The Last Mile Model:

What SEWA’s Community Leaders Teach Us About Service and Care

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## Introduction

The spread of COVID-19 to every corner of the earth within months is a startling reminder of our global citizenry. Filtered through the common lens of responses to COVID-19, we observe governments (democratic or otherwise, developed or developing) unable to cope with the needs of their periled citizenry, particularly their most vulnerable and historically marginalized. This observation has paralleled the spontaneous rise of a new “public” which harkens back to a pre-globalised world in many ways. This “public” has stepped up to meet the state and work hand-in-hand with the flailing state,[[1]](#footnote-1) and in collaboration these two entities have worked to create a social security net for vulnerable communities, thus spawning a vision for a more community-oriented public state as we emerge from this lockdown. It is to this vision that we look in this paper, to explore alternate models of governance, which center community by decentralising traditional power structures and feeding into a Last Mile Model which allows for a more equitable distribution of power, responsibility and accountability. While COVID has thrown the need for such a model into stark relief world over, we look to the SEWA community lead model of *aagewans* and SEWA Shakti Kendras to see how this model can and does exist even beyond crises, and how in fact such a model can bolster the resilience of communities to withstand forthcoming crises.

To that end: What can we learn about forming a proactive “public” (citizenry) from SEWA’s community leaders? How can communities become more participatory in their own governance, service delivery and resilience by bridging the gap between the State and market on one hand and vulnerable populations on the other? What of the SEWA model can be replicated beyond the confines of what has worked during the COVID induced global lockdown?

### Building a Theory of Decentralisation and the Last Mile

The SEWA model draws on Gandhian principles of decentralisation: the redistribution of power to people, collectives, and civil society. This draws on multitudes of research done on the democratic power of decentralisation, including but not limited to a Gandhian analytical framework which empowers the panchayat as a ruling entity, but also an Ambedkarite approach that centers the individual as the key “veto player”[[2]](#footnote-2) in political decision making and true consensus building. A policy analysis framework here for instance highlights the importance of local political relationships that allows the local to negotiate and arbitrate for the national, as seen with the implementation of the MGNREGA Act across India. Fisher and Ali argue “the devolution of resources under the MGNREGA has improved access to state resources and increased participation in development planning overall, the intensity, equity, and extent of influence varies according to the character of local political relationships.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Sunita Abraham builds on this by providing evidence that “poor people who engage actively in different aspects of political participation are better able to influence the functioning of local government and the disbursal of material benefits from it.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Daftary further finds that democratic decentralisation works in combination with local political brokers to mitigate elite capture and widen distribution of public goods to non-elite groups.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, the Ambedkarite concern about devolution of power to the local political unit (panchayats in the Indian case) rears its head when critically engaging with the political processes that allow for the devolution of power to the sun-national unit. Manor[[6]](#footnote-6) for instance notes that the strengthening of the local councils through the injection of MGNREGA funds has led to an accountability deficit due to the centralisation of local power in the hands of council leaders.[[7]](#footnote-7) This lack of accountability at the local level is the exact concern raised by Dr. Ambedkar when conversations about the unit at the core of the Constitution abounded. Dr. Ambedkar pushed for the *individual* as opposed to the Gandhian *panchayat* because of this very concern of the re-entrenchment of local socio-economic systems that uphold and enforce age-old discriminatory systems. During a moment of global reckoning, it behooves us to build systems that mitigate the harms of previous attempts. How then do we use this critical juncture[[8]](#footnote-8) and move towards models of democratic decentralisation, which center and prioritise the marginalised?

What we propose here is a model rooted in equitable *power-sharing* through processes of decentralisation. We draw here primarily on the example of SEWA leaders who have over the last 5 decades built up community leadership models that draw on solidarity networks to ensure that the State is able to reach every last citizen, thus ensuring the shrinking of a democratic deficit. This model has really been tested during the recent global lockdown and the subsequent stress on informal economy workers which has amplified pre-existing (and invisible) fault lines in our societies. Without a regular salary or welfare benefits, informal sector workers had no safety net when the Indian government imposed a nationwide lockdown in an attempt to curb the spread of the virus. This had significant consequences on the informal economy as the trades that they depend on for daily wages – domestic work, street vending, construction, and agriculture – require them to work outside of the home. Furthermore, of the self-employed worker population, women suffer disproportionately. In addition to their work not being formally recognized, they must also confront patriarchal family structures. With men and children confined to the home for months on end, women’s responsibilities have grown as highlighted by a [multi-state study of informal economy women workers](https://www.sewabharatresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Gendered_Precarity_SB_Lockdown-2.pdf). We look to explore how SEWA leaders navigated the lockdown and what lessons can be derived from their experience as we move forward. We also draw on the historical legacy of the SEWA model to understand the scope of the Last Mile Model, as well as it’s carrying power and external validity. We conclude with some ways forward for expanding the work of SEWA leaders to more communities, thus contributing to discussions on governance and service provision for the vulnerable and marginalised transnationally.

## Lessons from the SEWA (Union) Model

*Aao Aao Behenein Aao, Aakar SEWA se Jud Jaao*

*Aakar Kaamgaar Beheno Ka Sangathan Aur Bhi Badhaao![[9]](#footnote-9)*

The Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) is a trade union of women who make a living in the informal sector of India’s economy. 93% of the workforce in India is employed in the informal economy, and due to the vagaries of the informal economy, lack a social security net, have few if any labour protections, and are neglected in significant political discourses. Since its founding, SEWA has relied on a decentralized model to collectivize union members and address their needs, especially those that are being neglected by the market and the state. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and led by founder Ela Bhatt, the union invests power in local communities. SEWA does not take a top-down or bottom-up approach. Instead, power always remains within the community, so decisions are made collectively by the people who the decisions will affect.

The cornerstones of this decentralized model are grassroots leaders called *Aagewans*.[[10]](#footnote-10) A leader among their peers,[[11]](#footnote-11) aagewans share the same precarious conditions as the women they lead. These women however take on the mantle of leadership and self-select into positions of responsibility for their communities. They essentially step forward to carry on the work that their communities need, and become advocates and grassroots champions for the women around them, and by extension the entire community. For instance, through the COVID lockdown, aagewans have played a critical role in identifying areas of need, leading relief efforts, and strengthening community support networks among union members and the broader community for lobbying on behalf of the informal economy to the government. They have also continued their year-round work in ensuring that communities have adequate documentation (PAN cards, rations cards, Aadhaar cards) and are integrated into the financial and banking system, and have campaigned for community resources such as clean water and waste disposal. To better understand why and how these women build their own parallel models of governance that work in tandem with the government and ensure dual responsibility and accountability, we first explore here who exactly an aagewan is and the various (institutional and otherwise) positions she holds within SEWA.

### Women Movers and Shakers

Analytically, an aagewan is a community leader, someone willing to put her communities’ needs above her own. SEWA as a movement prioritises community led organising from the very initiation of union formation in new communities, and has done so from its very inception by informal economy women workers. To join the union and movement, the community must itself recognise the need for collective mobilisation and self-propel themselves into the movement and by institutional extension, the union. However, as we know from social movement theory, the collective action problem[[12]](#footnote-12) poses a fundamental challenge to the formation of a collective, as the costs of doing so are high and the benefits only incurred over the long term. Surmounting this collective action problem lies at the heart of the SEWA movement, as it does all movements. However, while most social movements look to leaders who bring the movement to new communities, SEWA expands on the word of women workers themselves. The woman worker who hears about and understands the SEWA movement, and spreads the word herself in her community, thus adopting the mantle of mobiliser and thereby overcoming the collective action barrier, becomes a leader of a movement in her own right. The election to an official position is but one aspect of her leadership, the institutionalisation of her leadership, but at its analytical core, what we have is a movement leader and by extension, a community leader. Given the triple burden[[13]](#footnote-13) of production, reproduction and community work that women in this socio-economic demographic anyway undertake,[[14]](#footnote-14) for women to step beyond societally prescribed community building work and take on mobilising and organising work is momentous, and as varied as the leadership traits we see emerging from the SEWA community. Some of these women become union leaders, some become developmental leaders, while some become business leaders. All however, carry their fellow SEWA members with them, evocative of images of a rising tide and ships, centering a solidarity network in all the work.

### Trade Unions and/in Communities

Institutionally, aagewans are women workers elected by their fellow union members to become their union representative. When women workers come together to become SEWA union members, they elect a local leader to represent their trade and (residential) community interests to the state and by extension, national union. In many cases, this leader volunteers herself to carry on the union work within the community, thus becoming the de facto union leader until an official election can be held. She is an aagewan however, from the day she steps forward to take on responsibility and to be held accountable to her community.

Aagewans organise themselves primarily into those with a trade focus and those with a community focus. SEWA has both trade aagewans (e.g. domestic workers, street vendors, construction workers, home-based workers) and *mohalla* (neighbourhood) aagewans who look primarily at residential issues. *Mohalla* meetings form the basic crux of all the organising work that these women do, where they bring together women from the neighbourhood to discuss their issues and the challenges they face, from their work to their homes, families, housing, health, savings, and beyond. One of the key activities at these meetings that aagewans lead, which in turn establishes the foundation for all subsequent work, is the acknowledgement of the woman as worker. While over 93% of India’s female working population is employed in the informal economy, a scarce few acknowledge themselves as workers. This has both social and political consequences as by failing to see how critical women are to keeping our communities and economies running, we relegate them to becoming second-class citizens. Recognizing a woman as a worker grants her social and political capital, she is counted as a worker who then in turn gets to have a say in conversations about work and the economy. Before we can get to that stage as a society however, the first step lies in the woman herself recognising her work as productive and significant. It is at these aagewan led meetings that women (collectively) work to recognise themselves as workers, and learn to acknowledge their own contributions to the economy and society at large. For many women, this space is the first time they publicly state that they too are a worker, buoyed by the support of other women who are bridging that cognitive distance alongside themselves.

On the basis of this first critical step, comes a retinue of subsequent actions *for women and by women* in a classic sense of the phrase. Aagewans are responsible for connecting members with resources and leading campaigns around common grievances that they jointly realize through their *mohalla* meetings, held in a biweekly frequency. Aagewans further organise into committees with representatives being elected at each level to help coalesce local issues into an eventual national platform. As representatives, they become the agents of the union at the grassroots, and propel the movement forward.

### Developmental Agents

When SEWA aagewans first started mobilising their fellow workers, they realised that the challenges to full employment for women were not limited to only the workplace and their trade. In conversations with each other, they realised that health, access to finance, housing, violence, mobility, literacy were all impediments to women’s economic empowerment. Given their community approach to organising and mobilising, SEWA went on to adopt a holistic approach to economic empowerment. Aagewans now work in developmental programs alongside their roles as mobilising and organising women. Aagewans have been at the forefront of our housing and sanitation work through Mahila Housing Trust (a sister SEWA organisation) for instance, where aagewans work together to bring about the notice of civic issues within their communities to city officials. Aagewans in this arena help identify sanitation and housing issues within their communities and work with SEWA Bharat and other developmentally oriented organisations within the SEWA ecosystem to get resources directed towards their communities. Aagewans organise and mobilise women to attend health awareness campaigns such as eye camps and gynecological camps set up by SEWA and their affiliates, and identify women and community members for skill development classes such as digital skills, leadership, tailoring, and literacy.

### Entrepreneurial Agents

Finally, aagewans play a critical role as entrepreneurial agents within the SEWA ecosystem, and the informal economy more generally. As leaders rooted in community, aagewans are constantly aware of the challenges women around them face in the workforce as informal workers, with no control over the forces of production and capitalism that serve to disempower women informal economy workers furthermore.

Aagewans therefore work to identify a problem and mobilise a (relevant) collective that are invested in asserting their own agency over the economic process. In SEWA’s history, leaders have at many different points identified issues that the existing market structure could not solve for them. Aagewans have therefore stepped into this space an entrepreneurial agents in their own right who collectivise other concerned parties and form a collective that tackles the economic problem they are facing. These collectives have taken multiple forms ranging from cooperatives to private limited companies and associations, all with a social focus in keeping with the solidarity principles that guide the SEWA movement. With collective social enterprises, we see for instance aagewans and leaders ensuring that the collective follows fair labour practices and participates in equitable supply chains that prioritise the worker. While the social enterprise focuses on economic sustainability, aagewans work alongside these principles and lobby for worker rights and better market access, engage with the state on behalf of small enterprises, thus resulting in increased sustainable economic empowerment.

### SEWA Shakti Kendras

A significant part of this work that aagewans coordinate and lead is centered around the SSK. Resources are pooled together by multiple spatially proximate SEWA communities at a SEWA Shakti Kendra (SSK) which serves as a one-stop shop for all SEWA work within communities including but not limited to government linkage services, awareness drives, organising venues, skill and training centers, and coordination centers. The SSKs also therefore allow SEWA Bharat, the developmental wing of the SEWA Movement, to support developmental activities that work bottom up in SEWA communities, and led by grassroots leaders. There are over 100SSKs across 18 Indian states which ensure that regardless of national platforms, organising, developmental, and entrepreneurial work continues to be rooted in the community and run by aagewans.

## The Changing Dynamics of the COVID Lockdown

Aagewans have been doing organisational, developmental and entrepreneurial work across India for the last 5 decades. However, it is against this decades-long backdrop of women-led community organising that the global health pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus hit India. Given an already fragile social security net nationally, in response the government imposed a complete lockdown of the economy, which came into effect within days and is still partially in place 5 months on. A study on the [preparedness of the informal economy](https://www.sewabharatresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SB_COVIDImpact_March2020.pdf) found that an overwhelming majority of families employed by the informal economy were unable to buy rations for more than 4-5 days at a time with their existing savings. Access to primary health care was limited and finances to afford access to better facilities was non-existent. The nature of informal settlements (which house over 45% of the Indian population) further complicated the ability of the population to prepare for this indeterminate and prolonged lockdown and health pandemic.[[15]](#footnote-15)

These challenges were only compounded as the initial three-week lockdown extended into the third month with an equally slow unlock period. 75% of domestic workers surveyed for instance had to reduce their food consumption to make ends meet during the lockdown, in spite of 60% still remaining employed.[[16]](#footnote-16) For other trades, such as street vendors who have seen a complete absence of any income in over 4 months, with no roadmap out of this financial precarity, the impact is significantly worse.

At a moment like this, when the informal economy is already burdened beyond their limits, organising becomes even more critical. In an attempt to revive the economy, discussions about the suspension of labour laws have abounded[[17]](#footnote-17) with [Uttar Pradesh already easing labour ordinances put in place to protect labour.](https://theprint.in/india/governance/up-suspends-labour-laws-what-stays-what-goes-and-why-it-is-a-step-in-right-direction/417186/#:~:text=New%20Delhi%3A%20The%20Uttar%20Pradesh,labour%20laws%20for%20three%20years.&text=The%20ordinance%20has%20been%20sent,the%20concurrent%20list%20of%20subjects.) However, traditional means of protesting labour violations and social movement tactics have also come to a grinding halt with social distancing protocols and global curfews that limit mobilisation and other means of civil disobedience.[[18]](#footnote-18)

How then do citizens (especially marginalised populations) adapt to these unprecedented circumstances and connect to the services they need? Who do they look to when they are cut off from their larger networks and must isolate themselves from the world as the world does the same? It is here that we look to our aagewans again to see where women have stepped up, how they have done so, and what the Last Mile Model looks like under stress. We look to the adoption of digital technologies and alternate livelihoods to specifically trace the configurations of the Last Mile Model and how civic society and the state can work in collaboration with one another to ensure that every citizen is slowly brought into the ambit of the provision of public goods in India.

### Adopting Digital Technologies

 [Jayanti Jangpani of Uttarakhand](https://idronline.org/a-day-in-the-life-of-a-banking-correspondent/) has been a banking correspondent with Sarthak[[19]](#footnote-19) in Uttarakhand for three years but thought of her work as a secondary job to support her during the agriculture off-season which is where her family would primarily draw their income from. Sarthak realised that with the complete lockdown, vulnerable sections of their communities who were entirely reliant on remittances and pensions, would be completely destitute in the absence of reliable access to banking services. All banking correspondents affiliated with the SEWA Sarthak program therefore (almost overnight) adopted digital banking and newer technology (smartphones and biometrics) for easier doorstep banking and reached over 10,000 people in the first month of the lockdown, conducting over 4 crores in cash transactions. They linked the elderly (the most vulnerable through the lockdown) to their pensions, ensured that as relief schemes were remitted to bank accounts customers could access instalments, and in some cases even opened up bank accounts for some of the unbanked. Jayanti Ben herself learned the biometric technology over the phone and increased her travel beat to 8 villages, many of them off the primary transportation beat, to ensure that everyone in the community was able to access their savings. She got herself an essential worker travel pass issued and visited people in her family car to make sure they could access the money that they needed to survive.

Sarthak is one of many SEWA services where aagewans support communities with financial literacy and integration. Bank *saathis* (grassroot leaders who work with a financial collective enterprise) across Bihar, Delhi, Gujarat, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh and Uttarakhand work to financially integrate women workers through membership in financial cooperatives and promoting financial literacy through peer networks. This kind of financial assistance has proven to be a critical need for informal economy workers across the length and breadth of the country. With strict rules governing the lockdown in many parts of the country, bank *saathis* continued to be the first line of (financial) defense for many communities, ensuring that women could still access their hard earned finances and access fair interest loans which became a critical component of the relief measures offered by financial cooperatives. Given that these are cooperatives, where loans come from other members savings, the community essentially helped pull each other through the lockdown, as they always have. We therefore see many such examples of women community leaders navigating new and complex systems to learn tools that would bring immediate relief and support to their neighbours. Simantini Ben (a domestic worker from Odisha) used a combination of Phone Pe and WhatsApp to contact the local PAN card agency and banks to learn their operating hours so she could help her fellow domestic workers open bank accounts for their children and enroll them in the mid-day meal scheme COVID replacement. Anjali Ben, a Digital Sakhi in Odisha, learned Google Pay and other UPI interfaces so she could help her neighbours recharge their phones and even dabbled with online banking transactions to try and get money transferred across bank accounts. Mira Ben of Jharkhand (construction worker) was unable to organise *mohalla* meetings as she would have and felt that there was a need to have all the women congregate together safely so she could check in on all of them. She learned how to conference call groups of women on WhatsApp as well as video call and taught her fellow construction members, all while socially distancing from each other. Through these chats she was able to make sure that the women were registered as construction workers with the State Welfare Board and were therefore eligible for the compensation promised to all construction workers.

Less than 15% of women in India have access to smart phones[[20]](#footnote-20) and digital technology, and these numbers will take a hit once we have taken stock post the COVID lockdown. Research shows that when assets must be sold to mitigate crises, women’s assets go first,[[21]](#footnote-21) a fact corroborated by preliminary data showing that women’s cellphones were the first asset being sold off to raise liquidity through the lockdown. Given these gendered challenges when it comes to digital access, the increasing capabilities of aagewans is beyond commendable. The adoption of digital technology also highlights the community-oriented focus of women’s productive work - these aagewans are picking up new digital skills through a severe crisis, to serve and nurture their communities.

The benefits of adopting digital technology go beyond the provision of services to communities. We note women engaging in skill trainings online and via phones to amplify the voices of their communities. In collaboration with GirlsxTech, 110 SEWA members across 9 states have learned the elements of graphic design as well as tools to design their own social media creatives. These women are now designing and implementing their own awareness campaigns around health, access to schemes and entitlements, to educate each other. A farmer from a producer company in Bihar participated in a [Niti Aayog webinar](https://www.facebook.com/WomenEntrepreneurshipPlatform/photos/women-entrepreneurship-platform-niti-aayog-and-sewa-bharat-bring-to-you-womenspe/2636336586633914/) where they spoke of the challenges that women farmers face, and they did so directly, engaging with audiences, representing their communities themselves instead of having to go through intermediaries due to a technological barrier.

### Alternate Livelihoods

While adoption of digital technologies has been the arena where we see women leaders flexing their learning scope the most, this isn’t the only arena where we see women stepping up and expanding their skill sets to support their families and their communities. Reema Ben[[22]](#footnote-22) from Jahangirpuri had applied for an e-rickshaw license in February and had put down a down payment on her own e-rickshaw. Once the lockdown hit, she was trapped at home with an abusive husband and no form of income to support herself and her children if she were to leave. In speaking with her fellow SEWA members, she heard about the domestic work burden from many of them and this motivated her to gather her resources and follow through with her license. She was finally granted her license and started plying her e-rickshaw in her community. Her clientele was initially restricted to other SEWA women who needed transportation to access and move rations for their families, but has since then expanded as her confidence increases and restrictions ease up.

Beedi workers in Malda, West Bengal have been suffering since January due to a series of crises that have affected their trade. Some reported a 60% reduction in their family income before the lockdown even started. Once implemented, these women were left with no way to support themselves and their families. Their aagewan therefore approached their local panchayat and after a series of negotiations, got them to agree to contract out mask making for the community to these women. The women learned how to stitch masks from each other and their families, and have now pivoted to making masks. Aagewans in Bikaner negotiated with the local government hospital and all non-surgical masks were stitched by home-based workers who were also out of work thanks to disruptions in the global supply chain. Parveen Ben learned how to make masks from a YouTube video on her phone and then walked her fellow members through the process so women could pivot to mask-making. Home-based workers affiliated with Ruaab, a producer company out of Delhi, even picked up production of PPE kits for essential workers to fill the gaps in the market as global demand surged, leaving frontline workers under equipped and overexposed.

### The Last Mile Model at Play

Aagewans play a critical role in bridging the gap between women workers and the market and/or the state, mitigating the harm caused to marginalised populations by the vagaries of the neo-liberal system. Informal economy workers have been left outside a social security net for increasing number of years at this point, and by the time the pandemic hit, there was little to no coverage of our most vulnerable populations. Where the State has been unable to reach citizens, civil society organisations have tried to fill the gap for the most part. However, COVID has complicated that even further as access and mobility have all but disappeared. Communities have been left to fend for themselves and it is in this space that we see the value of the Last Mile Model where communities (led by women) step up and forming their own parallel forms of governance that allow for the social security net to be stretched a little more.

#### Jharkhand and the Health System

Jharkhand and the challenges in negotiating the under-funded health system highlight the critical role the Last Mile Model plays in connecting those who need services to where those services may be. Anupriya Ben of Jharkhand was contacted by a fellow SEWA member who was in labour but due to the COVID pressure, no ambulance was available to get her to a hospital in Churchu, Jharkhand. Anu Ben therefore coordinated with Mira Ben who had her husband drive the lady 29 kms to the hospital to give birth. In another case, the local aagewan, Sahiya Ben, pulled all her connections at the health department (acquired through her community leadership work with SEWA members for the last few years) and got an ambulance deployed to a village to assist with a woman’s delivery. Pinky Ben, a domestic worker, heard that a hospital wasn’t admitting a sick child of a fellow member. Once phone calls and other formal channels didn’t work, Pinky Ben gathered a group of other domestic workers and they collectively approached the hospital and negotiated until the child was admitted and treated. When Jaywanti Ben heard of a fellow member who had been coughing up blood, she arranged for the member to be taken to the hospital where she was part of the janitorial staff. The member was diagnosed with TB and thanks to Jaywanti Ben’s involvement, was provided with free TB medicine and follow ups for further treatment.

#### Documentation and Ration Distribution

In other cases, we see women divert from their primary responsibilities, and picking up the mantle in other arenas. They are able to do so because the crux of the model is the leadership capability of the *aagewan,* as opposed to her trade. Banking correspondents in Punjab for instance, took over document and linkage work in border areas where penetration of government services is minimal. While their primary job focuses only on financial transactions, they realised in their interactions that these communities were being neglected in all relief efforts due to a lack of documentation on their part. The *saathis* therefore helped bridge the gap between people and government services by completing KYCs, filing paperwork for pensions and welfare benefits, and submitting insurance documentation. Due to their training as banking correspondents, they were more comfortable with the paperwork that is required to access our rights as citizens, and so they bridged that gap for their communities.

In other cases, we see women taking over local responsibilities for the egalitarian and fair distribution of rations. Sarabjit Kaur of Punjab took on the responsibility of identifying needy families, specifically migrants who were not surveyed by locally elected officials, to ensure that food rations reached the vulnerable. Renu Ben of Punjab made sure that sanitary napkins and other hygiene products were distributed to women in her community.[[23]](#footnote-23) Rupali Ben of West Bengal (as did many others across the length and breadth of India) made lists of those who weren’t eligible for government rations in their communities and collated this data for ration drive efforts by SEWA at the national level. Once rations had reached the community, these aagewans set up office in the local SSK and ensured fair and equitable distribution of rations to those who needed it the most. Aagewans in Delhi even reported threats of violence from the community once rations reached their SSK, but the aagewans held out until they had verified that the rations would reach those neglected by schemes and other measures being undertaken by the government and civic society organisations.

**Dharavi and Containing COVID**

In [Dharavi](https://theprint.in/india/how-covid-hotspot-dharavi-asias-largest-slum-fought-against-all-odds-to-flatten-the-curve/441036/), Bombay, community-based governance has also been particularly successful in preventing the unchecked rampant spread of coronavirus. When the world’s [most congested slum](https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/the-durable-slum)recorded its first case of the coronavirus on April 1st, fears abounded at the projected exponential growth rate. Within [Dharavi](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53133843), the “social distancing” preached by internationally-renowned public health officials and the nationally-mandated lockdown regulations are not feasible. However, two months later, the [growth rate is significantly lower](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53133843) than other more affluent and spacious neighbourhoods in Mumbai. This success is because what took place in Dharavi was, in a sense, the opposite of “social distancing”. Efforts to flatten the curve in Dharavi were inherently *social* and drew on the community to fix the last mile problem*.* The local municipality took a *close*, hands-on approach to contact tracing via local medical practitioners and quarantine facilities that kept people near their social networks where trust was high, discrimination and panic low, and information consistent. They adapted medical advice to build a containment model tailored to the spatial layout and social dynamics of Dharavi. A localized solution enabled the community to beat grim odds.

#### Public Safety and Security

Shakuntala Ben of Punjab contacted the police to get help to households who were being neglected by multiple sources due to the lack of any earning member and multiple dependents. In the absence of police or other disciplinary authorities, aagewans in Mubarakpur (Bihar) stepped up and quarantined those who returned to their villages from outside, while providing rations and sanitation supplies to them. Women in Jharkhand created barriers out of bamboo to act as traffic barriers for vehicular traffic that used their village as thoroughfare for their commute. Finally, the national network of aagewans communicated amongst themselves to make sure that migrants and those stranded away from home for work were looked after and their needs met. Staff members from SEWA West Bengal and SEWA Kerala for instance were in constant contact to ensure that Bengali immigrants in Kerala were housed and fed, until transportation back home could be arranged for them.

## So, What Works?

What we note being of significance here is not the absence of State power but instead, decentralised units where decisions are made at the community level in a collective fashion, and stakeholders making the decisions that affect their lives. This is done *in collaboration with* State authorities (mostly sub-national but with the potential to become scalable), thus ensuring that the Last Mile Model meets the Manor framework of resources, power, and accountability in its approach to decentralised governance.

A clear example of this would be the Odisha State government approach to hunger through the lockdown. The Odisha government, unable to reach every citizen on their own with limited resources through the crisis, handed over power and resources to the local panchayats to ensure that cooked food was provided to all who needed. This was done as panchayats have the most relevant information about what the community’s needs are, especially during a crisis such as the COVID-19 lockdown where the state can’t visit any local sites. Panchayats in most cases paired up with local SHGs to get the food cooked and distributed to every vulnerable citizen within the community. *Aagewans* in Odisha for instance realised that their panchayat didn’t have the organisational bandwidth to feed their village, as per state government directives, and no active SHGs to ensure distribution of work and accountability. They took over responsibility of collecting the rations, feeding and distributing amongst the community, all while maintaining health directives. The panchayat in the meantime focused on negotiations with the State, setting up directives for economic activity, and channeling community concerns and feedback to the State Government. The Badhigaon community from where we draw this case study reports very little hunger through the lockdown, exemplifying the potential of this decentralised, power sharing model that centers people and ensures that the marginalised are able to access their schemes.

This model of decision-making rooted in the community and *aagewans* acting as a bridge is one that evolved during times of “peace” but has held up exceptionally well through crises. Decentralisation was in some ways the only option through the COVID lockdown, but the SEWA model also proved effective during the Delhi Riots of 2020, and previously in Gujarat in 2002 – both cases where the model was established through many iterations and was really put to the test during the crisis. Locally developed networks with high levels of community trust enabled SEWA to reach communities in distress quickly and effectively, ensuring that relief and aid was delivered to those who needed it the most. Essentially, because of their community-based governance model, SEWAs across India have been able to serve as lifelines through this crisis and others – not only for their members but also for other community members, enabling the market and the State to reach those who would be neglected otherwise.

1. Pritchett, Lant. "Is India a flailing state?: detours on the four lane highway to modernization." (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tsebelis, George. "Decision making in political systems: Veto players in presidentialism, parliamentarism, multicameralism and multipartyism." British journal of political science (1995): 289-325. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Fischer, Harry W., and Syed Shoaib Ali. "Reshaping the public domain: Decentralization, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), and trajectories of local democracy in rural India." World Development 120 (2019): 147-158. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Abraham, Sunita. "The necessity of engaging with politics: Lessons from the grass roots in South India." IDS Bulletin 45.2-3 (2014): 56-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Daftary, Dolly. "Elected leaders, community and development: evidence on distribution and agency from a case in India." The Journal of Development Studies 46.10 (2010): 1692-1707. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Manor, James. When local government strikes it rich. Visby: Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD), 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Manor argues that for democratic local governance to work effectively, three factors are critical: funds, adequate powers, and an accountability mechanism. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Capoccia, Giovanni, and R. Daniel Kelemen. "The study of critical junctures: Theory, narrative, and counterfactuals in historical institutionalism." World politics 59.3 (2007): 341-369. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A folk song sung by SEWA members, loosely translated to: *Come sisters come join SEWA, come be a part of the solidarity of women workers* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The term *aagewan* is derived from Gujarati, and is a portmanteau of the phrase “aage aane waali ben” (the sister who came forward), and essentially looks to the women who volunteer to represent and lead their communities. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. ASK RENANABEN ABOUT QUOTE [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Olson, Mancur. The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups, Second Printing with a New Preface and Appendix. Vol. 124. Harvard University Press, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Drawing on and modifying Arlie Hochschild’s *Second Shift* and it’s economic adaptation (Hochschild, Arlie Russell. The second shift: Inside the two-job marriage. Penguin Books, 1990.) by Ester Boserup (Boserup, Ester. "The role of women in economic development." New York: St. Martin's (1970).) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Beneria, Lourdes, and Gita Sen. "Accumulation, reproduction, and" women's role in economic development": Boserup revisited." Signs: Journal of women in culture and society 7.2 (1981): 279-298. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “[Covid-19: Five lessons India should learn from the crisis to make cities more liveable for workers](https://scroll.in/article/963778/covid-19-five-lessons-india-should-learn-from-the-crisis-to-make-cities-more-liveable-for-workers).” Smriti Singh, Sonal Sharma, and Sukrit Nagpal. Scroll.in June 6, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. [SEWA Study on Domestic Workers.](https://www.instagram.com/p/CCvkV9MnMSp/) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. [Impact of the Global Pandemic on Indian Labour Laws](https://www.jurist.org/commentary/2020/05/daigavane-belmannu-labor-law-suspensions-india/) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. SEWA, alongside other Central Trade Unions staged a socially-distanced sit-in against the suspension of labour laws when they were first announced but all leaders were promptly [detained by the police.](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2963336827066212) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. A nationally incorporated company initiated by SEWA members, that focuses on banking correspondents in Uttarakhand and Punjab, renewable energy in Bihar, and digital data collection across multiple Indian states. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Cite UN Women-SEWA Report here. Get citation from CB. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. [Bina Agarwal](https://www.wider.unu.edu/publication/covid-19-and-lockdowns) [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Check name again with Nitya [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This was in spite of her having lost her husband a mere two months before the lockdown was implemented, leaving her with two young children to look after. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)