Role of Gram Panchayats in Safeguarding Child Rights

A Case Study of Eight Gram Panchayats in Ranga Reddy District, A.P. by M.V.Foundation
Seeds of democracy
MV Foundation (MVF) has been working on the issue of abolition of child labour over the past decade. MVF started working in three villages in Ranga Reddy District in 1991. Currently it now reaches about 6000 villages, 4 lakh children have been mainstreamed to schools and over 6 lakh children including the school going and non school going children are monitored regularly under the programme. All this has been possible with the massive support and involvement of the gram panchayats apart from the child rights protection forums and other committees operating at the village level.

In order to prevent children from joining the labour force and also to reach out to girls MVF looked at the issue of abolition of child labour as an issue of children’s right to education. Consequently, MVF evolved multiple strategies to withdraw children from work and to retain them in schools. In the process it involved the active participation of different sections of the community including institutions such as Gram Panchayats. The MV Foundation experience shows that gram panchayats can play a significant role in controlling and evolving new processes involving the community at large towards the protection of children’s rights and strengthening of the school system This is in accordance with the 73rd constitution amendment which envisages far greater devolution of powers than ever before to these institutions.

Children – A Gram Panchayat Agenda
The Gram Panchayats have been playing an important role in support of children’s right to education and health. As the local bodies, they are the essential link between the community, the school, the Anganwadi, the health centre and the government. They are actively engaged in planning, implementation and monitoring of the institutions related to children and in also protecting child rights. The Gram Panchayats have enhanced their capacities towards this end and built accountability with the Gram Sabha/community. The local bodies or the Gram Panchayats have taken upon themselves to engage in strengthening of the schools, anganwadi and health services to children and pregnant women. Constant review of children’s institutions by the gram panchayats in Ranga Reddy District in Andhra Pradesh has now led to a silent revolution. These gram panchayats have incorporated child rights as one of their key agendas. They recognise their roles, responsibilities and the powers that have been conferred by the 73rd and 74th amendment acts.
**In Brief**
The eight Gram Panchayats studied are undertaking the following activities in their Gram Panchayats to ensure that every child is tracked and there is a regular review system that highlights the status of children. Also see Annexure 1 for the list of various processes undertaken by the Gram Panchayats to ensure abolishment of child labour and retention of children in school

- Involvement in survey of school going and non school going children
- Involvement in door-to-door motivation drives
- Quarterly review of functioning of schools, primary, secondary and high schools by Gram Panchayats
- Identification of administrative bottlenecks, which make it difficult for poor children particularly girls from staying in schools and gradually introduce reforms in the school governance system
- Involvement in campaigns against child marriages and prevention of dropouts
- Gram Panchayats provide financial support to schools for required infrastructure, by mobilising local resources, networking with administration and use of seed capital and from the project
- Petitioning to the government for the required facilities in schools
- Provision of birth certificates to the new born babies in the villages
- Sensitising Child Rights Protection Forums and other local groups to take up the issue of child rights with Gram Panchayats and also the local schools
- Provide the support for withdrawing children from work by negotiating with the employers, and utilize its offices to harness the officialdom to tackle the issue
- Peer reviews with other Gram Panchayats

**Gram Panchayats are actively involved in review and monitoring of other child related institutions in the following manner**

**With the school**
In order to equip the village school to respond to the first generation learners the Gram Panchayats in these villages took up the following activities:

- The Gram Panchayats play an important role in monitoring the attendance of children in schools. This issue has been reviewed by the Gram Panchayats and the causes for absenteeism have been taken up on case to case basis. The Gram Panchayats are involved in rectification of false names reported in attendance registers of the local schools. They struggled for waiver of admission rules to enable enrolment of children especially those who had dropped out of school for two to three years and are now willing to pursue education.

- It was felt that due to the growing demand on school the infrastructure available in schools has been quite insufficient. Therefore, the Gram Panchayats have made efforts to generate local resources wherever possible for construction of additional classrooms. The Gram Panchayats also take up the issue of lack of teachers to meet the growing demand of children in school. It was found that in most of the schools especially after class 6 there were no teachers to teach English, Mathematics and Sciences. The Gram Panchayats have made out lists of such requirements and have continuously pressed for sanction of teachers to meet the challenge of the growing number of student in each class.
During the course of village level review meetings it was found that after class 5 children required support to help them shift from the local schools to another high school, which is close by. The Gram Panchayats monitor the transfer of such children from one school to another by insisting on the school administration to prepare all the documentation necessary for making such a transfer possible. In doing so it was found that the school drop outs especially of girls has largely been arrested. Thus the issue of retention of children in schools is now no longer an issue confined to the decision making processes in that village alone but has moved beyond the village where negotiations with the high school is important. Planning for retention of children in 5-14 years age group has now become the responsibility of the gram panchayat’s at the village and mandal level as well.

Other issues that are taken up, at the mandal level are modifications of the rules that governs the functioning of school, which help in retention of the first generation learners. Thus at the mandal level there is a discussion on creation of demand, policies on absenteeism of children, and condoning absenteeism, examination policies and so on. Gram Panchayats make it their agenda to ensure that every child is in school and no child is married before the legal age of marriage. Some of the issues discussed are:

- Number of children in school
- Number of teachers and volunteers in the school
- Regularity of the children to school
- Number of irregulars and reasons for the same
- Number of children in the village who are not attending school
- Timings of the schools
- Meetings held with the parents
- Possibility for formation of Children’s committees
- Problems of girl children
- Number of children having midday meals
- Provision of egg and vegetables during midday meals
- Number of children who are not taking midday meals and reasons for the same
- Collection of any type of fees
- If any pressures are exercised on children for school uniforms
- Facilitating Government schools to attract students who are studying in private schools

**With Health Department**

Topics covered during the review meetings include

- Identification of pregnant women
- Motivating pregnant women
- Dietary requirements of pregnant women
- Immunisation schedule for pregnant women
- Importance of family support for pregnant women
- Importance of institutional delivery and planning for it
- Importance of cleanliness for pregnant women
- High-risk pregnancies
- Infertility, low birth weight and its causes
- Importance of supplementary food for malnourished children and their follow up
- Precautions to be taken during pregnancy and the risks associated with their neglect
- Dietary norms for malnourished children
- Immunisation schedule for children aged below 5 years
- Problems associated with child marriage
- The Life Cycle Approach
Importance of breastfeeding, the concepts of LMP and EDD
The right age at which pregnancy ought to occur
Family spacing
Right weight and monitoring weight regularly
Gestation period, and premature childbirth

The valuable information that they gained during these sessions became the starting point of the intervention.

**With the Anganwadi centre**
Issues discussed include
- The number of children in the 0-2 and 3-5 years age group
- Monthly weights of these children
- Under weight children and measures taken for them
- Mothers committee meetings held and issues discussed
- Adolescent girls meetings held and their problems identified
- Provision of iron tablets to these girls
- Birth registrations of new born babies
- Number of children attending these centres - food provided to them, timings of the centres, cleanliness of the same etc.,

**With the village secretary**
- Number of Birth registrations and certificates provided
- Number of marriages registered and child marriages identified
- Efforts done to stop child marriages
- Verifying the transmission of the various Government orders and schemes to the villagers
- Identification of beneficiaries for the government schemes

**Some success stories from the Gram Panchayats:**
At the grassroots level political affiliations play an important role. However, Narsingh Rao narrates an incident where he chooses to fight against his own party’s Mandal convenor who had employed a child in his house. Most Sarpanches declare that when it comes to children no one plays the political cards. There is consensus that children’s welfare is above everything else.

Another striking example of this is case of the Prodattur GP, Shankerpally Mandal. The GP had accepted to lease a portion of the land to Pragati Resorts. In return they requested them to donate something for the school. Whitewashing the walls of the school, providing books, stationery, conducting sports competition and sponsoring prizes are things undertaken by Pragati Resorts for the school. Mr. Srinivas, the Sarpanch of Prodattur GP says that most times the local contributions such as from Pragati Resorts and from other villagers is a strategy they often adopt to ensure retention of children.

The review system that the Gram Panchayat conducts every month with children related institutions have been a boost in the accountability, transparency and effective working of the institutions. Mr. Pandu, Sarpanch, Girgetpally recounts that the regular review system has ensured that teachers come to school on time. This system has mended the fractures that existed between the school and the Gram Panchayat. Earlier, the teachers resented the Gram Panchayat’s reviews but over time the support extended by the gram panchayat has been welcomed and the synergy between the school and the GP has ensured retention of children.
An interesting template has been developed at the Kolkundla GP office for the review system every month. The tabular form with data of children and details of the various activities for them has been painted on the wall. Before the commencement of the meeting the teacher, Anganwadi worker and ANM write down the details of the activities and the numbers in the form. This has ensured that all members present at the meeting have information of the activities and the monitoring becomes easy.

Motivating parents and children is also a very important function of the Gram Panchayat members. Mr. Srinivas Sarpanch of Naskal GP says that the ward members have divided the responsibilities in such a manner that each member is responsible for children in their ward. They will be accountable and responsible for all children in their ward. The Goonor GP Sarpanch, C. Narsimulu, corroborates the same point by given instances where the ward wise distribution of responsibility has resulted in tracking every child in the village.

To sum up, N.Anantaih, Sarpanch of Gurudodla GP says children have been and should be the first responsibility of the Gram Panchayat. That is a sure way for leaving a footprint in the future. Children are the greatest assets and their development is essential for the development of the whole village.
Annexure I

The following activities are taken up at the village level to ensure retention of children in schools and abolition of child labour in Gram Panchayats identified

1. Make a list of children whose names are not in the attendance register, and who are out of schools. Motivate them to withdraw from work and join them to local schools and Residential Bridge Camps (RBCs).

2. Children who are enrolled but not attending schools are to be treated as non-school going children and as child labour.

3. Prepare a separate list of such children with details of work done by such children, father’s names and addresses. Take the help of youth volunteers, SECs, Gram Panchayats and local NGOs to bring them 'back to school'.

4. Some of these children whose names appear in the attendance register may not be actually attending schools. They may need additional motivation.

5. Check names of children in the attendance register for every class and verify if they are physically present.

6. Make out a list of all those children absent on that day. Bring all these children to school.

7. Lists of such children are to be handed over to the gram panchayats and read out in Gram Sabhas. The ward members are to be given the specific task of enrolling them in schools and if necessary into Residential Bridge Course Camps. They should be assisted by all other members in the community.

8. Bring all those children who have dropped out because they have not paid school fees, exam fee, and other fees or who do not have school uniforms back to school. All these rules and fees must be waived. A public announcement regarding this has to be displayed on all school buildings.

9. Village Secretary to convene a meeting with all the employers at the village level in the Gram Panchayat namely:
• Farmers producing cotton seeds
• Farmers producing other agricultural crops.
• Quarry and mining contractors.
• Small shops and hotels.

Children must not be subject to beating, caning and insults in school. Children who have dropped because of corporal punishment must be encouraged to rejoin school. A review of such practices must be made by Gram Panchayats (GPs)
## Annexure II

### Reviews conducted by Gram Panchayat for Protection of Children’s Rights

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section/organisation/department</th>
<th>Officials required to be present at review meetings</th>
<th>Topics that need to be discussed</th>
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| **1. Education Department**      | Head Masters, S M C Chairmen, P E T teachers        | • Data of children’s enrollment in schools  
                                           • Enrolled children’s attendance  
                                           • Details of children not enrolled  
                                           • Identification of child labour and arranging for RBCs for them  
                                           • Scholarships (Merit, students of general category who are financially backward)  
                                           • Textbooks supply  
                                           • Steps taken in school-less villages  
                                           • Review on DEPEP fund allocations  
                                           • Review on Midday meals scheme  
                                           • Debate on sports activities  
                                           • Review on Vidya volunteers |
| **2. Health Department**         | A N M Janani Committee President, Multi-purpose Health worker | • Review on debates on measures taken for the protection of school children’s health  
                                           • School children’s health programmes  
                                           • Total immunization / prevention vaccination programmes for children below the age of 5 years  
                                           • Review on supply of folic acid, vitamin A and  
                                           • Recording of infant mortality |
| 3. Integrated Women and Child Development Department | Anganwadi centre’s volunteers | - Review on running of Anganwadi centre
- Supply of nutritious food
- Review on vaccination program |

| 4. Revenue Department | Village Revenue Secretary | - Review on the measure taken to simplify the issuing of residential, caste and income certificates
- Review on petitions under Bonded labour Act
- Review on petitions concerning child marriages
- Details of migrated families and their children |