

EVERY CHILD OUT OF SCHOOL IS A CHILD LABOURER: THE WORK OF THE MV FOUNDATION

Based on an interview by David Archer with R. Venkat Reddy, Coordinator of MVF

Venkat Reddy has a remarkable story to tell. Just 16 years ago the MV Foundation started work by freeing 16 children from bonded labour in Ranga Reddy District of Andhra Pradesh in India. Now they have consolidated their learning into an approach that has an impact across the State and far beyond. Key to their success have been the non-negotiable principles from which they build their work (see box). At the heart of these is the idea that any child not in school is a child labourer. They have had remarkable success in mobilising rural youth around these principles with the central goal of eliminating all child labour by getting all children into school.

Ranga Reddy District is one of very few places where one can see the same number of children in grade 5 or rural schools as there are in grade 1. The MV Foundation has succeeded in shifting deep-rooted social norms. Beforehand, child labour was a normal part of life in the district, seen as inevitable by poor parents, tolerated by communities and implicitly endorsed by the government. Now, it is socially unacceptable for any child to be doing anything during school hours except learning.

THE NON-NEGOTIABLES

All children must attend full time formal day schools (not night schools or non formal education centres)

Any child out of school is a child labourer (whether waged, non-waged, in factory, fields or home)

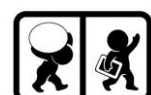
All work/labour is hazardous: it harms the overall growth and development of the child.

There must be a total abolition of child labour (any law regulating child work is unacceptable).

Any justification perpetuating the existence of child labour must be condemned (eg arguments about the “harsh reality” of poverty, the necessity of children’s earnings, poor quality of teachers or schools these are all anti-children)

The origins of MVF lie in challenging bonded labour in 1991. Despite powerful legislation to prevent bonded labour, MVF found that there were many bonded labourers in Ranga Reddy District and that 40% of them were children. There were government schemes to help adults freed from bonded labour but no equivalent for children. Once “freed” the children risked being bound once again. MVF linked up with local youth clubs and encouraged the youth to help by running a residential camp. These camps would protect the children and prepare them for going to school. The youth, many of whom were the first generation in their own families to have gone to school, were strongly motivated to act against child labour.

The next step was to mobilise the youth to conduct household surveys across a range of villages asking whether children were in school (if so what grade) or not (if not, what are they doing). Of the 10,000 children identified, only 4,000 were in school. Shocked by this, the young people analysing the results took a pivotal decision: the



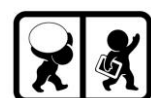
6,000 other children surveyed should be regarded as “child labourers” (whether they were bonded labourers, daily-wage labourers or working in their own homes). They noted that in every village surveyed there was a school and agreed that the central challenge had to be to make that school work effectively and include all children. Local campaigns were run to condemn all forms of child labour and mobilise all children. Young children in the 5-8 age range were encouraged to enrol immediately. Older children were invited to “bridge camps” where local youth would help them to get ready to go to school the following year, building their confidence and embedding their sense of education as their right.

The MVF built up training programmes to help the local youth run bridge camps and support village schools. Before long they had a strong cadre of committed youth activists who were able to train others. The non-negotiables were a powerful uniting identity, deeply internalised by everyone. From these core principles, local activists could determine innovative solutions to new challenges that they faced – without seeking approval from outside. This enabled a horizontal spread of the movement.

The work of MVF has of course evolved dramatically over the years, but the core threads remain clear: galvanising youth into an activist role to eliminate child labour by getting all children into school. The youth have reached out to sympathetic teachers, community leaders and government officials to extend their work, forming “Child Rights Protection Committees”. Activist teachers involved in the work have formed a Teachers Forum “BKVV” which now has 2,500 teachers involved and has linked MVF’s work to the teacher unions. These teachers have popularised the idea that “teachers are responsible for out-of-school children too”. They have worked with parents to create new “contracts” where in return for “*retention guarantees*” from parents (promising to keep their children in school), teachers issue “*learning guarantees*” (promising that children will achieve basic learning objectives”). This is indicative of the impact that MVF’s work has had on schools themselves. Once all children are in school and are staying there, the pressure for the school to improve is great. Parents no longer have the option of pulling children out of the local school if it is failing ... so they are compelled to engage actively to make the school work.

One dramatic example of the power of the “non-negotiables” came when MVF confronted the government of Andhra Pradesh around its support for non-formal education night schools. The government claimed it was running 25,000 such schools. MVF called for them to be closed down on the grounds that they were complicit in child labour – designed to enable working children to access school at night. This was highly controversial – an NGO campaigning to *close down* government provision! Surely this was madness! The campaign led the government to re-assess its provision. They found in fact only 17,000 centres were operational – and they agreed eventually to close all of these and to get the night-school teachers to link to the village school, bringing all the night-school children into the day school. Remarkably this worked.

The political clarity that comes from the strong principled foundations of MVF can be seen again and again. Shanta Sinha, Director of MVF, recently campaigned against the International Labour Organisation’s new convention on hazardous child labour. Some people were perplexed. Others saw this as overly-dogmatic. But the principle is clear. As soon as you talk about hazardous child labour you are inevitably suggesting



that non-hazardous is less bad – that somehow it is more tolerable. This sends out the wrong message altogether and fudges the issue.

The classic argument used against complete abolition of child labour is that poor parents depend on the income for survival. MVF have shattered this myth. They have shown that in areas where they work, even the poorest families have been able to adjust to sending all children to school. They have also shown that one of the obvious but unexpected side effects has been to increase the pay of adults working as day labourers or in low-paid employment. Once child labour is removed there is more demand for adult labour. Child labourers used to be paid less than adults – so the presence of children in the workforce directly undermined employment opportunities and pay for adults. This only works of course on a collective level – getting all children at once out of the workforce and back to school – and hence the mobilisation approach of MVF is essential.

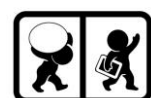
Some Challenges

Inevitably there are some areas of tension and contention around MVF's work. One key concern relates to the use of "hostels". In some villages, local youth run residential bridge camps for up to a year to help prepare former child-labourers to go to school. In part this builds on a particular tradition in rural areas of Andhra Pradesh for "hostel" based solutions. It is seen by some as essential for breaking the culture of dependency on child labour. But any institution like a hostel (whether called a residential camp or anything else) runs the risk of being a place where children's rights are abused rather than respected. There is also concern about separating children so much from their own families and from their cultural identity. Clearly "culture" cannot be accepted as an excuse for child labour, but eliminating child labour should not depend on separating children from their parents. Venkat recognises the risks: *"Residential camps are a temporary solution to help break norms. In the long term there should be no need for hostels."*

A second key area of contention concerns the role of teachers. The bridge camps are run by local activists as a "bridge" between child labour and school. They involve stimulating and creative activities, building the confidence of children and their preparedness for learning. Sometimes of course, they go beyond this and start teaching reading and writing. This may seem innocent but there are serious political implications. The government of Andhra Pradesh in recent years has employed 50,000 para-teachers on a third of the salary of professional teachers. These para-teachers are not-trained and are seen by many as a low-cost, cheap labour solution which will embed low quality education, especially in rural schools. MVF risks being seen as endorsing this by its own practice of using local youth activists as "para teachers". Venkat again is clear: *"The camps are a mobilisation activity, NOT an education activity. These are non-students working with non-teachers in a supportive environment. The real teaching happens in schools. We say very clearly that the formal school is absolutely key. Perhaps in the context of the spread of para-teachers we need to define a new non-negotiable: that formal schools require trained, professional teachers."*

Conclusion

There is huge potential for the MVF approach to be used outside Andhra Pradesh. ActionAid is already drawing on MVF to support work in Orissa, Madhya Pradesh



and Rajasthan. I believe the influence should extend beyond India to other countries in Asia and even to Africa and Latin America. The simplicity of the non-negotiables and the political clarity that they provide is wonderful. These, matched with the approach to youth mobilisation, can be used in almost any context.

Some people have criticised the non-negotiables of MVF – seeing them as overly-dogmatic. Personally I think we need more non-negotiables! The essential role of trained, professional teachers should be embedded as a non-negotiable. I think also there is potential for a non-negotiable around “free education”. There is much potential to link this grassroots work to campaigning for the abolition of fees and the call for free education. Unless all costs that exclude children from school are removed there may be difficulties in following this path in some contexts. So, making education free at the point of use should also be defined as a non-negotiable. Then we have the potential to build a truly powerful campaign.

One last reflection concerns the role of MVF as an NGO. Venkat argues that NGOs should be seen as temporary facilitators. Our role is not a permanent one – and we should be serious is working towards our own dissolution. Our role is to bring out the voices of children, parents and teachers – to provide space for them and not to occupy it ourselves. *“If we can shift social norms and enable parent, young people and children to organise for themselves, then we leave something enduring. If we make the teacher unions really work and ensure they take strategic action, then we can really leverage change. NGOs are transitory and should always work to strengthen existing structures.”*

