

**7<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on  
Good Rural Governance and Citizen Participation  
S M Sehgal Foundation, Gurugram, Haryana, India  
October 27, 2017**

The *Seventh Annual Conference* on Good Rural Governance and Citizen Participation, organised by SM Sehgal Foundation, will be held on October 27, 2017, at S M Sehgal Foundation, Plot No.34, Sector 44, Institutional Area, Gurugram, Haryana. The theme of this year's conference is "**Law and Governance – Pathways for Collaboration - Law Schools, Legal Services Authorities and Civil Society**". The conference particularly invites participation of legal services authorities, faculty and students of law schools, civil society organizations, and rural communities.

### **BACKGROUND**

S M Sehgal Foundation (SMSF) has been working since 2008 on developing a model to secure good governance in villages through effective citizen participation and involvement of various stakeholders including law schools and local government institutions. SMSF, in collaboration with Jindal Global Law School (JGLS) and University of Baltimore School of Law, organized its first annual conference on Good Governance and Citizen Participation in 2011. The conference series was conceptualised to develop shared understanding, peer learning and collaborative partnerships among stakeholders who are aligned closely with the theme of rural governance and access to justice. In the following five years, themes of the annual conference ranged from experience sharing to targeting specific government schemes and mobilising stakeholder opinion and exchange of ideas.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, to transform this initiative into a larger movement, SMSF organized regional conferences in 2012 in collaboration with National Law University, Jodhpur, JSS Law College, Mysore, Assam University, Silchar, and Chanakya National Law University, Patna, to disseminate the Sehgal Foundation-JGLS model to promote good rural governance, citizen participation, and clinical legal education (CLE) and its further development, refinement, replication, and/or consolidation in different parts of India. Furthering this, SMSF is currently conducting several consultations/conferences with prospective participating law schools to make their participation more engaging and meaningful in the 2017 conference.

To sharpen the focus further and to enrich the model, while widening its ambit in the sphere of legal education and rural development, SMSF is also proposing a national conference on rural development and legal education in partnership with the National Institute of Rural Development & Panchayati Raj (NIRD&PR) in February/March, 2018.

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<sup>1</sup> The annual conference had the following themes: '*Good Rural Governance and Clinical Legal Education*' (2012), '*Accountability at Grassroots - Experiences and Learning*' (2013), '*Good Practices for Improving Rural Governance: Successful Experiments and Stories of Change*'(2014), '*ICT for Good Governance at the Grassroots*'(2015) and '*Swachh Gaon: Preparing Communities and Panchayats*' (2016).

## ABOUT THE CONFERENCE THEME

Despite Article 21 of the Constitution of India promising dignified life to every citizen of the country alongside Article 39A, entrusting the state with the responsibility of ensuring equal access to justice, citizens of India often do not enjoy their basic legal rights due to several reasons primary among them being poor and ineffective governance system and lack of awareness amongst the legally mandated beneficiaries.

Legal aid is critical to fulfilling the constitutional mandate of Article 39A and Article 21 in both letter and spirit, and in ensuring equal access to justice to people who are most vulnerable and deprived, especially women, children and other backward classes. To make legal aid a reality, the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987 established Authorities and Committees at the National, State, District and Taluka levels across the country and also at the Supreme Court and High Court levels. Alongside, the role of law schools in catalysing access to justice is increasingly realised. They have the potential to serve as the most befitting forum to address the gaps between promise of law and its state at the grassroots. Engagement of law students and faculty with rural communities through law school based legal aid clinics and other programs has immense potential to address the unmet legal needs of the rural poor. Civil society organisations have an important role to play in these aspects. Recognizing the increasing disconnect between law schools and communities, civil society can play the role of a connecting string. SMSF's initiative for promising good rural governance "is one such experiment with Clinical Legal Education to address the disconnect between the larger Constitutional promise of a dignified life for every citizen and the reality of undignified human existence for majority of the population."<sup>2</sup>

The larger goal of seeking a paradigm shift in how people perceive justice and how the above-mentioned institutions of law and justice respond to the challenges of lack of access to justice can only be achieved if these institutions work together, breaking the existing silos. Collaborative efforts by stakeholders (Law Schools, LSAs and Civil Society) will have immense potential to create and support a transformational culture at the grassroots based on accountability and action. This will in turn lead to active citizen participation in different aspects of local governance to ensure transparency and accountability and create and congeal a culture of rule of law and constitutionalism, thereby, enabling the world's largest democracy to deliver on the promises that it made to its constituents.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE CONFERENCE

Specific objectives of the conference are:

- Promote engagement among law schools, LSAs, civil society and rural communities to effectively and cohesively address the disconnect between the constitutional promise of dignified life and its reality; and
- Knowledge and experience sharing of tools/techniques and practices which have helped in improving transparency with regard to law and governance in various parts of India.

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<sup>2</sup> Pandey, Ajay, 'Experimenting with Clinical Legal Education to Address the Disconnect Between the Larger Promise of Law and its Grassroots Reality in India', *Maryland Journal of International Law and the University of Maryland School of Law's Re-imagining International Clinical Law Symposium (2010-2011)*

## **PARTICIPANTS**

Various stakeholders promoting rural governance, legal education and legal aid. Community-based organizations, civil society organisations, students and faculty of law universities, academic institutions, and government officials, members of state and district legal services authorities, corporate foundations, and rural communities are invited to participate.

## **CONFERENCE FORMAT**

The conference will commence with a plenary session of experts in the field of law and governance followed by parallel sessions for sharing knowledge and expertise from various stakeholders on good practices that have been proved effective for improving rural governance and access to justice.

## **SUB-THEMES**

The plenary session of the conference will be designed to explore pathways for possible collaborations among the major stakeholders working on legal aid, good governance, and citizen participation. This will be pursued by three parallel sessions with sub-themes, which will attempt to search ways through which the vulnerable and deprived sections of the population will have better means to appreciate the following:

- (a) Food Security Act and MGNREGA to build capacities of rural communities to have access to food;
- (b) Right to Education, Right to Information and right to participation which can enable rural communities to act as active drivers of their own development; and
- (c) Social security schemes and democratic structure of local governance in the villages which can help rural communities to access justice and bridge the gap between the theoretical rule of law and grassroots reality.

The conference sub-themes are closely related to Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), such as No Poverty (SDG 1), Zero Hunger (SDG 2), Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10), Peace and Justice, Strong Institutions (SDG 16) such that the promises of law and existing governance patterns can be connected constructively leading to the betterment of the vulnerable and deprived sections of society. In addition, the crucial premise of women empowerment will cut across all the three sub-themes of the conference.

## **EXPECTED OUTCOMES**

- To develop a shared understanding and action on the gaps between promises of law and its reality especially in rural India.
- To promote knowledge - experience sharing and peer learning among the stakeholders on successful models of making access to legally mandated rights and entitlements and overall access to justice a reality for all.
- To identify possible pathways for collaboration among law schools, LSAs, Civil Society and rural communities so that they can complement each other in achieving the larger goal of imbuing accountability through action and create a culture of rule of law and constitutionalism at the grassroots.
- To develop a report to further strengthen the initiative and seek policy level interventions wherever required.

## **PARTICIPATION**

For participation in the conference, please fill the registration form available at: <https://goo.gl/forms/7Eoag05YssWschHvs2> by September 30, 2017. You can also email us at [n.narwal@smsfoundation.org](mailto:n.narwal@smsfoundation.org)

For more information about the organizer, please visit [www.smfoundation.org](http://www.smfoundation.org)

## **ABOUT US**

S M Sehgal Foundation, registered as a public, charitable trust in India in 1999, strengthens community-led development initiatives to bring about positive social, economic and environmental change across India. Recognizing that human rights are central to developing every person's potential, work of the foundation emphasizes on gender equality and women's empowerment across all issues. The foundation team works with rural communities around three thematic areas viz. water security, food security and social justice. In addition, the foundation engages in participatory research, impact assessment, interactive dialogue and community media to take informed actions and achieve sustainable results. The foundation started its work from Mewat (renamed as Nuh) district of Haryana in 1999 and has expanded its work to Rajasthan, Bihar, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh in recent years.