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IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF AN ALTERNATIVE INTERVENTION FOR ACCESS OF MARGINALIZED CHILDREN TO EDUCATION AND RETENTION

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ABSTRACT

The last couple of decades have witnessed sustained governmental efforts towards universalization of elementary education in India; yet the status of human development in the country is a matter of great concern. In the latest Human Development Report published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), covering 187 countries across the world, India is ranked at 135, among the 'medium development' countries like Egypt, South Africa, Mongolia, Philippines and Indonesia. Among India's neighbours, Bhutan and Bangladesh too figure in this category. Though India has made considerable progress in social, political and economic spheres and has emerged as one of the fastest growing and the world's fourth largest economy. But it still has more poor people than any other country with about one third of the population living below the poverty line. One of the main reasons of the poverty of the masses is not having the access to adequate educational facilities and subsequent benefits of education. This paper presents the factual details of a study, which attempted to examine the status of marginalized children's access to education and retention in West Bengal, particularly of those children, whose parents work in the brick kilns of 24 North Pargana and Maldah districts of the State.

Keywords:

Education, marginalized children's, Children education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

India's progress in social, political, and economic spheres may be considered substantive today, as it has emerged as one of the fastest growing and the world's fourth largest economy. But it still has more very poor people than any other country with about one third of the population living below the poverty line. According to the UNDP Human Development Report 2014, India has ranked 135 on the Human Development Index, putting it in the category of Medium Human

Development. Moreover, there are wide disparities between regions and between social groups, which have been aggravated by the structural adjustments programme and economic reforms. The HDR 2014 points out that the HDI remain particularly low for Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Caste groups. There is growing evidence that childhood poverty triggers an intergenerational cycle of poverty and poverty reduction strategies in order to be effective and sustainable must effectively target children reaching the poorest and hardest to reach groups.

The governmental efforts, at central level as well as at state level, for the betterment of social, economic, and educational conditions of its masses and of particularly those who are deprived of the opportunities and are marginalized in terms of life chances, have been better than before. Various governmental schemes, like UEE (Universalization of Elementary Education), SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan), Mid-Day Meal, etc. have been launched by the central government in the recent past, to be executed in collaboration with state governments. Besides, NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) are also being encouraged to suffice the gaps and contribute to their level best in improving the elementary education system in India. West Bengal is one of such states where some NGOs have been putting their efforts towards fulfillment of the UEE dreams for the communities that are still at the margin of the society in terms of development and progress. The present study attempted to take stock of the status of education of some of the genuinely deprived sections of the society and governmental and non-governmental efforts towards helping them.

2. THE BACKDROP

North 24 Parganas, in the Sunderban sub-region and Malda of West Bengal are among the poorest districts of West Bengal. Returns from the land are minimal and most adults work as tenant farmers on the lands of the others. Government programs for poverty alleviation are virtually non-existent, and what exists most, either does not reach the area or else is diverted into other activities. The rich are based mostly in Calcutta or outside West Bengal, and leave the administration of their farms / local businesses to contractors/ middlemen. The growing urbanization and the expansion of the capital of West Bengal, Calcutta, and its suburban areas have resulted in a boom in real estate and the resultant ancillary industries. One of these is the increase in the numbers of brick kilns. The families working in these brick making units (particularly in the brick kilns of North 24 Parganas district) are mostly migrant laborers (tribal communities from 'Santhal Parganas'). The poverty and social discrimination of these families pushes them into exploitative forms of labour such as the brick making factories. Within this circle of disadvantage, the most vulnerable are children. Child labour is cheap, easily available; and most of the skills are learnt on the job. Children of families working in these brick kilns don't have a voice and can easily be hired and fired. Moreover, they can be paid cheap or no wages and employers can exercise power over them. Trafficking of children into various forms of labour is very common in these areas. Most children either get into such occupations as brick making, or else are trafficked out of the district into other informal sector work.

Brick making is a seasonal business 'on' for eight months a year, with a lean period of four months during the rainy season. The entire family, including children, migrate and remain engaged in the brick making process during the business season. As families are paid according to the numbers of bricks they produce, adults, especially mothers, involve their children from as

early as 6 years of age to assist them to produce more numbers of bricks however the labour put in by the children of this age is not counted. The account for this is maintained by the contractor, paid to the family representative (usually the male adult) through a system of plastic tokens. This amounts to extreme exploitation of workers, both adults and children. These children are not counted in any government statistics and hardly attend school. The local NGOs working in those areas targeted these children to provide them with basic educational facilities and ensure that they get their due in terms of their right to survive with dignity.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of this study was to capture the outcomes of the efforts of NGOs working for the community, identify gaps and challenges of the processes at NGO/village and district levels and draw learning to provide recommendations to further strengthen the intervention.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study took up survey method to collect data followed by subsequent analysis and inferences of the same. The study was conducted in the North 24 Parganas & Malda districts of West Bengal. The villages were identified in consultation with the NGOs working in those areas. The primary data collection included discussion with different group members, duty bearers (teachers, Govt. Officials etc.) with different social groups (marginalized and minority community), visit to schools/brick kilns to observe the programmes and facilities supported through intervention focusing on Migrant children, focus group discussion with different groups, feedback and planning meeting with NGO staff and other associated persons.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The overall objective with which NGOs seemed to have been working in the identified areas was to strengthen government systems of elementary education, so that they are inclusive of all children, specifically the most marginalized one, in order to reduce social and economic disparities in the identified areas. The specific result of these efforts seemed to have – (i) improved access to education especially for the most marginalized groups by strengthening the quality of education and making it more inclusive of these children's needs; (ii) improved participation of the community, parents and children in education planning, monitoring and management; and (iii) child protection mechanisms within schools and communities established and functioning in order to safeguard children's rights. While the main aim of the programme was to strengthen and support the government systems of education provision, work had been implemented in partnership with local communities. Working and building the capacities of the community, NGOs played an important role in complementing the efforts of the state, ensuring the effectiveness, quality and accountability of the government education system. This also sought active involvement of the Local self-governance (Panchayati Raj Institution) and village education committees to ensure good governance and accountability within the system.

To add value, the programme worked closely with academic institutions, consultants, networks, the state, the media and other international agencies. These partnerships enabled more effective programming, policy research and advocacy by drawing upon their capacities and competencies.

For effective programme delivery a close association of officials at block, district and state level was deliberated. The local NGOs partnered with some national level NGOs and other philanthropic organizations to initiate interventions at school and community level in order to improve the teaching learning environment and quality of education by building capacities of teachers, children and community so that the issues of discrimination could also be addressed. The strategies articulated for this purpose were – (i) To improve quality of education in order to ensure access and retention of children ages 6-14 years in 9 blocks of the 2 identified districts; (ii) Supporting Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCD) in 9 blocks of the identified areas; (iii) Strengthening child protection mechanisms within schools and communities; (iv) Influencing policy in order to bring systemic changes in education so as to ensure inclusion of target disadvantaged groups

THE OUTCOME: EFFECTIVENESS OF THE INTERVENTION

In general, the NGO intervention seemed to be successful on the quantitative scale. Qualitatively, the efforts needed some more clarity at the level of conceptualization and strategy formulation and afterwards at the level of implementation. Considering the sustained nature of intervention and the quantum of work in terms of its achievable objectives, it is evident that the people involved in the process demonstrated a good result in terms of enrolling the poor and marginalized children to the education processes, mobilizing community towards child rights and their own potential life, increasing awareness of parents, children, teachers and other stake holders. With its various visible efforts, the commendable aspect of the work being done was that it had made its presence felt in the community and amongst other stake holders. It had induced momentum in the community and set them in a state of accelerating inertia to get rid of the augmented negativity of disparity and discrimination. However there were certain gaps or weak links that needed to be addressed. These were:

- Less efforts seem to have been put in to strengthen the existing groups like VEC and SDC
- Very limited intervention with ICDS especially on ECE seems to be there.
- Role of local level teachers and BRCs found to be very limited; they were heavily relying on the inputs of the NGO. Also, their understanding towards inclusion seemed not coherent.
- Lack of meaningful intervention at the school level to ensure bi-lingual teaching, inclusive classrooms and joyful learning environment in true sense.
- Lack of convergence with other government departments like health, labour and women and child welfare.
- The NGOs seemed to have very limited role in the external environment which were both cause and effect for the high drop outs of the children like - exploring the local level livelihood options for the community to reduce the distress migration, played a very limited role in linking the NGOs' efforts with other flagship programmes like NREGS, SGSY and NRHM, No efforts to link with private sector for exploring more resources for sustainability of the efforts.

ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND RETENTION

- Sufficient numbers of BCCs (Bridge Course Centres) were established and were functional in the 80 operational brick kilns with the cooperation of the kiln functionaries and villagers. At 50 locations, academic supports were being provided to the children.
- The BCC teachers participated in specific trainings (2 days each) on Skill based Teaching Methodologies, Learning methodologies, child friendly atmosphere and inclusive education. The teachers were given training on up gradation of skills on pedagogy, puzzles and concept teaching and preparation of teaching-learning materials for creating child friendly environment.
- 3420 children from 80 brick kilns and from the neighbouring villages in six blocks of Malda and 3 blocks of North 24 Parganas districts had been enrolled in 65 Government Schools. The efforts made through the NGOs led to the establishment of Child Protection Committees in the villages which actively monitored the retention of those enrolled children in the formal schools.
- 3025 children from the brick kilns who were enrolled in 65 formal schools were provided with additional support study material & TLM. This was a major factor of motivation for the children to continue their studies.

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION

- Individual child profile of over 2000 children in the age group of 0-6 years from the 80 brick kilns were prepared by the time of completion of the study.
- This information was being used to link those children with the 'anganwadi centres'. This information was also being used to advocate for the formation of new 'anganwadi centres' in the vicinity of the kilns.
- As many as 80 Crèches were set up in 9 blocks of Malda and North 24 Parganas districts.
- 34 Anganwadi workers were trained through a Capacity Building Program conducted over a period of 2 days. The training was facilitated by the CDPO (Child Development Project Officer), ACDPO (Assistant Child Development Project Officer) and Supervisors of ICDS Project, North 24 Parganas.
- Monthly meetings were being conducted in each kiln with the adolescent girls and mothers to address different issues including HIV/AIDS. Sensitization on issues related to HIV/AIDS is being done by organizing audio visual program in the brick kilns during the evenings.

5. CONCLUSION

The implication of the insights generated through the course of action of this study may be quite useful in terms of understanding the nuances of the social reality and devising meaningful strategies to bring out desired change in the lives of those who genuinely and eagerly wait for it. It is evident that the governmental efforts can pick up pace if a more synchronized perspective of implementation strategy is developed which could include local level resources and NGOs with them. The study discovered that the NGOs' efforts were commendable due to their dedicated human resources available for the execution of the programme. The limitation, that the programme faced, was inconsistency of the fund that NGOs received. This eventually hampered

their pace of work. If the gaps mentioned in the above section are bridged adequately and limitations are taken care of properly, the educational programme would certainly be fruitful for the community with a better outreach.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The project team members at the identified areas were doing remarkable work. The most important of all was that it had catalyzed a process of unfolding possibilities for the community and the children in context. In order to let this inertia of unfolding opportunities continue, some efforts are recommended to be put in place. These are as the following:

- Networking with the various govt. departments of education, child and women welfare to be done in a better planned manner.
- Devise a plan of action to track the academic progress and achievements of children who have been mainstreamed in the Govt. school system.
- Develop a cognitive and psychomotor skills based achievement scale and contextualize it to have better assessment mechanism of academic achievements of children. Organize a workshop or brainstorming session roping in experts of the field.
- Emphasis to be given on networking with teachers' groups to lobby with the education department and the state for improvement of school infrastructure.
- Intensive campaign against child marriage should be launched and more concrete plans of action for girl child empowerment should be formulated.
- Sensitize all sections of community towards the issues of various forms of discrimination including gender, disability, caste based, local Vs migrant /outsiders, religious and linguistic discrimination with the help of CPC members.
- Facilitate exposure visits of child club members to each other's schools.
- Facilitate exposure visits for CPC members to each other's villages.
- As the NGO intervention was situated in a limited area, the experiment could be replicated in other areas too.

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