

Strengthening Governance, Deepening Impact:

The ASSCOD–WoB Story



In the quiet tribal villages of Tamil Nadu, the mission has always been clear: to enable women—especially those from rural and marginalised communities, to reclaim control over their lives. Since 1994, the **Association for Sustainable Community Development (ASSCOD)** has worked with this singular focus—organising women into self-help groups (SHGs), promoting financial literacy, advancing healthcare, and nurturing local leadership.

Over nearly three decades, ASSCOD has reached over **3,000 women** through more than **200 SHGs** across Kancheepuram and Tiruvannamalai districts. Many of these women belong to the **Irula tribe**, one of India's most underserved indigenous communities, where over **83% live below the poverty line**, and lack basic services, which remain a distant dream.

But like many grassroots nonprofits, ASSCOD eventually encountered an inflexion point:

1. How do you sustain your mission without being dependent on a single founder?
2. How do you serve the community's voice—not just donor directives?
3. How do you grow systems and governance without losing the soul of your work?

At the heart of the answer was a powerful realisation: **For social impact to deepen, governance must evolve.**

A Founder's Reflection. A Sector's Dilemma

ASSCOD's founder, **Mr. Loganathan K.**, had dedicated decades to walking with the community—on foot, on two-wheelers, through dusty roads and dense forests. His grassroots understanding was unparalleled. But the organisation's systems had not kept pace with its growth. There was no advisory board. Leadership was concentrated. Projects were donor-driven, not community-led.

"We had the heart," he says, "but we lacked the scaffolding." That scaffolding arrived in the form of the **Women on Boards (WoB) Program**, an initiative by the **Indian School of Development Management (ISDM)** and **Governance Counts**. The program aims to strengthen governance in the social sector by equipping senior women leaders from the corporate world to serve on nonprofit boards and advisory bodies. This alignment was more than strategic—it was timely.



Enter Sunanda Rangarajan: *When Corporate Skill Meets Community Heart*



In 2022, **Sunanda Rangarajan**, a CSR and social impact strategist with experience across India and the U.S., joined ASSCOD's newly formed advisory board. At the time, ASSCOD's annual fundraising hovered around **₹25–30 lakhs**, often cobbled together from CSR donors whose priorities shaped the programs—solar lights one year, nutrition kits the next, mangrove plantations in arid zones the year after.

Sunanda, then serving as **Head of CSR at Omega Healthcare**, approached her board role humbly. In an Ahmedabad immersion hosted by WoB, she met a U.S. social entrepreneur who ran a "Service Café"—a space rooted in reciprocity, not charity. That conversation reframed her lens: "I stopped thinking about what I could give to the NGO, and started asking: What can I learn? This wasn't about offering help—it was about showing up, listening, and being in service."

And so She Began.

Walking the Talk—Literally

Sunanda's first six months were not spent in boardrooms but in the field. She travelled to tribal hamlets with Mr. Loganathan's, visited homes, listened to SHG women, and built trust—first with the founder, then with the community. This approach paid off. Instead of parachuting solutions, Sunanda co-created frameworks:

- She **streamlined proposals** into **two-page logical frameworks**, simplifying complex narratives for CSR alignment.
- Phased out 10+ misaligned donor projects (e.g., mangrove planting in water-scarce zones)
- She guided the setup of **ASSCOD's first formal advisory board** in 25 years.
- And she brought in strategic CSR partners—starting with her company, Omega Healthcare.



ASSCOD began with a board comprising its founder and a few trusted associates. As the organisation expanded in both scope and scale, the team recognised the importance of involving others who shared their vision in governance roles. To strengthen the board, a few individuals were onboarded. However, it soon became clear that a deep understanding of the local context was crucial for board members to contribute effectively. Despite their best intentions, some of the earlier members found it challenging to add meaningful value without this contextual grounding. Sunanda's initiative to set up an advisory board paid off.

"Today, with a more conscious approach to board engagement and the presence of individuals who have taken the time to empathise with our work and our people, ASSCOD is steadily moving toward a more participatory, aligned, and impactful board. This remains a continuous learning journey for us." Says Mr. Loganathan K

Wings to Fly: A Model of Community Ownership

One of the most transformative initiatives to emerge from this collaboration was the **Wings to Fly Trust**—a **community-owned women's federation** designed to nurture local entrepreneurship.

- Women from villages like Nelvoy, Kallankollai, and Kalliyampoondi received **interest-free microloans** through a revolving fund.
- The **repayments are reinvested** to fund new women entrepreneurs—creating a sustainable model for community-led financing.
- Today, these women are not just beneficiaries—they are **investors, mentors, and change agents**.

The ripple effect has been profound: women now intervene in cases of domestic violence, mediate local disputes, and lead healthcare awareness drives—often in places where government programs barely reach.

Healthcare with Heart:

Where the System Cannot Reach, they do



Sunanda also helped initiate ASSCOD's **door-to-door preventive healthcare model**, training local women as **Seva Shaktis**—community health workers.

- Seva Shaktis screens for non-communicable diseases and conducts health awareness campaigns.
- In partnership with a **government hospital**, doctors now visit tribal pockets that were previously medical blind spots.
- With 3,500+ screenings conducted in the last year alone, ASSCOD has turned the healthcare model **from reactive to preventive, and from top-down to bottom-up**.

More than Governance: A Cultural Shift

Sunanda's approach—rooted in respect, reciprocity, and relevance—shifted strategy and culture. She helped the team rethink what “professionalisation” really means in the development sector.

“It's not about replacing grassroots wisdom with jargon. It's about aligning systems with soul.”

Under her guidance, ASSCOD:

- Defined clear roles for its advisory board.
- Built internal capacity in fundraising, compliance, and communications.
- Reclaimed its narrative—from surviving on donor whims to thriving through community voice.

From Founder-Driven to Community-Led

Mr. Loganathan now sees a path where he is no longer the organisation's only pillar.

The presence of an engaged advisory board has enabled conversations around second-line leadership and succession planning—critical for nonprofit sustainability.

“I may not be there forever,” he reflects, “but the women will be. And now, so will the systems.”



What this story teaches us

This isn't just a story about ASSCOD or Sunanda. It's a living case study on what becomes possible when:

Governance is reimagined as care.



Professionals approach grassroots spaces not with ego, but empathy.



Nonprofits are seen not as charity recipients, but as equal partners.



Sunanda is one of 50+ WoB alumni now advising nonprofits across India. The Women on Boards program made this connection possible—and continues to do so for nonprofits across India. The Women on Boards program builds:

- 1 *Inclusive boardrooms with corporate and community fluency*
- 2 *Strategic interventions grounded in real needs*
- 3 *Sustainable leadership models, not one-woman shows*

Today, ASSCOD Stands Taller



The Bigger Picture

In a country with over **3 million NGOs**, fewer than **10% have active advisory boards**, and even fewer have diverse, women-led boards. The need for ethical, inclusive, and strategic governance has never been more urgent. ASSCOD’s journey isn’t just a success story. It’s a blueprint. Because leadership doesn’t just belong in boardrooms. It belongs to the women building a more dignified tomorrow—one village, one voice, one vision at a time.