Hemima,

... [who] was not well, and she was admitted to a hospital. He went all the way from Coimbatore to Tirunelveli to see her and check if she needs any support. Financial support can happen across the internet [for] you can just transfer the money, but then the mental support which somebody can give [matters much more], and not everybody can do that.

And she reiterates the impact that a strong, well-respected founder has on building a tightly knit set-up,

If you see the team which is there now with us, they are almost touching a decade with SIVA Trust. So I don't think they would even consider leaving SIVA Trust unless we want them to move out of this place. So we see them as our strength, in fact.

[Today] what makes them work in the end will be Siva Sir. He is the driving point and this is where I get a little worried because for somebody to motivate [in that way], it's not very easy [for] it needs a lot of energy.

It is this set-up which Shakila, as a Trustee, has to ensure does not disintegrate as SIVA considers the elephant-in-the-room— “succession”. She speaks of the anxieties accompanying this question,

[Today] Subramania Siva is the main person to run the whole show of the organisation. But to execute his thoughts (vision) at the field level, we need somebody who has the same understanding as Siva sir, [and] God forbid if something happens to him, in that case what will happen to this team? Who will be able to keep this team as motivated as he has is a big question mark. That's where I see a challenge for SIVA Trust.

Framing the succession question

This challenge is not lost on Subramania Siva. He has been aware for quite some time that SIVA needs to adapt if it is to continue what it has built so far. However, does this make for flux and tension? How to maintain the bond between the team and the community while at the same time ensure that the team is adequately compensated? Or will the considerations of funding override the spirit that has animated the organisation so far? It seems prescient that when Siva founded the Trust, he named it “Service Initiative *for Voluntary Action*”: succession which fails to account for this volunteerism may result in succeeding the body losing the soul.

This spirit speaks to a deeper sense of purpose when people join civil society. First and foremost, it raises the pointed question of what exactly draws someone to work in this sector? Beyond very successful careers, people still feel pulled by something that their career has not been able to provide. This work is perhaps representative of a way that individuals seek to express that intangible something. It is a personal endeavour. Stemming from the country's long history and culture enjoining us on how to lead the “right” life, for some this is akin to embarking on a spiritual journey. Further inspiration comes from the real experience of deprivation and amelioration; and the real nitty-gritty of “small-scale” community-based development work—in some ways the most “classic form” of civil society work—embodied by persons like Mahatma Gandhi.

SIVA has acquired a distinctive organisational form in the context it operates in: being too small to drive change alone, it works with local administrations. Being highly local, it is strongly bound by the needs of the communities as it looks to engage both donors and the state with them. While it might be a small outfit in the larger scheme of things, its longevity and closeness have made SIVA a very important entity within a particular community.

How does SIVA retain what is at its core and yet adapt to the governance and management changes required by the changing context outside? Where does an organisation like this go from here? Being so founder-driven, with an extremely inspirational personality, how does it progress from here? Shakila calls it out explicitly: the big challenge she sees is the dependency on the founder—there is a reliance on the founder to give instruction, which means the “idea generation”, as Shakila puts it, is not much, with people essentially doing what they are told. How much longer can this continue, considering that the founder is now 74?

Preparing for a pivot

From a small beginning and dedicated community service to responding to changes called for in the organisation, Siva has carried the vision. At the same time, he was not blindsided by his passion and devotion to shunning outside influences. Age has not made him possessive; rather it has intensified his desire to pivot.

And this is important because as a founder looking for succession, it is important that he sees the same level of meaning in the work as when he started. While the future demands an answer, it has not made him despondent at all and he acknowledges that even today the work invigorates him. Whenever asked, he continues to emphasise the idea of service that has always animated SIVA's founding, namely,

We have been [busy] doing [the] work but never expose [talk about] our work because we are here to serve somebody. Personally, if I'm able to help a person in a day, either by way of financial assistance or physical assistance or even assistance with my experience, that is a day I can sleep peacefully. That's my outlook (NGOStory, 2022).

At the same time, Siva acknowledges the inherent weakness in his organisation of which for him fundraising stands out. And he is candid about its backdrop,

Initially, because of my government employment, I could not be directly involved or guide the organisation. Those who managed its affairs were mainly dependent on assistance from international donor agencies and so did not make much effort towards the expansion of its activities and mobilisation of additional resources from other venues. Again, they were all very good in field work but poor at communication and documentation in English.

The challenges of fundraising were by no means unique to SIVA Trust and have afflicted many small non-profits across the length and breadth of the country. But before he hands over the reins, Siva wishes to equip the organisation better. In his quest to seek an answer, he came across Dhvani Foundation, a Bengaluru-based foundation which supports nonprofits in building systems, processes and internal capacities to strengthen themselves and drive better impact on the ground.⁵

The association with Dhvani, which started in 2021, while the pandemic raged outside, gave Siva the space to articulate more clearly the challenge as well as the solution. Specifically, shortcomings Siva recognises are related to the lack of skills required today: technological proficiency and communication in English. These are a barrier to collaboration and seeking funding. He is clear on his team's ability on this front,

⁵Dhwani offers solutions for the efficiency and compliance of NGOs. According to Dhvani, one of the challenges that small and rural NGOs face on the capacity building front is finding and retaining qualified and well-trained personnel who can manage their internal systems and processes. Dhvani solves this problem by helping NGOs outsource their back-end operations. Further they provide services in all significant support functions, including compliance, governance, human resources, MIS, accounting and finance, marketing and fundraising, technology, and communications services. Dhvani also provides services of branding and marketing communications in establishing NGO credibility, raising awareness and building beneficial relationships with donors. They provide training and grants for resources, and help induct independent board members. - <https://dhwanifoundation.org/>

They are still weak in English language communication. But they were hesitant feeling they may not be able to do it, with many being in their early to late forties. I have [myself] learned computer operations only at the age of 60. So we have been constantly motivating them to learn computers. We have some younger ladies there to teach them computers.

Another systemic shortcoming in the organisation Siva was able to clearly define was the absence of individual performance evaluation and, arising out of this, analysis of training needs. As a new Trustee on the Board, Shakila points out that several efforts are underway,

When you come to the training of the staff, it happens at the local level [and] in the office. Whenever there is an association with other partners, depending upon the thematic areas [the staff also attends their] training programmes (that are held). And nowadays much online training is going on. And for the field level, Siva sir takes the training. [Meanwhile] we have an advocate who is part of the Advisory Board [who] gives training on the law, which is associated with women issues and the POSCO and how they need to react.

Given the typical dynamics of a small organisation, hierarchy is loosely defined. Shakila shares that hierarchy evolves organically along with the work,

... there is the staff which is available [who] have been here for nearly a decade. Initially, they were just trainees but they've learned [while working] to move to become a field executor. As a field executor, they [continue] working hard becoming a senior field executor. [But] It [certainly] does not work like corporate culture where it is [more] formal.

While not formal, there is nonetheless a defined organisational structure now after SIVA's association with Dhvani Foundation [see Exhibit 4]. In the absence of a chief executive, Siva continues to play that role with a strong focus on capacity building of the team. He draws attention to the fact that, "I give directions to the team on how to work, tell what is expected of them and give guidance to them in what they do, how they report and what course correction[s] [if any] have to be made."

By now having spent some time dealing with challenges of succession has helped Siva evolve a frame for change. When asked what he has learnt over the years, he lays it out:

I have learnt that for the sustenance and survival of any organisation, three things are required: **One** is able leadership to manage with thorough knowledge on legal compliance, HR management, fundraising, and those aspects. That is one main requirement. The **second** thing is: a team of dedicated staff having a passion for social work, and having access to some of the latest technology. It is always changing and one should know technology without which we cannot survive in today's world. So, the team must have knowledge of technology. **Third** is a consistent financial resource for the sustenance of the organisation and its programmes. If you are ready

with these three things, [then] definitely, if you start an organisation, you will reach goals within a reasonable period. Don't be overambitious, stick to your limits; don't copy others, chart a clear strategic plan for yourselves. That would be the message I want to give to those who want to start their own non-profit organisations (NGOStory, 2022).

Structures, Culture and Governance

Today, going forward, Siva sees compliance, fundraising, technology-adoption, and talent-retention as major issues to tackle in the organisation's evolution. As a first step, the engagement with Dhvani has enabled the organisation to look ahead and plan better. As he points out, SIVA has started to build structures around existing ways of working,

We would train for new projects as and when the project [would] come. Now, we don't have this sort of system and in the month of March [year-end], we are going to evaluate their [staff's] performance and announce additional increments or promotions in the career. It will be carried out systematically based on their own evaluation and our evaluation.

The same approach, Siva says, is being brought into fundraising,

Those with a focus [on a] single theme and good connections get funds easily. We mostly depended on individual donations. Without project funds and [our own] funds, it [was always] very difficult to retain staff. Again, Dhvani's training has given us new insights into trying different resources and techniques [and] we shall see how it goes in the future for us. Like any other organisation, resource mobilisation has always been a challenge [for us].

Meanwhile, Siva has not been averse to expanding the footprint of the work as well as in introducing changes in culture where appropriate. Although open to change, at the same time he is not looking to lose the committed, grassroots spirit of the organisation. This is evident from SIVA Trust's three-year strategic plan, prepared alongside Dhvani which was designed to keep the culture and the team intact. Laying this out, Shakila explains that,

Part of Dhvani's hand-holding was to have a plan for the next three years. In particular what was SIVA Trust going to do with respect to its manpower, projects, financials, and any new inclusion of work?

[In making] the three-year plan, we have been very, very conservative. I should call that out because we didn't want to stretch or give big numbers or to say that we would take up huge projects, because we did not want to increase the team strength. So [we asked ourselves that] keeping in mind the existing manpower what is the best thing which we can do for the next three years?

And also, geography is also not going to change much. We will be working in the same geography as we do now, but we will likely extend the radius of our area. If we have not entered any nearby villages or towns, we would enter those rather than moving into a totally new location.

[In terms of financials], today SIVA is at one crore, but that doesn't mean that in the next three years, it is going to grow into five crores. So, we are thinking of stretching our wings to reach more beneficiaries so that the benefits go not to 100 people but to move on to 1000 people. That's how we have decided to go.

And Siva is wont to give the same advice to others in maintaining this adherence-to-the-roots ethos despite looking to change:

There are many people coming up [to me] who want to start their own NGOs and such, but what I can say from my own experience is to select a specific team and a specific geography. [And] instead of comparing themselves to other organisations and thinking of expanding initially, if they [were to only] concentrate on a specific team or a specific geography, they can do wonders. They can really do wonders (NGOStory, 2022).

But there was a part of the culture that certainly did change at SIVA: the part on how decisions will be made going forward. For without that change, the idea of succession remains a design on paper. Says Siva about this, "Part of the Dhvani collaboration is also a significant culture shift within the organisation [in this regard], with more decision-making devolved to other team members, and me stepping back." Shakila, as a Trustee, corroborates,

Prior to [collaboration with] Dhvani, it [Trust governance] was handled by Siva Sir [and] the decisions were taken largely by him. Amongst the other Trustees, one is Hemima, and she was fully occupied with the field. [While] she might give feedback, but making a final decision was something she was neither used to nor comfortable with. Amongst the other two Trustees one was old (and) not keeping well, while the other Trustee, had to cater to the needs of his business and struggled to give adequate time.

That is the point at which Siva Sir realised that something has to be done to restructure the whole thing [of governance] and literally shake the system so that it comes on track. He probably felt like you know, it is becoming an individual man's Trust, which is not how a Trust has to run. Trusts run on [pulling in of] different ideas and people moving around, and only then is there development happening.

Incidentally, Shakila as well as the long-standing Trustee Hemima—who is being groomed so that she could take over from Siva—are both women in whom Siva is seeing the future of the Trust he is leaving behind. On this Siva is categorical,

So, maybe in a few months' time, I will also come out. I may be[come an[other] executive [but] without taking any salary or something, I will guide the organisation, look after certain correspondences and miscellaneous other tasks. Whereas the organisational management will be done by Hemima. In that way, the changes are being brought about. [While] we have identified who will be the next managing trustee but the period of transition is yet to be finalised. Once it is up to that mark, she has been raised to that level to manage then we will be very happy to hand over the charge to her.⁶

And speaking of women, Dhvani also helped SIVA get a new Fundraising Manager as well as a Compliance and Finance Manager, of whom, one is a lady, J Deepa. Siva expands on her as well as other members of the team he is actively grooming,

The programme manager, though she has studied only up to secondary school, is getting more and more leadership training so that she can lead the organisation's [programmes], manage the affairs. Similarly, the person looking after the field activities of the disability programme has five years' experience, while the person looking after the accounts has been for two years in this project and four years in the tribal: so a total of six years with the organisation.

Clearly, in Siva's scheme of things, it will be, by and large, a group of individuals from diverse backgrounds and with diverse skills, who will take over the charge of the Trust. It is an act of faith he seems to have absolutely no qualms about. Siva has come full circle: from working with the severely marginalised groups, it is members of the same groups who will now chart the future of the course of SIVA with the same communities.

In conclusion

As SIVA finds its foothold on succession, it has to deal with many contradictions, none perhaps greater than the simple one of: how not to lose the past in the noise and rush of the present. For the future is nothing but a reflection of the past. Somewhere in the margins of what is today called the "development sector" are still the faint echoes of the erstwhile civil society.

In set-ups like SIVA, these echoes manage to find their own voice. Although many different definitions and approaches of civil society exist today, and it has become quite the "amorphous" entity, the form it takes around the depth of India's vast interiors might be something very similar to SIVA Trust. And not just rural, but also within the congested alleys of large metropolises and rapidly sprawling urban centres across the breadth of India. SIVA Trust is therefore representative of an enormous number of grassroots operations that

⁶ In 2023 (a year after these interviews were recorded) the Board of SIVA Trust made one change to the composition of the Board. It recognised that since as per law none of the Trustees can actually draw a pay, Hemima could not be a Trustee, but would continue to lead the organisation. Meanwhile the Trustees were also keen that another member from Siva's family should be inducted into the Board so as to maintain continuity of the value-system and culture. As a result, Siva's granddaughter, who is 21 years old and had shown an interest in this work, joined the Board. She would remain on a voluntary and pro-bono basis on the Board. If she grows deeply interested in the work, then in the future she could take on an executive role.

are small, unheard of, but do very important work in very specific places, and continue to do so for many years at a time, largely unnoticed. And it is in this “long-tail”⁷ that the civil society still throbs and thrives.

That this “long-tail” sustains is in the interests of the broader civil society. In an era of increased formalisation and greater digitalisation, the cost of compliance and demands on documentation have increased sharply. But most importantly, it has brought in a new techno-managerial paradigm that sits at odds with the way of working of such small set-ups and many a times struggles to understand the core of such organisations.

In particular, does the language of measurement, impact, growth and scale-oriented programmatic approach clash with the ethos of the organisation, whose focus is the community and the people working with them? Can the spirit of “volunteerism” be maintained as new talent with different skill sets and, consequently, expectations, is hired? How will an organisation like SIVA Trust retain the culture it has nurtured over the past two decades? Most critically, will seeking funding from donors with, perhaps, a different set of expectations, cause SIVA Trust to dilute its approach of paying careful attention to individuals and families within its communities?

It is rarely the case that an individual succeeds another; rather it is a system which eventually ends up succeeding an individual. And this axiom applies more vigorously to SIVA Trust where it was a central figure who held together the organisation’s core. The role of Trustees and that of long-standing seniors as they undergo this transition will be instruction to both SIVA Trust as well as those like it. It will, if anything, strengthen the belief that the best way to serve and sustain self is through serving others. And the central part of that is being small and rooted and remaining that way.

When asked whether he was worried about what will happen to the organisation after him, Siva is categorical that,

If something happens to me, the next leadership will evolve on its own. My role remains to ensure that there is a system after me and that my role is to train them for the future of the organisation. Like SIVA has evolved so far, it will continue its evolution under the next leadership. However, if there is one thing I would wish not to change is the idea upon which the organisation started—the idea of humbly serving those who need help irrespective of what caste or religion they belong to.

Structures, processes and competencies provide sound safeguards for succession but ultimately they rest upon a foundation of faith: the continuing belief in what gave birth to the organisation continues to matter. In remaining anchored to this faith lies the key to hope of a future for SIVA and many smaller organisations like it through the length and breadth of this country.

⁷ The term “long-tail” is used in the field of Statistics to highlight that part of a statistical distribution that is far from the “head” or central part of the distribution.

Exhibits

Exhibit 1: Demographic and Geographic Data of Tirunelveli

I) Demography As Per Census

S.No	Description	As Per Census 2011	As Per Census 2001
1	Male Population	15,20,912	13,33,939
2	Female Population	15,56,321	13,90,049
3	Total Actual Population	30,77,233	27,23,988
4	Population Growth (in Percentage)	12.97	8.93
5	Area (Sq.Km)	6,759	6,823
6	Density/km2	460	406
7	Proportion to Tamil Nadu Population (in Percentage)	4.27	4.36
8	Sex Ratio (Per 1000)	1,023	1,042
9	Child Sex Ratio (0–6 Years)	960	957
10	Male Literates	12,10,710	9,97,278
11	Female Literates	10,62,747	8,31,786
12	Total Literates	22,73,457	18,29,064
13	Male Literacy Rate	79.6	74.76
14	Female Literacy Rate	68.29	59.84
15	Total Average Literacy Rate	73.95	67.3
16	Male Child Population (0-6 Age)	1,64,157	1,63,624
17	Female Child Population (0-6 Age)	1,57,530	1,56,551
18	Total Child Population (0-6 Age)	3,21,687	3,20,175
19	Boys Proportion (0-6 Age) (in Percentage)	10.79	12.27
20	Girls Proportion (0-6 Age) (in Percentage)	10.12	11.26
21	Total Average Proportion (0-6 Age) (in Percentage)	10.45	11.75

II) Population As Per Religion

S.No	Religion	Persons in District	Persons in Tamil Nadu	Percentage to Total Population in District	Percentage to Total Population in Tamil Nadu	Percentage to Total Population in All India
1	Hindus	24,25,630	6,31,88,168	78.83	87.58	79.8
2	Muslims	3,03,368	42,29,479	9.86	5.86	14.23
3	Christians	3,42,254	44,18,331	11.12	6.12	2.3
4	Sikhs	268	14,601	0.01	0.02	1.72
5	Buddhists	373	11,186	0.01	0.02	0.7
6	Jains	144	89,265	0	0.12	0.37
7	Other Religions	450	7,414	0.01	0.01	0.66
8	Religions not Stated	4,746	1,88,586	0.15	0.26	0.24
Total	Total Population	30,77,233	7,21,47,030	100	100	100

III) Block Wise Data

S. No	Name of the Block	Geographical Area (in Hectares)	Density per Sq.Km	Females per 1000 Males (Sex Ratio)	Increase in Population since 2001 (%)	Percentage of Urban/Rural Population	Percentage of Male Literacy Rate	Percentage of Female Literacy Rate	Percentage of SC Population	Percentage of ST Population
1	Manur	50,5888	1,197	1,027	18.69	78.22	82.74	74.61	16.83	0.27
2	Palayamkottai	38,036	338	1,010	30.89	18.82	80.36	70.06	24	0.37
3	Sankarankovil	29,342	544	1,015	8.89	35.87	77.79	61.72	27.56	0.2
4	Melanelithanallur	31,796	299	1,022	9.1	0	73.31	57.33	15.99	0.03

5	Kuruvikulam	35,153	271	1,043	-10.88	8.74	75.21	58.52	35.59	0.18
6	Tenkasi	23,237	808	1,004	9.4	72.73	79.57	67.6	19.71	0.23
7	Alangulam	34,609	378	1,040	11.92	21.98	76.37	61.32	14.18	0.08
8	Keezhapavur	18,454	1,012	1,009	15.56	30.79	78.13	64.6	9.57	0.08
9	Vasudevanallur	60,387	322	1,032	9.17	62.66	74.87	57.91	24.32	0.48
10	Shencottah	18,207	1,066	1,004	16	77.42	78.17	64.13	23.25	0.7
11	Ambasamudram	70,549	208	1,038	3.41	73.78	84.07	74.25	15.42	0.51
12	Cheranmahadevi	22,209	609	1,030	9.27	73.94	81.85	72.62	18.59	0.41
13	Pappakudi	16,254	513	1,034	17.16	17.98	77.82	65.65	14.84	0.23
14	Kadayanallur	24,838	676	997	19.1	53.84	76.81	61.01	20.41	0.29
15	Kadayanam	19,483	572	1,030	13.97	19.49	78.68	67	17.5	0.17
16	Nanguneri	49,333	229	1,034	5.69	15.73	79.93	71.42	18.8	0.2
17	Kalakadu	46,001.28	245	1,034	15.52	51.73	81.47	73.97	16.09	0.39
18	Valliyur	42,763	370	1,023	6.77	37.53	82.08	75.81	14.39	0.47
19	Radhapuram	44,612	329	1,032	25.76	39.22	81.21	75.85	13.36	1.08
	Total	6,75,851	526	1,024	12	42	79	67	19	0.335

Exhibit 2: SIVA Trust's Programmes (As per their website)**Children Projects⁸****AWARENESS PROGRAMME ON CHILD LABOUR ERADICATION**

"Prevention and Eradication of Child Labour System" in all the 10 target villages in Melaneelithanallur Block of Tenkasi district & five villages in Manur block of Tirunelveli district.

11 staff from SIVA Trust including four Community Organisers, three Health workers and four NFE teachers, divided into three groups, and toured five villages each.

- We met families which have drop-out children
- We convinced them to send the children either to regular schools nearby or to the educational/vocational institutions run by SIVA Trust.

As a result of this intensive exercise, the parents have given assurance to send 81 children (36 boys and 45 girls) to our NFE centres, 45 (9 boys and 36 girls) to our computer centres, 32 girls to tailoring centres, 19 students (8 boys and 11 girls) to our supplementary education centres and 27 (13 boys and 14 girls) to our ELC centres. The staff will pursue those parents and admit those children into our institutions.

MOBILISING GRAM SABHAS FOR CHILD PROTECTION

As part of our mission toward protecting child rights, SIVA Trust mobilises the community to attend the Gram Sabha meeting in the project village panchayats.

Our project staff helped the villagers, Self Help Group members, and Village Development Council members draft a common petition requesting the panchayat authorities to adopt a resolution unanimously proclaiming that:

- there will not be any child labour in the panchayat,
- all the children up to 18 years will be in school,
- there will not be any school dropouts,
- there will not be any early/child marriages, and
- no child in the village will face any kind of exploitation.

The panchayat presidents, ward members, government employees, NGO representatives, teachers from SSA and schools, panchayat staff and community people, both male and female, participated in these meetings.

ENROLMENT CAMPAIGN: "EVERY CHILD IN SCHOOL"

During the campaign the local community groups, SHG members, youth club members, school teachers and regular school students participated and supported the Trust enrol all the children into schools. In this campaign, a total of 1662 students, 134 SHG members/youth/VPC members, 39 school teachers and 360 community representatives participated. Staff of SIVA Trust and Children took out rallies chanting the slogan "every child should be in school." The enrolment campaign mainly focused on the parents of the dropouts and the general community (both male and female) to promote the cause of education.

⁸ <https://sivatrust.in/children-projects/>

PUBLICATIONS ON CHILD RIGHTS

SIVA Trust also conducts various training programmes for their staff, school teachers, and government functionaries, besides the children, on the importance of child rights and child protection. Two documents prepared for the same are:

- [Counselling](#): On various counselling techniques that could be used to support any adult/child in distress. This was used to train the staff and field functionaries of other NGOs and Government Organisations (GO).
- [Good Touch Bad Touch – \(English\)](#): We created simple, easy-to-understand training material for children on “Good Touch and Bad Touch” in the context of child sexual abuse and harassment. This is being used to train the staff, school teachers, community teachers and the students.

Women Livelihood⁹

WOMEN’S SHGs AND MICROFINANCE PROGRAM

One of the key programmes that is being implemented by the SIVA Trust is promotion of women’s SHGs and savings and microfinance programmes since chronic poverty is a common sight in the villages where SIVA Trust has been working. To elevate the socio-economic status of the community, the Trust has been doing a lot of livelihood interventions.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE TDH-NL REVOLVING FUND PROGRAM

The Dutch donor instituted a study by a third-party, The Gateway Consultancy, to evaluate its success on the following parameters:

- Document the progress of TdH-NL’s Revolving Fund program
- Assess outcomes and impact of the fund on the lives of the beneficiaries
- Document learnings and impact from case studies of selected beneficiaries¹⁰

EXPOSURE VISIT TO SHGS

In order to encourage the SHG members to start new income generation programmes and to strengthen the existing ones, they are taken to various NGO partners for exposure visits.

The team led by the Project Director, Mr. S.S. Shiva consisted of Mr. T. Selwyn (Finance Trustee), Mr. N. Ravi (Manager-cum-Counsellor), the four Community Organisers, the Tailoring Teacher and five SHG leaders and representatives from our working area. Activities:

- The participants were briefed on the financial assistance given under the Revolving Fund scheme to self-employed persons, mainly in the textile industry, which is prominent in that area.
- They were advised to choose a trade best suitable for their area, based on the availability of raw materials, market for sale and one which is not being done by others.

⁹ <https://sivatrust.in/livelihood-projects/>

¹⁰

http://secureservercdn.net/160.153.138.71/cz1.c63.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/SIVA-Trust_-RF-Monitoring-Report.pdf

Then, the team was taken around Pallipalayam and nearby areas and shown the various stages of the textile industry, from preparing the yarn to selling the finished garment. They were also shown the models [used] in artificial jewellery making, poultry rearing and the processes involved in them were explained. As a result, the team members decided to apply the knowledge gained in their working area and start some new income-generation ventures soon.

LIVELIHOOD PROMOTION AND INCOME GENERATING ACTIVITIES

SIVA Trust organises various income-generating programmes for the SHG members and field staff. Our project coordinator, with the support of the Trustees organises the training, uses trainers for practical demonstration of the preparation of consumer articles like garlic/tomato/chilly pickles, rose/nannari/pudhina juice, phenol, liquid blue and soap powder. Trainers explain that these things could be prepared with little investment and sold locally without too much effort. The participants showed a lot of interest in learning the preparation and they were made to make those things by themselves.

SIVA Trust provides them with financial assistance when they start a income-generating venture through the microfinance program.

LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION & UPSKILLING

Besides income generating activities, SIVA Trust also provides life skills education for the youth. The life enrichment education imparted by the counsellor to the youth consists of opportunities available for employment, scope of vocational training, care of physical and mental health, evils of alcoholism, self-development, learning for life work, adjustment with job providers and future opportunities.

Skill training such as four-wheeler driving and mechanism, electrical and appliances repair and tailoring are also provided to the unemployed youths. Development programs leave a significant impact on the poor and disadvantaged male and female youth in the age group of 16-30. They are provided with formal and non-formal employment training skills and life enrichment education for their sustainable development. It adopts a holistic approach for offering youth-centred services and preventive support services to the families of the youth.

As part of its activities, SIVA Trust has been organising such job oriented non-formal employment training and life enrichment education for the disadvantaged male and female youth. The Trust shared with the community youth its vocational skill training programs imparting four-wheeler driving, motor mechanism and simple electrical appliances techniques and invited applications from the target villages

Disability Service¹¹

SIVA Trust has been serving persons with disability in the two blocks of Manur and Melaneelithanallur in Tirunelveli District by mobilising funds through Global Giving, USA and Impact Guru Foundation, India.

Work with Tribals

Forest Rights Act and SIVA Trust's work with tribals, securing their rights.

¹¹ <https://sivatrust.in/project-on-disability-service-and-its-progress-reports/>

Exhibit 3: Forest Rights ActScheduled Tribes And Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition Of Forest Rights) Act, 2006¹²

The Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, recognises the rights of the forest dwelling tribal communities and other traditional forest dwellers to forest resources, on which these communities were dependent for a variety of needs, including livelihood, habitation and other socio-cultural needs. The forest management policies, including the Acts, Rules and Forest Policies of Participatory Forest Management in both colonial and post-colonial India, did not, till the enactment of this Act, recognise the symbiotic relationship of the STs with the forests, reflected in their dependence on the forest as well as in their traditional wisdom regarding conservation of the forests.

The Act encompasses Rights of Self-cultivation and Habitation which are usually regarded as Individual rights; and Community Rights such as Grazing, Fishing and access to water bodies in forests, Habitat Rights for PVTGs, Traditional Seasonal Resource access to the Nomadic and Pastoral community, access to biodiversity, community right to intellectual property and traditional knowledge, recognition of traditional customary rights and the right to protect, regenerate or conserve or manage any community forest resource for sustainable use. It also provides rights to allocation of forest land for developmental purposes to fulfil basic infrastructural needs of the community. In conjunction with the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Settlement Act, 2013, FRA protects the tribal population from eviction without rehabilitation and settlement.

The Act further enjoins upon the Gram Sabha and rights holders the responsibility of conservation and protection of biodiversity, wildlife, forests, adjoining catchment areas, water sources and other ecologically sensitive areas as well as to stop any destructive practices affecting these resources or the cultural and natural heritage of the tribals. The Gram Sabha is also a highly empowered body under the Act, enabling the tribal population to have a decisive say in the determination of local policies and schemes impacting them.

Thus, the Act empowers the forest dwellers to access and use the forest resources in the manner that they were traditionally accustomed, to protect, conserve and manage forests, protect forest dwellers from unlawful evictions and also provides for basic development facilities for the community of forest dwellers to access facilities of education, health, nutrition, infrastructure etc.

Objective:

- To undo the injustices that the forest dwelling communities have dealt with historically
- To ensure land tenure, livelihood and food security of the forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers
- To strengthen the conservation regime of the forests by including the responsibilities and authority of the Forest Rights holders for sustainable use, conservation of biodiversity and maintenance of ecological balance.

Website:

<http://forestrights.nic.in/>

¹² <https://tribal.nic.in/FRA.aspx>

MINT GRAPHITI

Law of the jungle

The bill proposes to give higher management powers to forest officers beyond what is provided in the Forest Rights Act, 2006.

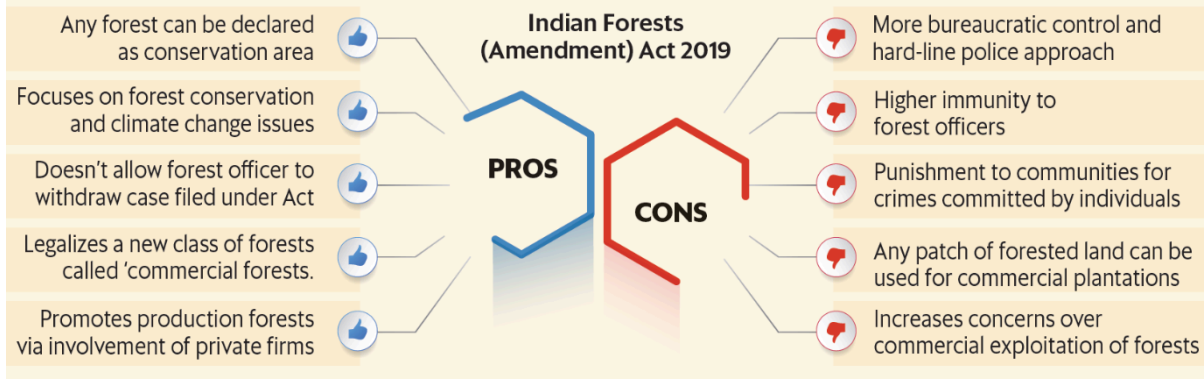
10th India's world ranking in total land area under forest and tree cover.

421,000 sq. km Total forest cover in tribal districts

21.54% Total forest cover in India with regards to geographical area

2.99% Area classified as 'very dense' forest

15 states/UTs Have above 33% of geographical area under forest cover



13

13

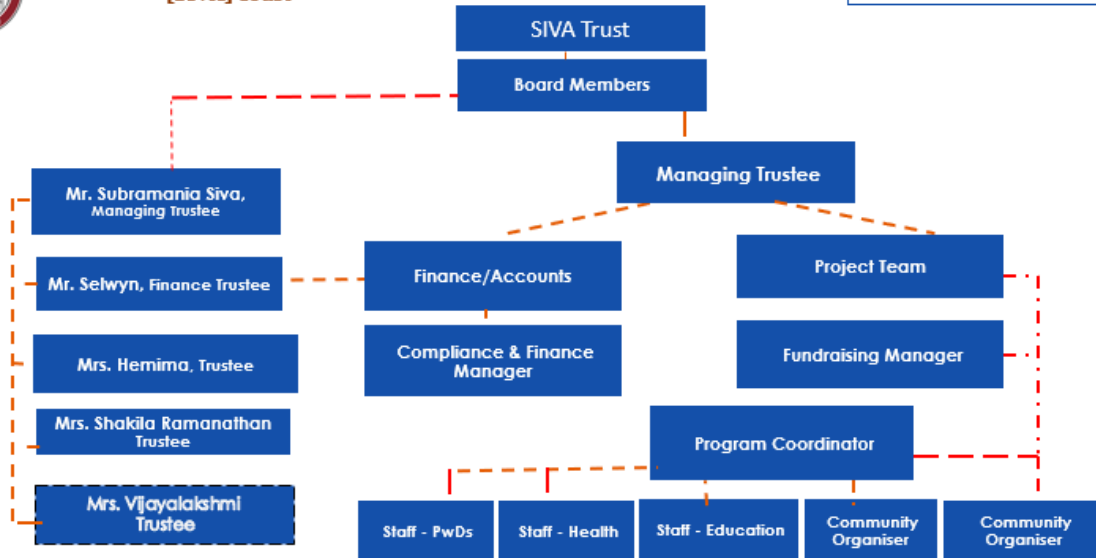
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Exhibit 4: SIVA Trust Organogram (As on March 2022)



**Service Initiative for Voluntary Action
[SIVA] Trust**

Organisation Structure



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